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The Tây Sơn Uprising:
Society and Rebellion in Late Eighteenth-Century Việt Nam, 1771-1802

George Edson Dutton

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University of Washington

2001

Program Authorized to Offer Degree: Department of History

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Abstract

The Tây Sơn Uprising:
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George Edson Dutton

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:
Professor Laurie J. Sears
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This project is an examination of the Tây Sơn movement and regime of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Việt Nam. I argue that the nature of this movement and its transformation into a series of political regimes is best understood through analysis that considers dynamic interactions between various segments of Vietnamese society during this period. The analysis challenges prevailing Vietnamese scholarly traditions by questioning the assumption of a convergence of interests between the Tây Sơn and the peasantry, arguing instead that what might have begun as a movement for peasants was transformed into a regime that exploited them.

The study first looks at the connection between the movement's leadership and various conceptions of legitimacy that coexisted in Viet Nam in the eighteenth century, arguing that the movement's leaders were opportunists not visionaries, and were far from the revolutionaries some scholars have depicted. Next, it considers the relationship between the Tây Sơn leadership and peasant populations, showing that early peasant support gave way to active resistance to forced military service and onerous corvee labor. The study then looks at the dynamic between the Tây Sơn leadership and various segments of Vietnamese society, those living at the social margins – bandits, pirates, and ethnic and religious minorities – and intellectual elites. It reveals the critical role that each of these groups played in shaping the course and nature of the movement, and the ways in which their roles have frequently been misstated.

The study finally argues against the idea of Tây Sơn exceptionalism. Instead, it shows that the Tây Sơn regime was not unlike its predecessors or eventual successors in many respects, including its policies, its treatment of the peasantry, and its political institutions. The peasants in particular noticed relatively little difference between the Tây Sơn and the other regimes they had seen. By challenging the existing Vietnamese interpretations of the Tây Sơn, this study lays the groundwork for further examinations of the movement.

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Acknowledgements

The author wishes to express his appreciation to those in the Department of History at the University of Washington who have provided encouragement, helpful criticism, and much food for thought. In particular, I am grateful to Laurie Sears for her constant assistance and thoughtful advice. She is an incomparable advisor and I consider myself very fortunate to have benefited from her guidance. I am also glad that Christoph Giebel arrived at the University of Washington while my work was underway, and for his guidance and friendship I am very thankful. I also offer thanks to the University of Washington's Southeast Asia Librarian, Judith Henchy, whose tireless commitment to stocking the library with many important materials relating to Vietnamese history and literature is something for which I and future generations will be ever in her debt. Finally, thanks to the staff at various libraries where research for this dissertation was carried out:

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Work for this dissertation was supported in part by a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad Fellowship, a Foreign Language and Area Studies Dissertation Fellowship, and a Ford Foundation Small Research Grant.

Introduction

The eighteenth century was a period of enormous turmoil in what is now Việt Nam.[1] This turmoil was played out in the rice fields and on the coastal waters of the country, and in the minds of the people living through this time of upheaval. The apogee of this disorder was the Tây Sơn peasant uprising, which spread from its origins in the south-central part of the country throughout the Vietnamese territories between 1771 and 1802. Before it was over, two ruling families had been overthrown, the 300 year-old Lê dynasty had been toppled, major invasions from Siam and China had been repulsed, and French, Portuguese, and Southeast Asian mercenaries had joined the fray. As the uprising and its attendant wars dragged on, several hundred thousand people were killed by warfare or famine, a far larger number were displaced from their homes and farms, and Vietnamese society from the peasantry to the intellectual and political elites was confronted with the stark realities of a state in transition.

Since even before the movement was brought to an end and its political regimes overthrown, the Tây Sơn have been the subject of enormous and often contentious debate. What were the movement's origins and what did it represent? Whose interests were being pursued? Was it a revolution or merely the displacement of one set of monarchs with another? During the nineteenth century, the Nguyễn dynasty, which eventually overthrew the short-lived Tây Sơn regimes, wrote its own account of the events of the last three decades of the eighteenth century. The Nguyễn depicted the movement as an uprising of "bandits," rejecting any notions of the Tây Sơn as having constituted a popular uprising and denying the Tây Sơn regime's political legitimacy. Instead the dynasty's court historians argued that the reason there had been any popular participation in the movement was that the people had been duped into supporting the Tây Sơn. Thus, the Nguyễn historians suggested, the

[1] To avoid confusion, I will continue to use the term "Việt Nam" in this text, although that name was not formally used until the beginning of the nineteenth century, and even then "Đại Nam" (The Great South), was the more commonly employed term.

peasants had supported the movement because they did not know any better, not because they believed in its objectives. In this way the new dynasty ensured the dominance of its interpretation of these events, at least at the official level. It also laid the groundwork for the reinterpretations that began to emerge in the twentieth century, both those of early nationalist historians, and later those of Marxist historians trying to understand the Tây Sơn in light of the Vietnamese revolution.

The early twentieth-century scholarship began to elide references to the Tây Sơn as "bandits" or "rebels." Instead, these historians suggested that the Tây Sơn brothers had made legitimate claims to political authority. Even as this shift occurred, these early twentieth century accounts did not address the question of popular support for the movement. Indeed, references to "peasants" were almost completely absent in the writings of the two most prominent early twentieth-century historians, Phan Bội Châu and Trần Trọng Kim. These men were more comfortable in discussing the political and military leaders of Tây Sơn period, than they were writing about the (for them) less comprehensible peasantry. It was not until after World War II, in the wake of the Communist revolution and its connections to rural Việt Nam, that characterizations of the movement as a "peasant uprising" or "peasant movement" began to emerge. It is these representations, most often promulgated by Communist historians of the second half of the twentieth century, that now dominate discourse pertaining to the Tây Sơn movement.

These scholars enthusiastically portrayed the Tây Sơn uprising as a "peasant movement" – *phong trào nông dân* – yet this characterization was made uncritically. The argument that the Tây Sơn was a peasant movement brought with it a conviction that the peasantry, with few exceptions, supported the Tây Sơn movement's leaders and their subsequent regime. Historians working and writing under the Communist regime argued that there was eager peasant support for the Tây Sơn leaders in the uprising's early stages, followed by unified peasant cooperation in the heroic efforts to unite the nation and drive out foreign invaders. The logic of Vietnamese historians (*post hoc ergo propter hoc*) seems to have run along the following lines: "peasant

armies fought the Chinese invasion, therefore they must have been struggling to defend national independence," or "peasant armies crossed the former north-south dividing line, they must, therefore, have been guided by a passionate desire to see national reunification." I argue that the Communist historians who see steady peasant support for the Tây Sơn would seem to be making the peasants complicit in their own oppression. Peasants were not, I would argue, thinking about saving "the nation" or "liberating" cities or regions, except in very rare instances. They were much more likely to be thinking about personal survival, the fate of their families and their farms. It makes considerably more sense to see most peasants as very much resisting any sort of military service, for it is so rarely in their best interests.

This politicization of historiography concerning the Tây Sơn movement that developed over the course of the twentieth century made it difficult for Vietnamese historians to entertain alternative interpretations of those events. The contemporary Vietnamese state has invested so much in its interpretation of the Tây Sơn and the place of the Tây Sơn leader Nguyễn Huệ in the pantheon of national heroes, that historians cannot readily challenge these interpretations. There have been some recent changes, but even these have been slow in coming and are still often couched in language guided more by ideological than scholarly considerations. When in the late 1980s the noted Vietnamese writer, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, wrote several short stories that challenged prevailing interpretations of the Tây Sơn Emperor, Quang Trung, his rival, Nguyễn Ánh, and Nguyễn Du, the author of the *Tale of Kiều*, it created an uproar in the Vietnamese intellectual community.[2] This response to Thiệp's brief fictionalized accounts of these three men is a strong indication that the Tây Sơn movement and the ways in which it has been historicized still carry considerable political and psychological weight.

Vietnamese nationalist and Communist historiography is certainly not unique in its effort to glorify peasant movements and to place them into the context of

[2] For a description of this episode and the texts of the short stories, see Peter Zinoman, "Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's 'Vàng Lửa' and the Nature of Intellectual Dissent in Contemporary Vietnam," *Việt Nam Forum*, No. 14 (1994): 43ff.

incipient nationalism. Indian nationalist historians, for example, also understood peasant uprisings, particularly in the colonial era, specifically as precursors to the emergent Indian nationalist movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These historians, moreover, suggested that it was not until key nationalist leaders emerged, that the inchoate motivating forces for the peasantry could be directed toward specific objectives. Like the Vietnamese historians, these interpreters, using the lens of nationalism, frequently attributed a sense of patriotic purpose to peasant movements. The peasants rose up against the British or their domestic collaborators, and therefore they must have been guided by nationalism. This reasoning is similar to that found in the Vietnamese case.

One way to get out of the trap into which many nationalist historians have fallen is to take the approach suggested by the Subaltern Studies project, which developed in part as a reaction to the nationalist historiography relating to South Asia. As suggested by its name, this project's aim is to give greater attention to the "subaltern" classes in society. It is an effort to render their historical presence more visible within historical narrative frameworks that too frequently discount, overlook, or misjudge the participation of peasants, religious or ethnic minorities or other groups living below the sight lines of political and economic elites. Peasants in existing accounts had too often been depicted in very general, undifferentiated terms. The subalternist approach attempts to make central persons who have often been rendered peripheral in existing studies of colonial history. Moreover, existing histories, describing peasant uprisings as "spontaneous," give little agency to peasants, suggesting that their actions were irrational responses to events, rather than the actions of thinking people. Nationalist histories, while resisting many colonial interpretations of events, often equally marginalized the peasantry, or, as was noted earlier, rendered them as generic proto-nationalist figures. Such descriptions too stripped peasants of their agency. Historians working in the Subaltern Studies framework, such as Ranajit Guha and Gyan Prakash among others, have shown how the nationalist historiographical project conveniently used the figure of the peasant as

part of the nationalist process, rather than recognizing the complex motivations of peasant actors.[3] The subalternist approach, then, is an attempt both to look directly at peasants and their concerns, and in so doing to restore to them their agency as autonomous and self-motivated persons.

The Tây Sơn period is one that can benefit from application of the subalternist method, despite the fact that it is already typically studied as a *peasant* uprising. There are two principal reasons why applying this corrective to the Tây Sơn period would be very useful. The first is that the peasants in accounts of the Tây Sơn period have too often been conflated with their leaders, suggesting that the motivations of the leaders (frequently not peasants themselves) somehow represented or coincided with those of the peasant groups. Thus, the term "the Tây Sơn" is often used as a referent for the movement as a whole – leaders and followers alike whose interests are assumed to have coincided, or at least largely overlapped. Although the reasons for this tendency to conflate leaders and followers are complex, one reason may simply be the nature of the sources which are very limited, particularly those available in Việt Nam. As I will show throughout this work, the reality was that the leaders often did not address the concerns of their followers, and the supposed followers often did not follow their leaders.

A second reason that a subalternist approach is useful is the lingering effects of a historiographical tradition that has frequently subordinated the peasants' stories to those of political and military elites. Equally problematic is that despite the obvious presence in the Tây Sơn armies of literally hundreds of thousands of peasants, these participants have typically been rendered as an undifferentiated mass. Looking more directly at the peasantry during the Tây Sơn period would allow one to distinguish different groups of peasants in different regions, and allow us to understand why some peasants at some times joined the Tây Sơn, while others equally

[3] See, eg. Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 4; Gyan Prakash, "Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Perspectives from Indian Historiography," in *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*, ed. Vinayak Chaturvedi (London: Verso, 2000), 168-171.

strongly resisted them. This is a particularly difficult task, precisely because of the available body of evidence, which is small and skewed toward the elites. We cannot, of course, easily (if at all) recreate the voices of the eighteenth–century peasantry. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak asks, "can the subaltern speak?" The answer, she argues, is that **the** "subaltern" cannot speak, for this once again renders this group as an undifferentiated mass. Rather, individual or particular subalterns can speak, though whether we can hear their individual voices is a much more difficult proposition. We need to admit that we cannot pretend to speak authoritatively about why particular peasants acted in certain instances or responded in certain ways.

Given these constraints, perhaps the best a historian can do is to at least raise some questions about the existing portrayals of Vietnamese peasants and their actions during the Tây Sơn period, even if no satisfactory answers may be forthcoming. What we can do is repeatedly remind ourselves that particular peasants were speaking and acting and rising up and that it is important to remember this. We can try to guess what they were saying and why, all the while acknowledging that it is largely a guess. Moreover, even when we think we can hear the voices of the peasantry, it is usually only a single voice or perhaps the collective voice of a single village – which cannot be considered to be representative of an entire region or period of time. Consequently, we will rarely have enough evidence from a broad enough spectrum to be able to offer convincing generalizations about **the** peasant experience. If we can admit that what we are writing about is only a small piece of the larger picture, then perhaps our account becomes more plausible. Indeed, one may argue that interpretations that posit a peasantry in sympathy with the Tây Sơn may be correct even as similar arguments speaking of antipathy are valid, the difference in interpretation being a function of changing times and places.

After asking the question "can the subaltern speak?" the next question we might ask is "why do particular subaltern actors respond in certain ways in times of rebellion?" That is, why are they rising up or why do they resist appeals to join a movement? What do they hope to achieve by their actions? What are they thinking

about, not only as they rise up, but over the course of a given uprising? These are extremely important questions, and, given the available body of sources, extremely difficult to answer in any satisfying manner. Despite this difficulty, I propose to attempt to answer them, if only in a preliminary fashion, however incompletely. Broadly speaking, I believe that if we attempt to understand what exactly it was that the peasants wanted in the Tây Sơn period we must set aside the ideological blinders that have too often made peasants the instruments of politicians' desires.

The Thesis

I was initially drawn to the Tây Sơn uprising because of an interest in Asian peasant movements. In the course of my research and as I sifted through the source material I began to wonder about how useful it was to depict the Tây Sơn as a peasant movement, or its leaders as "peasants." There were certainly peasants in the movement, and even in its leadership, but did this justify existing characterizations of the Tây Sơn as a "peasant movement?" Generally speaking, a peasant movement is one assumed to originate among the peasantry and to represent peasant interests. As I looked at the Tây Sơn, it became clear that whatever convergence of interests between the movement's leaders and its followers had existed in the very early years of the movement, quickly disappeared. What might have been a "peasant movement" in its early days changed, and not very subtly, into a movement representing the interests of particular political elites, seeking to gain power for its own sake, and largely using the peasants to achieve this end. Particularly after 1785 there is almost no justification for maintaining the characterization of the Tây Sơn as a peasant movement. By that time the Tây Sơn had already fought a long series of battles against a number of armies – the Trịnh, the Nguyễn and even a naval invasion by the Siamese. The eldest Tây Sơn brother, Nguyễn Nhạc, had already been installed as an Emperor with a functioning court and capitol near Qui Nhơn for seven years. The Tây Sơn, moreover, were developing foreign trade contacts, minting coins and

organizing the populations under their control. Indeed, by as early as 1775, when Nguyễn Nhạc declared himself king at the ancient Cham citadel of Vijaya, what had once been a "movement" had now been transformed into a "government," perhaps rendering references to a Tây Sơn "movement" after that date inappropriate.

Based on this transformation of the movement, I came to see an adversarial relationship developing between the movement's leaders and its Vietnamese peasant base, a perspective that is reflected in the surviving documentation, and particularly that found in the European sources. I realized that the portrayals of this movement that had emerged in the second half of the twentieth century had been shaped in accordance with a political agenda that quite clearly distorted the history of the Tây Sơn years. In much of the Communist historiography on the Tây Sơn, the peasants had become models, marked as noble and unafraid, committed to economic and social justice and a unified nation free from foreign interference. If this sounds suspiciously like the agenda of the Vietnamese Communist Party in the second half of the twentieth century, it is of course precisely because that is what it is. The Tây Sơn-era peasantry are portrayed not merely as forerunners of the twentieth century peasant-supported revolution, they are depicted as its eighteenth-century mirror. Thus, my project is in part an attempt to look more closely at the relationship between the Tây Sơn leadership and the peasantry, and specifically to depict these as separate groups, whose interests might have coincided at some points, but which often did not.

Once I concluded that the Tây Sơn movement was not simply a peasant movement (if it was ever a peasant movement at all), I realized that the movement could only be understood in a wider context that considered all elements of Vietnamese society during this period. Thus, rather than simply looking at Vietnamese peasants of this era, I elected to broaden my inquiry to consider the social dynamics of the Tây Sơn movement. In taking this approach I want first to describe how different segments of Vietnamese society were affected by the events of the movement and the policies of the subsequent Tây Sơn regime, and then to look at how these social groups respond to these changes. Thus, rather than seeking to find

convenient labels to categorize the Tây Sơn movement, I find it most helpful to look at particular aspects of the movement and those who were involved in it, and to allow their experiences to give us some guidance. Rather than foreclosing different interpretations, I argue for a more open-ended analysis that enables us to contextualize the Tây Sơn in ways not previously attempted. I am not looking for villains or heroes, but as much as possible am attempting to view the Tây Sơn period and its notable figures through eighteenth-century eyes. My approach is also akin to that articulated by Michael Adas, who noted that the actions of peasants are best understood through

> a dyachronic approach, which assumes that dominant and subordinate social groups are locked in an ongoing contest over the terms by which hegemony is imposed and accepted, gives the peasantry agency without attributing to them a capacity, which they have rarely possessed, to master fully the intricacies of the political or social systems in which they live and to act collectively to right the injustices they perceive in those arrangements.[4]

This Gramscian vision of peasant worlds points in the direction that I take here. In order to understand peasant responses to their environment one needs to consider all social groups within that environment and the relationships between them. Like Adas, and Gramsci, I am cautious in ascribing to peasants too great a capacity to comprehend the complexities of the world in which they live. Nonetheless, the Tây Sơn case appears to make clear that peasants have a fairly good sense of what they expect from a government as well as the types of treatment they seek to avoid. The existing interpretations of peasant involvement in the Tây Sơn movement depict peasants as naively patriotic people, ready to set aside personal comforts for very abstract political objectives – national unification, national defense, or defense of a king. It is far from clear that peasants will readily choose to pursue such objectives when the personal costs are as high as they were in the Tây Sơn period, and indeed, there is considerable evidence that peasants actively avoided serving in the Tây Sơn

[4] Adas, "Comment," 133-134.

armies, regardless of whether they were attacking feudal rulers or defending the nation against foreign aggression.[5]

In taking this social history approach to the Tây Sơn movement my intent is also to transcend the frequent focus on military events and heroes and to overcome the too simple elite-peasant dichotomy often depicted in accounts of peasant movements. This approach will hopefully also yield a more nuanced understanding of the character of the Tây Sơn movement as it reveals some of the major fault-lines within Vietnamese society in this period. Thus, for example, I want to consider both popular and elite reactions to the Tây Sơn, considering the circumstances that provoked differing responses. At times some peasants supported the Tây Sơn movement and its leaders, while at many other junctures they resisted the new regime's demands. Similarly, some scholar-officials in the north welcomed the Tây Sơn leaders and joined the new dynasty, while others either remained neutral or actively resisted the Tây Sơn. It is these complexities that I am exploring here in an effort to provide some sense of Vietnamese society and its response to the rise and spread of the Tây Sơn over the course of thirty years in the late eighteenth century.

The popular reactions to the Tây Sơn regime were sometimes based on perceptions of their legitimacy, but more often reflected pragmatic reactions to economic conditions and other more concrete circumstances, such as the tides of war. What this analysis makes clear is that central to the Tây Sơn movement was a series of interactions between the movement's leaders and various groups in Vietnamese society during this time. Sometimes these interactions took the form of accommodations between the two sides, at others they were negotiated relationships. In yet other instances the Tây Sơn leadership coopted certain groups or their leaders, and in many instances, depending on circumstances, the Tây Sơn relied on coercion to achieve their objects. Thus, through accommodation, negotiation, cooptation and coercion, the leaders of this rebel movement were able to transform themselves [to a

[5] The classic debate regarding peasant motivation and their sense of the system in which they live is that between James Scott (Moral Economy of the Peasant) (1976) and Samuel Popkin (The Rational Peasant: The Political Economy of Rural Society in Vietnam) (1979).

certain degree] into rulers of "Việt Nam" even as the country remained divided and at war.

My study also argues against the notion of Tây Sơn exceptionalism, the idea that the Tây Sơn represented a profoundly different approach to government or that their policies toward or treatment of the peasantry were any better than those of the regimes they displaced. The new regime, not surprisingly, adopted the modes and forms of its predecessors, including both their administrative structures and many of their ritual trappings. There were a very few instances in which the Tây Sơn regime deviated from the actions of its predecessors – most notably in its selection of titles for various government positions, and to a lesser extent its use of the vernacular script Nôm in some (though hardly all) government documents. But on closer examination, the Tây Sơn were not innovators, and in many respects their policies and actions were very similar to those of their Trịnh and Nguyễn predecessors, their Nguyễn contemporaries in the struggles of the 1780s and 1790s, and their eventual successors, the Nguyễn dynasty. The hardships that the peasants faced in terms of corvee labor demands, in terms of taxation, in terms of military obligations were virtually identical under the Tây Sơn, the Trịnh before them, their Nguyễn contemporaries, and the later Nguyễn dynasty. The same is true if one looks at a particular group – Vietnamese Christians. One cannot argue that Tây Sơn policy toward Christians was any more consistent than that of the Trịnh or the Nguyễn. There were periods of tolerance toward the religion interspersed with crackdowns typically provoked by political factors of various types. The crackdowns were as much a function of the avarice of local officials as the periods of tolerance were the result of a sympathetic provincial or local administration, sometimes headed by Christianized officials. The same dynamic can be seen throughout the history of Christianity in Việt Nam, the patterns being little changed from the Trịnh through the Tây Sơn and on into the Nguyễn period.

I also suggest that perhaps the popular adulation for the Tây Sơn that developed in the nineteenth century was as much a function of disgruntlement with

the ruling Nguyễn as it was a true reflection of the nature of Tây Sơn rule. The hagiography of Nguyễn Huệ that developed in the 1800s as well as a variety of works that recorded the feats of the Tây Sơn uprising may have been a response to frustration with the Nguyễn regime's failures to address peasant concerns. That is, the Tây Sơn were being remembered more for being the "not-Nguyễn" than they were for their own successes and more frequent failures. Since much of the information we have about the Tây Sơn comes from after the movement's demise we must consider that this form of popular revisionism may have been a powerful element in the historiography that lauds the Tây Sơn as well as in the popular remembrances of the movement and its leaders. I do not wish to argue that the Tây Sơn leaders and movement had nothing good to commemorate, but rather that the excesses of this period were often being conveniently overlooked in favor of a nostalgia for a non-Nguyễn regime. Indeed, this may have paralleled the popular nostalgia for the Lê regime that existed in the middle and latter parts of the eighteenth century among the northern populations. Anything would have seemed better than the Trịnh regime, and so leaders posing as champions of the Lê were able to rally support even as the reality was that the golden era of the Lê had passed nearly two centuries earlier.

Finally, my study is inspired to some extent by the work of Thongchai Winichakul's *Siam Mapped*.[6] This work on the emergence of the "geo-body" of Thailand also challenges existing nationalist historiography and its powerful political connotations by questioning the convenient projection of present-day realities into the complexities of the past. *Siam Mapped* also challenges historiographies that too readily subsume social, ethnic and geographical margins into a neatly unified national essence, something I attempt in a chapter on people living at the social margins of eighteenth-century Việt Nam. Moreover this perspective is useful for destabilizing the Subaltern Studies approach, which frequently emphasizes class divisions rather than recognizing complex ethnic and geographical divisions of society.

Thongchai's work also highlights the importance of place, and I would argue

[6] Thongchai Winachakul, *Siam Mapped*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994).

that place is crucial in understanding the Tây Sơn period, for local affiliations and loyalties must often be seen as transcending broader issues and "national" trends. That is, people respond differently depending on their own local circumstances and networks. Since my work is focused more on people rather than places I can only offer some hesitant steps in this direction through references to local variants in regard to experience and response. Nonetheless, I believe that my study points toward both social and geographical complexities in the Tây Sơn period that, like Thongchai's work, challenges existing historical narratives and hopefully lays the groundwork for more studies in this direction.

Overview

Since my work is designed as a challenge to existing interpretations of the Tây Sơn period and assessments of the nature of the movement, I begin in Chapter One with a survey of the existing literature pertaining to the Tây Sơn. In this chapter I demonstrate that the social dimension of the movement and its peasant component more particularly, have both been either overlooked or misrepresented in existing scholarship. The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century accounts, in the tradition of court histories or private scholars' writings focused on political and military figures while barely acknowledging the peasant element of the movement. These accounts, moreover, were largely intent on denying any political legitimacy to the Tây Sơn regime, making its leaders out to be thieves and military adventurers. The early twentieth-century scholars, while depicting the Tây Sơn leaders as legitimate sovereigns instead of usurping bandits, were also reluctant to highlight the role and plight of the peasantry in this period. It was only in the post-1954 period that the peasant dimension was brought to the forefront of scholarly work, but in a way that glorified a heroic peasantry instead of acknowledging the enormous hardships this group had to endure during the many wars of the Tây Sơn years. This was particularly true of Communist historians in the north, while their southern counterparts continued to be

more critical of the Tây Sơn regime and more likely to portray the difficulties of the peasantry. I show that there is a consistent thread distinguishing northern and southern interpretations of the Tây Sơn that dates from the early accounts of the movement and weaves through well into the second half of the twentieth century.

After analyzing the existing body of historical writings on the Tây Sơn I shift in the remaining chapters to an analytical account focused different segments of the Vietnamese population during this period. I consider the lives of these groups under Tây Sơn rule and their reactions to the events of the Tây Sơn period. In so doing I challenge the existing scholarship with its simplified views of the Tây Sơn as a "peasant movement" by considering the multiplicity of social groups and other pressures that shaped and defined the nature and course of the uprising. To do this I weave together a broad range of sources from northern and southern perspectives in Việt Nam, while integrating the invaluable European-language resources for this period.

In Chapter Two I examine the leadership of the movement – the three brothers from the village of Tây Sơn. I describe how the movement's leadership saw itself and how its objectives and political strategies changed over the course of the last three decades of the eighteenth century. In this context I also examine the political culture of the period to look at the ways in which claims to power were made by the rebel leaders. I argue that the Tây Sơn leadership relied on various sources of legitimacy, ranging from references to the supernatural to elements of Confucian political philosophy to concrete connections to existing political institutions and ruling families. The connections to existing political institutions were particularly important to the Tây Sơn brothers who eventually linked themselves to the Nguyễn ruling family in the south, then to the Trịnh in the north, thereafter to the Lê, and finally even attempted a marital link to the Chinese imperial family.

These various affiliations and justifications were extremely important to the Tây Sơn, who emerged from an economic backwater to make grand political claims. And yet, despite their grand political ambitions and impressive military victories, I

argue that the brothers' vision remained constrained by their origins. They were unable successfully to conceptualize a unified nation stretching the length of the Vietnamese-speaking world. Rather, their orientation remained toward Qui Nhơn and Phú Xuân, the capitols that had emerged as the political centers of Nguyễn Nhạc and Nguyễn Huệ respectively. Moreover, their political claims were always more about holding power than about exercising it. The promise that the movement began with – an end to official corruption, the abolition of unjust taxation, and the redistribution of wealth – soon gave way to the gloomy realities of life under a regime almost constantly at war. References to alleviating peasant oppression ring particularly hollow when one looks at life under the new regime established by the rebellion, the topic to which I turn in Chapter Three.

In Chapter Three, I undertake an examination of the manner in which the peasantry, broadly speaking, were affected by and responded to this "peasant movement." The chapter is in part a social history of the Vietnamese peasantry during the Tây Sơn years, providing a detailed and concrete look at the nature of peasant existence in a time of enormous upheaval. It is also a challenge to the conventional characterization of the Tây Sơn uprising as a "peasant movement," an interpretation that I suggest is superficial as well as inaccurate. I argue that although many short-lived peasant movements may remain true to the objectives of their peasant adherents, the Tây Sơn movement, led by men who were arguably not true peasants, quickly lost its focus on peasant aspirations, and became a conventional political regime, in some ways perhaps better and in others worse than its predecessors. It appears that the lives of peasants were no more improved by coming under the administration of the Tây Sơn than they were to be made miserable by the subsequent Nguyễn administration. There were periods of relative calm during the Tây Sơn years, but these were brief. For much of that thirty year period, the ordinary people suffered the exhaustions of military service, forced labor, heavy taxation and the constant uncertainty produced by the incessant cycle of conflict. Consequently, the peasants began to look to the growing strength of Nguyễn forces in the far south as a potential source of salvation

from their miseries, just as they had earlier looked to the Tây Sơn. Moving slightly past the Tây Sơn time-frame, I conclude by arguing that the peasant view of the Nguyễn as their saviors evaporated almost before the new dynasty had been established, and that some peasants already began to hope for a return to what they remembered as a better life under the Tây Sơn.

In Chapter Four I focus on another segment of society, which I classify as people living at the "social margins." These groups, among which I include outlaws, pirates, ethnic minority groups and Vietnamese Christians, are ones rarely examined in the Tây Sơn period, or if studied, frequently glossed briefly as having been well-served by the Tây Sơn regime. The reality is far more complicated, and I argue that each of these groups played very important and complex roles in the events of the late eighteenth century. For example, outlaws generally, and pirates more specifically, were integral to the Tây Sơn military successes of this period. The Tây Sơn leadership pragmatically established alliances with these groups, drawing on their knowledge of terrain, fighting skills and the organized numbers they could bring to the Tây Sơn armies. In addition, the Tây Sơn found themselves in a complex relationship with various ethnic minority groups, including most prominently ethnic Chinese and Chams. Both groups were initially strong supporters of the Tây Sơn, but each began to distance itself from the Tây Sơn over time. After their hopes for greater economic freedom and promotion of trade under the Tây Sơn were dashed, most ethnic Chinese in the south began to side with the Nguyễn, while Cham groups demonstrated divided loyalties as they sought to assess the outcome of the Tây Sơn-Nguyễn conflict. Finally, Vietnamese Christians and their small group of European missionary coreligionists had, as I demonstrate, a very complicated relationship with the Tây Sơn leadership, one that changed dramatically over time and place. At some points Vietnamese Christians were being persecuted and forced to renounce their faith, at other times they were permitted to purchase exemptions from this persecution, and at yet others they were permitted free practice of their faith while Christians entered high-level administrative positions in the Tây Sơn regime.

In Chapter Five I close the study with an examination of the manner in which the intellectual elites responded to and were affected by the events of the Tây Sơn years. I consider the political and social pressures under which Confucianized scholars operated in this period and measure the responses of these men to the circumstances in which they lived. I look at the ways in which the Tây Sơn leader, Nguyễn Huệ, recruited these men, both by suasion and by force, as I seek to complicate a standard analysis that portrays this Tây Sơn leader as quite benign in his treatment of those who resisted him. I argue that he frequently resorted to force and threats, including kidnapping and other forms of pressure. I then consider three case studies through which examine in more detail three types of responses to the appearance of the Tây Sơn in the north. Ngô Thì Nhậm was an enthusiastic supporter of the Tây Sơn regime and a loyal aide to Quang Trung; Trần Danh Án actively resisted the repeated solicitations and threats of Quang Trung and his literati supporters, including Nhậm; finally, Bùi Dương Lịch was a Nghệ An intellectual who tried to avoid a summons from Quang Trung, but eventually agreed to serve the Tây Sơn regime, though with great reluctance. Thus, I show that intellectuals, and even families, were often deeply divided among themselves about how to understand the Tây Sơn regime, what it represented, and how they might best respond to it, both philosophically and practically.

Ultimately, my project does not suggest a definitive narrative account of the Tây Sơn period, nor does it constitute a detailed exploration of why the Tây Sơn rose up or succeeded for so many years. Instead, it attempts to examine the dynamics of the movement in terms of social, political and intellectual relationships between various elements of Vietnamese eighteenth-century society. The Tây Sơn uprising is best understood not as a discrete event, but as part of a certain era in Vietnamese history. The continuity of the movement was provided, to the extent that it existed, by a group of leaders who emerged from the Tây Sơn homeland in the vicinity of Qui Nhơn. Beyond this, the movement was also partly about relationships between

different social groups as I demonstrate here. Clearly there are other ways to approach the Tây Sơn movement and regime, for this is but one among many possible vantage points. I believe, however, that it is particularly effective for highlighting some of the important tensions of this period and for revealing much about the nature of Vietnamese society during the turmoil of this era.

Sources

As national heroes, the Tây Sơn, and particularly Quang Trung, are difficult to write about objectively. But the existing accounts are also constrained by the nature of the sources. A common lament about the Tây Sơn period is that there is a real dearth of contemporary Vietnamese source material, which renders study of this period difficult if not impossible. Pierre Manguin, the author of an important study of Tây Sơn-era commercial relations between the Nguyễn and the Portuguese noted in 1984 that "All historical studies of Việt-nam prior to its reunification by the Nguyễn in 1802 straightaway collide with an almost complete absence of primary sources," and he concluded that "the rare original documents of the last quarter of the eighteenth century which have been preserved for us are found almost exclusively in the European or Colonial archives."[7] The only exception he allowed was Lê Quý Đôn's important *Phủ Biên Tập Lục* (The Frontier Chronicles). While it is certainly true that there are nowhere near as many sources as one might like (are there every enough?), Manguin's is a particularly pessimistic and unfounded conclusion.

It is true that there are very few surviving internal government or administrative documents for this period. There is, however, a much larger and very rich body of contemporary literary materials that serve as an important repository of information for this era. These writings include poetry, which while seldom addressing the Tây Sơn explicitly, does provide some sense of the milieu in which these events were taking place – as seen by intellectual elites. These materials also

[7] Pierre-Yves Manguin, *Les Nguyễn, Macau et le Portugal: Aspects politiques et commerciaux d'une relation privilégiée en Mer de Chine 1773-1802*, (Paris: École Française d Extrême-Orient, 1984), XXIV.

include smaller quantities of other forms of eighteenth century writings, including personal letters between scholars, diplomatic correspondence, edicts written by scholars on behalf of the Tây Sơn leadership, and literary commentary and philosophical writings. Finally, this corpus of materials must also be expanded to include, as primary materials, nineteenth century reflections by eyewitnesses to the events of this period. These documents leave a lot of questions about the nature of the Tây Sơn unanswered, but nonetheless contribute to an understanding of the era in which these events took place. In my research I relied extensively on these types of Vietnamese materials, examined both in original manuscript versions – in Hà Nội at the Hán Nôm archives, the History Institute Library, the National Library and the Library of the Hà Nội National University Faculty of History – and in published forms both in Việt Nam and the United States. These sources were both in Classical Chinese as well as in romanized Vietnamese (*quốc ngữ*), with a few sources in *Nôm*, the traditional Vietnamese vernacular writing system, which I read in *quốc ngữ* transliterations.

In addition to these Classical Chinese sources, I also used a small number of texts originally produced in *quốc ngữ*. These texts, as they relate to the Tây Sơn period, are almost exclusively the product of Vietnamese Catholics, the only segment of Vietnamese society versed in *quốc ngữ* prior to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I consulted three main groups of primary source materials in *quốc ngữ*. The first of these was the work of Philiphê Bỉnh (1759-1832), which dates from the first three decades of the nineteenth century and which I consulted at the Vatican Library in Rome. Bỉnh's writings are of considerable importance for providing a perspective on the Tây Sơn era from a person living outside of the traditional literary stream of Confucian scholars. The second group of these *quốc ngữ* primary source materials consists of letters written by Vietnamese Catholics in Việt Nam to European mission societies. The small body of such letters that I examined is held at the Archives of the Missions Étrangères de Paris, and dates from the period between 1760 and 1802. Like Bỉnh's writings, these letters are useful for providing the

perspective of literate Vietnamese, but not ones within the Confucian literary tradition or in any way part of the political structures of the period. At the same time, these letters, with their strong emphasis on particular religious concerns, are most useful for depicting the status of Vietnamese Catholics in eighteenth-century society, and not as helpful for more general observations about the state of the world in which they lived. The final important *quốc ngữ* text I consulted is the *Sử Ký Đại Nam Việt Quốc Triều*, (The Historical Records of the Great Southern Việt National Court) which, although anonymous, was almost certainly written by a Vietnamese Catholic at some point in the late nineteenth century. It appears to draw on missionary materials, and includes considerable detail regarding the status of Christianity in Việt Nam during the Tây Sơn period. In particular, it examines the relationship between the French Bishop of Adran and Nguyễn Ánh.

Despite a richness that is not always (or often) acknowledged, the Vietnamese sources still do not offer sufficient detail to describe fully the events of this period. Fortunately, in addition to these obviously indispensable Vietnamese materials there is a rich body of European language sources for the Tây Sơn period. These materials are primarily in French, though there are other texts in Spanish, English, Latin, Italian and Portuguese. Although not as extensive as those produced later in the colonial period, these materials are, nonetheless, of great value. Europeans had been arriving in small numbers in Việt Nam since the early seventeenth century, including both missionaries from various orders and merchants from a number of European countries. While the merchants' contact with the country tended to be brief, some of the missionaries, particularly by the eighteenth century were remaining in the country for several decades at a time, developing proficiency in the language along with a more thorough knowledge of the country and its people. French and other European missionaries were present in Việt Nam in small numbers in the late eighteenth century, and were witness to the events of the Tây Sơn era. These Europeans left behind some of the most important eyewitness accounts of the rise and reign of the Tây Sơn, accounts which contain much information not found in any surviving

Vietnamese materials. The European documents are also useful for providing somewhat more detailed dating of particular events than is available in the Vietnamese sources.

Of the French sources, the most important are those of French missionaries from the Missions Étrangerès Paris. Their letters from what they called Cochinchine and Tonkin(g) are today held at the MEP Archives in Paris. While many of these letters are in a poor state of preservation, it is remarkable that such a large number of letters made it to Europe at all in a period when mail was sent by the next available ship bound for Europe – a lengthy and perilous voyage. A substantial number of the MEP documents have been published, though sometimes in truncated versions, in a variety of texts, including *Nouvelles Lettres Edifiantes* (1821-1825) and Adrien Launay's three-volume compilation of letters in *Histoire de la Mission de Cochinchine.* In addition, there is the important memoir *La Relation sur Le Tonkin et la Cochinchine* (1807) by the French missionary M. de La Bissachere, based on his 18 years of service in both Tonkin and Cochinchina. While many of these texts, unsurprisingly, relate largely to spiritual matters, they also include often detailed descriptions of political and military events, as well as descriptions of the local impact of these events.

Finally, in addition to the French missionary sources are those of merchants who made briefer visits to the region. These include the accounts of two British missions that passed through Vietnam in the Tây Sơn years, those of Charles Chapman in 1778, and of Lord Macartney in 1793. The former is particularly revealing, as it described a visit to the Tây Sơn capital of Nguyễn Nhạc at Chà Bàn in 1778, the year that he declared himself the Thái Đức Emperor. Chapman gave a detailed description of the Tây Sơn capital during this early period in the movement, and described conversations with the Tây Sơn leaders that revealed their outlook and intentions for the future. The report from Macartney's mission provides a glimpse of the post-Quang Trung Tây Sơn capitol at Phú Xuân during a period of relative political and military tranquility.

Other merchant records have been preserved in Portuguese and Macanese archives as has been recently demonstrated by Manguin, whose *Les Nguyễn, Macau et le Portugal: Aspects politiques et commerciaux d'une relation privilégiée en Mer de Chine 1773-1802* (1984) includes copies of various important texts in Portuguese with French translations. These materials include an early 1780s account by a Portuguese merchant, Jacinto de Fonseca E Silva, *Description Chorographique Du Royaume de Cochinchine*, which described, region by region, the geography, contemporary political situation, and economies of the southern part of Việt Nam at the height of the Tây Sơn strength in the south. They also include another, much briefer, description of Cochinchina from the mid-1780s, by an anonymous Portuguese author held in the archives of Goa, and also reproduced by Manguin. Finally, Manguin discovered an important cache of letters between various Vietnamese political leaders and Portuguese officials in Macao, also held in the archives in Goa. This last is particularly interesting for containing Portuguese translations of several letters by the Tây Sơn leader, Nguyễn Huệ (later Emperor Quang Trung), one written in 1786 and another in 1792. These letters are unavailable elsewhere and provide important insights into Tây Sơn attitudes toward the Europeans.

My work attempts to make use of both Vietnamese and European sources, with a heavier emphasis on the European materials, which are extremely useful for filling in the many gaps in the Vietnamese historical record. While the Vietnamese source material is very useful for describing military and political developments, it is generally far less helpful for examinations of peasant life or the lives of people living at the social margins. For this reason, the European sources, and in particular those of the European missionaries active in Việt Nam throughout the Tây Sơn period, are vitally important for what they tell us about the impact of the turmoil of this era on the peasantry. These letters serve as an important counterpoint to the Vietnamese sources, for they provide the perspectives of outsiders both in terms of their cultural and ethnic background and their physical locations. The Vietnamese sources were primarily written from the vantage point of scholar elites residing in major cities,

while these French sources were written by missionaries who lived in rural Vietnam and rarely dared be seen in the centers of political power.

Restricted to living in smaller towns and villages, these missionaries were able to describe rural life and the enormous costs of warfare and social upheaval caused by the Tây Sơn conflicts. Consequently, their perspective, however much shaped by their proselytizing purpose and political sympathies, is that of rural regions of the country at a time when few people in these regions could tell their stories. Given the impact of the Tây Sơn on the peasantry, the missionary materials are often critical of much about the Tây Sơn regime, and might perhaps be seen as biased against the Tây Sơn. Yet, these same materials, particularly those produced by missionaries active in the north, regularly praise the Tây Sơn for their religious tolerance and are often critical of the Nguyễn (whom they ostensibly supported), so one cannot dismiss the French eyewitness accounts as predisposed to being critical of the new regime. These sources must obviously be used with care, but they are nonetheless of unparalleled value in helping to paint a more complete portrait of life during the Tây Sơn period.

This study has considerable limitations, ones that I hope can be addressed by future researchers. Most notably, my work approaches the Tây Sơn through an examination of political and social relations rather than through a specific geographical or chronological approach. Thus, while I readily acknowledge that there were enormous differences and divisions in terms of policies and objectives over time and location, I have chosen not to focus on these. Future studies, for instance might examine Tây Sơn policies in the far south of the country when those regions were under Tây Sơn control in the 1770s and 1780s. Such studies might also focus specifically on the role of ethnic Chinese participation in the Tây Sơn or the impact of the movement on ethnic Chinese communities. Vietnamese historians have already begun to carry out limited regional studies pertaining to the Tây Sơn era. Such studies have looked at popular involvement during the Tây Sơn period in Hà Nội, in Nghệ An, in Bình Định, in Thuận Hóa generally and Huế specifically. Historians and

folklorists in Huế have been particularly active in collecting local folklore, gathering tomb inscriptions and other late eighteenth century written records, and combing the countryside for potentially interesting materials. Similar work could be done in other regions of the country and may still yield considerable insights into the dynamics of the Tây Sơn movement generally and certain localities specifically

Other studies might also consider the ways in which the Tây Sơn movement interacted with the physical landscape in which it played out. In Chapter Four I address to some extent the role that Chinese pirates played in the important coastal naval conflicts of this period, but there are a great many more ways in which the geography of Việt Nam played an important role in the movement. The Tây Sơn hinterlands, including the highland plateaus, were crucial to the early development of the movement as it grew in anticipation of engaging Nguyễn forces. Later, the movement of Tây Sơn troops north and south across the Gianh River through Nghệ An and into the northern reaches of the country must also have shaped its course. Other such examinations could assess the ways in which different groups of Vietnamese society were affected by the movement relative to their geographic location.

Finally, while I acknowledge that the Tây Sơn was by no means a unitary movement, I do not address the complexities of its divisions in this paper, except where such divisions are particularly prominent. Thus, although I challenge the category of "the Tây Sơn" I do not directly delve into the issue of how we should break apart this category and how the distinct components thereof should be treated. Any movement that lasts for thirty years and that covers as much territory as the Tây Sơn did must have had complexities that defy simple generalizations. The biggest challenge to researchers pursuing such studies may be finding sufficient sources to allow for detailed analyses of discrete aspects of the movement. Nonetheless, such studies may be very rewarding.

The Tây Sơn Movement: An Overview

Since I have chosen to organize this study around examinations of particular social and political groups in eighteenth-century Việt Nam rather than in chronological fashion as the Tây Sơn have frequently been studied, a brief overview of the main political and military events will provide some context for the analytical chapters that follow. The account that I present here is not meant to be definitive or to foreclose other possible narratives, as the rest of this work will show. It is merely intended to provide a general guide to the course of events in the Tây Sơn era. Those seeking more detailed narrative accounts can consult Văn Tân's *Cách Mạng Tây Sơn* (The Tây Sơn Revolution) (1957), or Tạ Chí Đại Trường's *Lịch Sử Nội Chiến ở Việt Nam Từ 1771 đến 1802* (A History of the Civil War in Việt Nam from 1771 to 1802) (1973). There are also several less detailed French-language accounts including Charles Maybon's *Histoire Modern du Pays D'Annam, 1592-1802* (1919) or Lê Thành Khôi's *Histoire du Viet Nam des origines à 1858* (1981), though these include only small sections pertaining to the Tây Sơn.

The Tây Sơn movement emerged during a period in which what is today Việt Nam was divided between two ruling seignorial families, the Trịnh in the north and the Nguyễn in the south, with an Emperor of the Lê family sovereign over both regions in name alone. The movement was named for the village in which it originated, and emerged in the south-central region of Việt Nam, at the point where the lowland plains give way to the interior highlands west of the port city of Qui Nhơn. The movement was led by three brothers from a family that had been settled into the region after being relocated from Nghệ An as prisoners during the Trịnh-Nguyễn civil wars of the mid-seventeenth century. Spurred by economic and political changes, and coming on the heels of several other smaller uprisings in preceding years, the Tây Sơn movement began sometime in 1771, and after capturing the provincial capital of Qui Nhơn in 1773, the movement's armies grew rapidly, adding the support of ethnic Chinese merchants and Cham royalty and catching the Nguyễn

government off-guard. Unable effectively to counter the rebel threat, the Nguyễn soon faced even bigger problems when the Trịnh, sensing an opportunity, themselves invaded the south in late 1774. The Trịnh seized the Nguyễn political center at Phú Xuân with little resistance and pressed southward across the Hải Vân pass.

The Tây Sơn, their offensive having stalled, reached an accommodation with the Trịnh in which they offered their services to the northern commander in exchange for being enrolled in the Trịnh armies. Now serving as the vanguard of the northern army, the Tây Sơn turned their attention toward the south where the Nguyễn had regrouped near Gia Định (the region of modern Sài Gòn). Most members of the Nguyễn royal family were killed during the subsequent struggles, with the only survivor, Nguyễn Anh (a distant relative of the former Lord), becoming the center of Nguyễn restoration efforts. For his part, Nguyễn Nhạc declared himself Chúa in 1775 and a few years later named himself Emperor with the reign title Thái Đức. Beginning in 1775 and continuing until 1785, the two men and their supporters engaged in a protracted back and forth struggle over the far south with Gia Định as the focus of these efforts. The area changed hands repeatedly as the powerful Tây Sơn armies, readily able to seize Gia Định, were unable to establish a permanent hold in a region where the Nguyễn had been able to develop a stronger following. Finally, in late 1785, the Tây Sơn dealt a crippling defeat to a joint Nguyễn-Siamese military force, which led the Nguyễn forces to flee into exile at Bangkok for the next two years.

This respite in fighting to the south allowed the eldest Tây Sơn brother, Nguyễn Nhạc, to turn his attention to a long-deferred plan to recapture Nguyễn territory seized by the Trịnh in 1774. With the assistance of a key Trịnh defector, Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh, he organized an army to be led by his brothers, Nguyễn Huệ and Nguyễn Lữ, and supported by Chỉnh. In the early summer of 1786 this force marched and sailed north, easily seizing Phú Xuân from a complacent Trịnh garrison, and then marched north to the Gianh River, the former Trịnh-Nguyễn boundary. At this juncture the Tây Sơn armies, propelled by the ambitions of Chỉnh (seeking vengeance

on political enemies in Thăng Long), moved across the former border and toward Thăng Long. After a brief struggle, the imperial capital itself fell to the Tây Sơn forces and the Trịnh family fled into the countryside. The Tây Sơn leader Nguyễn Huệ presented himself to the aged Lê Emperor as his restorer, declaring the power of the Trịnh to be broken. Nguyễn Nhạc, incensed at his brother's violating the order to halt at the Gianh River, hurried north, paid his respects to the Emperor, and then brought Huệ and his army back to the south, leaving Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh behind to fend for himself.

In the aftermath of the dispute over the attack on the north, the Tây Sơn brothers had a falling out that included a brief war between Huệ and Nhạc. The conflict resulted in a total victory for Huệ, marking his political ascendance as the preeminent leader of the Tây Sơn forces. In the aftermath of that internal conflict the territory under Tây Sơn control was divided between the three brothers: Huệ was given control over the northern territories, stretching from the region of Nghệ An to the Hải Vân pass; Nhạc remained in control of the center from his capital at Qui Nhơn; and Lữ was given the far south centered on Gia Định. The political situations in north and south remained unstable despite the military strength of the Tây Sơn. The brothers' falling out proved the opportunity Nguyễn Anh needed, as he returned from exile, drove Lữ out of Gia Định and reestablished Nguyễn authority in the far south, not to be drive out again. In the north, the Lê were unable to restore their authority after two centuries of Trịnh dominance, and turned to Chỉnh for assistance. Chỉnh's new political role and demands for the return of Nghệ An prompted Huệ once again to intervene in the north and to place his own political allies into power. Driven from their throne, the Lê sought Chinese assistance in regaining the capital, and the Chinese court, at the urging of their representative in the border region, agreed to intervene.

The Chinese invasion was briefly successful in the face of a tactical retreat on the part of Nguyễn Huệ's troops, but the ease of their victory made the northern army complacent. This complacency, combined with a lack of popular support for the Lê

ruler, paved the way for the Tây Sơn military response. Emboldened by Nguyễn Huệ's declaring himself to be the new Emperor, Quang Trung, the Tây Sơn counterattacked during the Lunar New Year celebrations in early 1789 and dealt the Chinese a humiliating defeat. Thereafter, the Chinese formally recognized Nguyễn Huệ as the new ruler of Việt Nam and peace was restored. Nguyễn Huệ's rule as the Emperor Quang Trung was brief, however, for he died in 1792 at the age of forty, leaving behind an underaged heir, his son Quang Toản, who took his father's throne as the Cảnh Thịnh Emperor. The following year Nhạc also died, similarly leaving a young son as his successor. Quang Trung's successor was able to hold together an uneasy political structure for the next decade, even as the Nguyễn continued, with the assistance of French mercenaries, to build up their military and political strength. The growing Nguyễn strength, combined with growing popular unrest in the Tây Sơn territories shaped the final years of the struggle, as Nguyễn attacks up the coast from Gia Định slowly eroded Tây Sơn territorial control in the south-central coastal region. Finally, in the summer of 1802, Nguyễn Anh was able to enter Thăng Long, having vanquished the remnants of the Tây Sơn regime.

This account obviously gives only the briefest outline of the Tây Sơn period whose complexities are enormous. The rest of this work will fill in many of the details, but as noted earlier cannot address all of the issues raised by events of this period.

Chapter One

The Historiography of the Tây Sơn Movement

> The Tây Sơn insurrection was the powerful spearhead of peasant war in our country and was credited with its first successes. It had the rare feature of turning itself into a patriotic war for national defense. It put an end to partition and initiated reunification, at the same time successfully defending national independence against foreign forces invading the country in both the north and the south and foiling all acts of treason by the feudal cliques in Đàng Trong and Đàng Ngoài.[1]

Such characterizations of the Tây Sơn as a peasant uprising, triumphing over corrupt feudalism and traitorous leaders, unifying a nation, and ultimately defending it against foreign aggression have come to dominate discourse on this major event in eighteenth-century Vietnamese history. The tone of this and indeed most descriptions of the Tây Sơn to be found in much of the literature of the second half of the twentieth century must inevitable raise suspicions in the mind of the historian. To understand the sentiments expressed in such writings, and then to begin to rethink them, we must first understand where they came from. To comprehend their origins requires an understanding of the patterns of historiographical writings on the Tây Sơn movement and era that have been produced over the past two centuries.

Peasants uprisings are usually short-lived and almost always quickly brought to an end by the superior power of the ruling state. The leaders or other participants in these movements rarely have the opportunity or means to write an account of their rebellions or their objectives in rising up. There are few exceptions to this rule in Southeast Asia. After his uprising in Java in the early nineteenth century, the mystic rebel Dipanagara, who was exiled rather than executed, wrote his own account of these events in his *Babad Dipanagara*. The Burmese rebel of the 1930s, Saya San wrote in a diary, preserving some conception of his understanding of events. More typically, in numerous peasant uprisings in eighteenth and nineteenth-century China,

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[1] Nguyễn Duy Hinh, "Reflections on the House of Tây Sơn," *Social Sciences* (2/89), 35.

and many colonial-era uprisings in Southeast Asia, there are records of "confessions" made by participants during interrogations after their capture. Such confessions are, of course, highly problematic, but remain an important source of information concerning the outlook of peasant rebels, both leaders and followers. Ironically, it may be the most successful peasant uprisings that leave the least trace of their collective or individual understandings of their actions. The Tây Sơn movement appears to fall into this latter category.

Because of the rebels' success, combined with the enormous level of social disruption caused by the struggles of this period, written documents for the Tây Sơn period are limited, uneven, and scattered. Since the Tây Sơn destroyed the existing political powers there are no surviving "confessions" to these powers. Moreover, when the Tây Sơn regime was finally brought down, its surviving political leaders were executed, rather than exiled, so unlike Dipanagara, they did not have the opportunity to write or otherwise record their own stories. There is every indication that the Tây Sơn would have written their own history, for after taking power their regime created a history board to prepare draft histories of earlier ruling houses. Unfortunately for later historians, although the Tây Sơn regime issued the first of these pre-Tây Sơn era histories in 1800, it was overthrown two years later, and the opportunity to write of their own origins and rise to power vanished with them. The histories that were written of the Tây Sơn in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries thus tended to reflect either the views of the Lê rulers or their sympathizers, or the prevailing antipathies of the Nguyễn regime towards its immediate predecessors.

The Tây Sơn period was defined by enormous upheaval, almost continual warfare and considerable displacement of peoples and political parties, and was thus not conducive to careful preservation of records. The relative absence of surviving Tây Sơn government records is a result of this turmoil as well as systematic efforts by the Nguyễn dynasty to obliterate (to the extent that it was possible) traces of the

Tây Sơn government.[2] As David Marr has pointed out, "the Nguyễn court forbade its historians from compiling an account of the short-lived Tây Sơn dynasty (1788-1802), normally a routine function associated with maintaining for posterity chronological continuity from the distant past."[3] Consequently, there was no organized gathering of Tây Sơn court documents or other materials which might have been preserved, albeit indirectly, in the form of an official history. While such a history would obviously have reflected the biases and objectives of the new dynasty, it would have offered much greater insight into the Tây Sơn as movement and government had it been compiled. The failure to include the Tây Sơn is particularly significant in light of the fact that Phan Huy Chú's important nineteenth-century encyclopedia, the *Lịch Triều Hiến Chương Loại Chí* (Monographs of the Institutions of the Dynasties) includes records of previous usurpers like the Hồ and the Mạc. As Phan Huy Chú observed in justifying their inclusion: "There are only the Hồ clan who usurped the throne of the Trần house, and the Mạc who usurped the throne of the Lê house, who, having rebelled for a time, cannot be called orthodox (dynasties). But they are a reality in our history and should not be lost, and therefore they have been included in this appendix."[4] In this light, the absence of the Tây Sơn is even more striking.

Indeed, the awareness of this conspicuous gap in the historical record grew over the course of the nineteenth century. By the early twentieth century, historians were remarking on it more directly. In his 1905 introduction to Đặng Xuân Bảng's *Việt Sử Cương Mục Tiết Yếu* (The Essential Summary of the History of the Việt), Thiện Đình commented on the early Nguyễn policies calling for destruction of all vestiges of the Tây Sơn regime. He noted that even if the Tây Sơn had been usurpers, the point of histories was not to delete such figures, but to include and learn from them. He noted, for instance, that the usurping Mạc had been included in the

[2] For a detailed description of the lengths to which the Nguyễn went in this regard see the account in Quách Tấn and Quách Giao, *Nhà Tây Sơn* (Qui Nhơn: Sở Văn Hóa và Thông Tin Nghĩa Bình, 1988), 234-249.

[3] David Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885-1925* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 23, note 1.

[4] Phan Huy Chú, *Lịch Triều Hiến Chương Loại Chí* (Monographs of the Institutions of the Dynasties) Sài Gòn: Bộ Văn Hóa Giáo Dục và Thanh Niên Xuất Bản, 1973), vol. 2 (part one), 45a-45b.

histories written by their successors, and that by the same logic the Tây Sơn should be as well. He concluded by observing that not to include the Tây Sơn was to leave a 15 year gap in the historical record (between 1788 and 1802), for he did not accept the convenient Nguyễn fiction that preserved the dead Lê Hiên Tổng as ruler until Gia Long ascended the throne in 1802. As he observed of that gap: "At that time the Lê house had already fallen, and the present dynasty had not yet ascended, and as for the continuous transmission through all the dynasties from the Đình to the Lý, the Trần, and the Lê, if it was not (passed through) the Tây Sơn, then through whom?"[5] This was clearly an important issue, and Thiện Đình's question was one that would increasingly draw the attention of twentieth-century scholars.

Given the bitterly divisive nature of the Tây Sơn era, it is perhaps not surprising that the subsequent historiography of the Tây Sơn has a complex lineage, reflecting often dramatically different points of view, both ideological and geographical. The Tây Sơn had challenged conventional authority in an uprising the strength and scope of which had not been seen in the country since the forces of Lê Lợi had ousted the Ming occupation in the early fifteenth century. Their movement had represented the worst nightmare of ruling states – a mass rising of the population. In the period since the Tây Sơn era ended, there has been an ongoing debate about how to define and interpret the events and figures of this period, a debate that became particularly contentious in the twentieth century. Were the Tây Sơn revolutionaries or rabble-rousers? Were they the vanguard of peasant aspirations or merely a collection of ambitious military figures? Did they unify the country or further divide it? Finally, and perhaps most significantly, could the Tây Sơn be considered to belong to the line of legitimate ruling houses, or could they only be classified as "usurpers" like the Hồ and Mạc before them? This last question in some ways subsumed all of the other issues being debated about the Tây Sơn and always lurked behind any other writings relating to them.

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[5] Đặng Xuân Bảng. *Việt Sử Cương Mục Tiết Yếu* 越史綱目節要 (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học Xã Hội, 2000), 9.

Underlying all of these debates, however, was another more subtle historiographical dimension, and that had to do with the question of peasants. Accounts of the Tây Sơn from the movement's early days through to the first half of the twentieth century, tended to downplay or ignore entirely the role that peasants played in this era. The emphasis was always on the leaders of the movement, and the uprising became synonymous with the three brothers who instigated it. Given the nature of traditional historiography with its emphasis on political and military matters and the men perceived to be shaping the course of events this is hardly surprising. History was about heroes and kings, not about peasants. The peasants were always there, of course, even as they often constituted the unnamed presence at the center of events during the Tây Sơn era. Only in the second half of the twentieth century, as a new approach to the writing of Vietnamese history and specifically the Tây Sơn era started to take shape, did peasants finally emerge to take their place at center stage.

Beginning in the 1950s in the north, Communist historians dramatically shifted the emphasis of their studies and interpretations and began to extol the Tây Sơn as a profoundly important "peasant movement" or sometimes a "revolution," even as they continued to write the history of national heroes. Thus, although Nguyễn Huệ-Quang Trung continued to be celebrated for his personal accomplishments, the Tây Sơn movement was now depicted as one reflecting peasant aspirations in the face of a debauched feudal polity rather than merely constituting the brainstorm of one larger-than-life figure. Moreover, these accounts were intensely nationalistic, portraying the Tây Sơn movement and its supporters as united in defense of the country and in their aim to "reunify" the long-divided land. Thus, this historiography developed a picture of the Tây Sơn as a peasant movement, guided by leaders with devotion to the nation, its defense and unity, and a movement that readily united diverse elements of Vietnamese society in a spontaneous attack against criminality and oppression. It is these depictions that I will question in subsequent chapters of this dissertation.

In this chapter I begin a reexamination of the Tây Sơn period by first

considering the existing historiography. I look at the various perspectives on the Tây Sơn and how these have been shaped by geographical, political and historical circumstances. As this chapter will show, there were marked geographical divisions that shaped scholarly interpretations of the Tây Sơn period from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries. Northern scholars and their writings have tended to be more sympathetic to the Tây Sơn as a regime, and more willing to recognize its legitimacy. Southern scholars on the other hand have always been much more critical of the Tây Sơn leaders and movement, unwilling to acknowledge that the Tây Sơn might have been lawful successors to the Lê dynasty. These tendencies can be traced over the centuries, and so an understanding of the late eighteenth and the nineteenth-century historiography is extremely important for explaining the patterns of twentieth-century interpretations. Considerable attention will be paid to twentieth-century historical accounts, particularly of the period since 1954, for it is these interpretations that shape contemporary understandings of the Tây Sơn, understandings that I intend to reexamine in the rest of this work. Finally, I cast a fairly wide net in my historiographical overview of the Tây Sơn scholarship, and as a consequence I address a wide range of disputes relating to interpretation, not all of which I develop in subsequent chapters. I have included sometimes minor issues as a way to show the breadth of disputation on this topic, even when I have not elected to pursue each of these issues in my own reinterpretations.

European Language Writings on Eighteenth and Nineteenth-century Việt Nam

In 1971 Alexander Woodside argued, in his *Vietnam and the Chinese Model*, that "modern Vietnamese history opens with the Tây Sơn Rebellion."[6] Despite the truth contained in this observation, the Tây Sơn episode has largely remained a blank spot in western scholarship, which has somehow managed to avoid confronting the

[6] Alexander Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model: A Comparative Study of Vietnamese and Chinese Government in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 4.

complexities of this period. Woodside's work, for instance, begins its account just after the Tây Sơn defeat, describing the manner in which the Nguyễn dynasty developed its political and administrative institutions in the first half of the nineteenth century. Although the Tây Sơn period lay outside the period being studied in Woodside's work, he nonetheless addresses the Tây Sơn in his preface, dividing the trajectory of the movement into three phases: the first being its early conquest of the south, the second the attack on the north and the brief rule of Quang Trung, and the third one of political conservatism and gradual collapse. Woodside emphasizes the peasant dimension of the Tây Sơn movement, seeing its leadership as closer to the peasant social and cultural traditions, and describes the Quang Trung period as one involving "an unprecedented program of political and cultural experimentation."[7] Moreover, he sees the Tây Sơn period as commencing the period of modern Vietnamese history by involving westerners, focusing peasant discontents, unifying the country and revealing tensions with the ethnic Chinese merchant community emerging in the south. Despite its brevity, Woodside's summary stands as one of the most cogent English-language assessments of the significance of the Tây Sơn.

At roughly the same time that Woodside's important study appeared, David Marr's pioneering work, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism* (1971), took up the historical thread in the late nineteenth century as Việt Nam came to terms with its status as a French colony/protectorate. Thereafter, Marr brought his story up to the middle of the twentieth century with *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial* (1981), which covers the height of the French colonial period from 1920 to 1945. Although not directly addressing the Tây Sơn, Marr's account does devote some pages to analyzing the early twentieth-century historiography that developed around the Tây Sơn, revealing the tensions that emerged in that tradition.[8] More recently, Li Tana stepped backward and approached the Tây Sơn from the seventeenth century. Her *Nguyễn Cochinchina: Southern Vietnam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (1998) looks at the emergence of the Nguyễn polity in the region known as Đàng Trong, covering the period from Nguyễn

[7] Woodside, 3.

[8] David Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1981), 268-272.

Hoàng's late sixteenth-century entry into the southern frontier regions up to the early days of the Tây Sơn movement. Her work devotes an entire chapter to the Tây Sơn, marking the first detailed consideration of the movement in English. Li's work, however, looks only at the early days of the movement as she places it into its local context, describing the economic and social tensions that emerged in Đàng Trong. She emphasizes the degree to which the Tây Sơn project, at least in this early manifestation, drew heavily on imagery and discourse of southern ethnic and political traditions. Her account thus highlights the Tây Sơn as a local phenomenon, but does not address the nature of the movement as it expanded beyond its point of origin. It is, nonetheless, very important in its contributions to English-language scholarship on the Tây Sơn.

In addition to the English-language scholarship, there are a few works by French historians dealing with the Tây Sơn. Perhaps the best early and detailed French study is Charles Maybon's 1919 *Histoire Moderne du Pays D'Annam (1592-1820)*, which devotes several chapters to the Tây Sơn period. This account, however, chiefly examines the events of this era from the Nguyễn perspective, with a heavy emphasis on the role played by the French, and particularly the Bishop Pigneau de Behaine. More important still is a detailed history of the movement by the noted French scholar Maurice Durand, which currently exists only in an unpublished typescript that I discovered at the Yale University Library. This account lies very much within the parameters of traditional Vietnamese historiography. That is, it emphasizes political and military events over social and economic ones. This approach also privileges military and political figures and the conflicts between them, while the experiences of the peasantry are virtually absent. Moreover, Durand's reliance on the official court histories of the victorious Nguyễn in the nineteenth century, results in a bias favoring the Nguyễn interpretation of events during the Tây Sơn period. Despite these shortcomings, the text provides what might be considered a baseline for western language study of the Tây Sơn. It offers an outline of the main events, characters and dates, something which has heretofore been unavailable in a

western language. As such it is both a very useful source of reference for this period and hopefully a starting point for further research once published.

More recent scholarship by French historians includes Yang Baoyun's 1992 work, *Contribution à l'histoire de la principauté des Nguyên au Vietnam méridional (1600-1775)*, and Philippe Langlet's *L'Ancienne Historiographie D'État au Vietnam: Tome 1, Raisons d'être, conditions d'élaboration et caractères au siècle des Nguyễn* (1990). Yang's work, as its title dates suggests, stops just as the Tây Sơn are emerging. Yang relies very heavily on Lê Quý Đôn's *Phủ Biên Tạp Lục*, a good source for this period, but not the definitive explanation for the emergence of the Tây Sơn. Following Đôn, Yang concludes that the causes of the Tây Sơn outbreak are largely attributable to the corrupt regent, Trương Phúc Loan. Langlet's study, on the other hand, is more similar to Woodside's in that it looks more at the nineteenth century Nguyễn. Specifically, his is a study of the Nguyễn historiographical project. Among other topics Langlet addresses is the Nguyễn understanding of their own historical antecedents including the Tây Sơn and the Lê. Langlet shows how the Nguyễn historians had to wrestle with the question of how to portray the Tây Sơn and how to reinforce their own legitimacy in the context of their irregular path to power.

In this manner, the Tây Sơn movement has been neatly bracketed by a considerable amount of important scholarly work in English and examined in somewhat greater detail by a few French scholars, and yet it remains largely unstudied in both the English and French-language scholarly traditions. The reasons for this are not entirely clear, although one may be the nature of the sources. Most existing studies of peasant uprisings in Southeast Asia have been of colonial-era movements and consequently relied heavily on colonial sources. Such sources often provide a wealth of information on peasant movements of various types. Being a precolonial movement, the Tây Sơn uprising is perhaps perceived as being more difficult to approach through the sources. In some regards, the Tây Sơn fall into the cracks between the formal Vietnamese dynasties of the pre-Tây Sơn period, many of which left considerable amounts of textual records, and the colonial peasant uprisings, whose

record resides in the colonial archives. Consequently, studies of the Tây Sơn must be approached somewhat more creatively than more traditional studies of peasant uprisings. Whatever the reasons for the failure of western scholars to conduct studies of the Tây Sơn, the absence of a western scholarly tradition pertaining to this uprising means that any serious study of the topic must instead begin with the work of Vietnamese scholars, who have been studying and writing about the Tây Sơn since the early days of that movement.

The Eighteenth-century Historiographic Tradition

What might be considered historical narrative accounts of the Tây Sơn already began emerging during the eighteenth century. Although the number of such accounts is not great, and they are of necessity not complete, they are obviously of great importance for beginning to understand the origins of Tây Sơn historiography. The earliest of the eighteenth-century historical accounts of the Tây Sơn dates from 1776, while the last was probably completed in part in the 1790s. These accounts, and one in particular, the *Hoàng Lê Nhất Thống Chí*, have had a considerable influence on subsequent writings about the Tây Sơn, serving to indicate some of the early points of contention about how precisely to interpret the movement. Because of its enormous impact on subsequent writings on and interpretations of the Tây Sơn, I look first at the *Hoàng Lê Nhất Thống Chí* in some detail.[9]

Hoàng Lê Nhất Thống Chí

The *Hoàng Lê Nhất Thống Chí* (*HLNTC*) or "The Unification Records of the Imperial Lê" is arguably the single most important eighteenth-century historical account of the Tây Sơn. This text was written by a number of members of what is referred to as the *Ngô Gia Văn Phái* – the Ngô Family Literary Group, whose home was in the Hải Dương region just east of the northern capitol, Thăng Long. For

[9] See my "The *Hoàng Lê Nhất Thống Chí* and the Historiography of 18th Century Vietnam." Paper presented at the American Historical Association Annual Meeting, January 2001.

generations this family produced scholars and officials serving the northern court at the highest levels. Its members had served both the increasingly irrelevant Lê Imperial court and the powerful Trịnh overlords, and by the middle of the eighteenth century were at the height of their influence. The line included Ngô Trân, his son Ngô Thì Ứ'c (1709-1736), Ứ'c's son Ngô Thì Sĩ (1726-1780) and Sĩ's own sons, including Ngô Thì Nhậm, Ngô Thì Chí, Ngô Thì Trí, and Ngô Thì Hương. Each of these figures was a prominent man in eighteenth-century Vietnamese literature and philosophy, although only the two most notable – Ngô Thì Sĩ and his son Ngô Thì Nhậm (1746-1803) – attained the *tiến sĩ* ("doctorate") status in the imperial examinations.

The *HLNTC* is a text describing political events and palace intrigues in the northern part of the country in the period from the 1760s to the fall of the Tây Sơn in 1802. The bulk of the text, however, concentrates on the brief period between 1782 and 1789, from the death of the northern seignorial ruler, Trịnh Sâm to the defeat of a Chinese military force by the Tây Sơn army. While there are lengthy descriptions of the Lê in exile after 1789 in China, and brief descriptions of Tây Sơn actions in the Phú Xuân and Qui Nhơn areas, the *HLNTC* is chiefly concerned with events in Thăng Long. In many ways, it feels very much like a play: it is largely dialogue rather than description, and the dialogue that takes place is lengthy and used to characterize the various individuals taking part in this drama. There are some battle scenes and general descriptions of troop movements, but these are secondary to the personal interactions at the center of the text. Above all, the text is a careful delineation of the political struggles between two main groups – Lê loyalists and Trịnh partisans.[10] Once the Tây Sơn arrive to attack the Chinese in late 1788 and early 1789, the text shifts again and now becomes a description of new struggles: between the Tây Sơn and the Lê, and between the Lê in exile and their Chinese hosts, unwilling to provide the renewed military support that is demanded of them.

The text is very favorable in its depiction of the Tây Sơn. More precisely, it is favorable in its depiction of the great Tây Sơn leader, Nguyễn Huệ (later the

[10] Because of the proliferation of contenders for political power in this period, there are also subgroups within these general categories.

Emperor Quang Trung). He is frequently referred to by various characters in the account as a hero, "anh hùng," and is shown to have a forceful and commanding personality. His actions are decisive and his ability to gather worthy individuals around him is considerable. His elder brother, Nhạc, also appears in this account, but is not depicted in the same favorable light. In one instance he is shown being duped by a group of mountain bandits who successfully attack his own forces, after which he and his troops are frightened of their surroundings.[11] Nhạc, the central figure of the Tây Sơn drama as it had unfolded in the south prior to 1786, is not of particular importance to the northern narrative. This is shown as his brother's stage. The depictions of these two men and a few of their aides are really the extent to which this text addresses the Tây Sơn movement. There is little interpretation of the Tây Sơn movement itself, and the inception of the movement is described only briefly as follows:

> Earlier Văn Nhạc had been rather poor, but later on through his gambling, he suddenly became wealthy. Nhạc had already served as the *biện lại* in Vân dồn, for which reason the inhabitants there still call him Biện Nhạc. Because Nhạc had lost the tax money of the office, he quickly fled into the forest and gathered a group of more than one hundred people to go to loot in all of the highland hamlets. The governor-general of that region was unable to suppress him.[12]

However limited in these respects, what makes this text of unsurpassed importance as a source of information about the political and military aspects of the Tây Sơn intrusion into the Bắc Hà region after 1786 is the fact that it was almost certainly written contemporaneous to the events that it describes and by men in a position to

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[11] Ngô Gia Văn Phái. *Hoàng Lê Nhất Thống Chí*, Tập 1. (The Unification Records of the Imperial Lê, vol. 1). Trans. Nguyễn Đức Vân and Kiều Thu Hoạch (Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Học, 1998), 149. Hereafter *HLNTC* (1998).

[12] ibid., vol. 1, 91; see also Ngô Gia Văn Phái, *Hoàng Lê Nhất Thống Chí* (The Unification Records of the Imperial Lê) Collection Romans et Contes du Viet Nam écrits en Han, vol. 5 (Paris-Taipei: Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient and Student Book Company Ltd., 1986), 61.

know the concrete details that abound in this work.[13]

Given its important status as a source, the *HLNTC* has been the focus of numerous translations into modern Vietnamese (*quốc ngữ*) as well as the subject of several scholarly examinations.[14] These studies have included considerable debate about a number of issues, chief among which are the authorship of the text and its historical accuracy. In terms of authorship, the debate centers on a number of figures in the Ngô lineage. Was the author Ngô Thì Nhậm, the great scholar who supported and served the Tây Sơn? Was it Ngô Thì Chí, his younger brother who maintained his loyalty to the Lê Emperor in exile from the capitol? Was it his young cousin, Ngô Thì Du, who followed his father in fleeing the Tây Sơn to avoid serving the new regime? The conventional view that has emerged is that the most likely author of the first seven chapters was Ngô Thì Chí, the Lê loyalist, who died while in flight with the Emperor Lê Chiêu Thống in 1788. He was a noted literatus, easily capable of producing this text, and was also in a position to provide much of the degree of detail found therein. Moreover, there exists plausible early evidence pointing to his role as author of at least part of this work. The late eighteenth or early nineteenth-century *Vũ Trung Tùy Bút* (Following the Brush Amid the Rains) by Phạm Đình Hổ, states that Ngô Thì Chí, was the author of what is referred to simply as the *Nhất*

[13] The surviving texts are all hand-written copies, and for the most part are very difficult to date with any certainty. The earliest datable copy is from 1899. See Phạm Tú Châu, *Hoàng Lê Nhất Thống Chí, Văn Bản Tác Giả, Và Nhân Vật* (The *Hoàng Lê Nhất Thống Chí*, Text, Authors and People) (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1997), 14; Bắc Hà (North of the River), being a reference to the region north of the Gianh River, which had divided Trịnh and Nguyễn territories from 1672 to 1774.

[14] See for example: Vũ Đức Phúc, "*Hoàng Lê Nhất Thống Chí* và Sự Thực Lịch Sử Chung Quang Việc Quang Trung Phá Thanh," (The *Hoàng Lê Nhất Thống Chí* and the Truth Around the History Concerning Quang Trung's Destruction of the Qing) *Tạp Chí Văn Học*, 1974, No. 3, 105-123, 129; Phạm Tú Châu, "Đọc Lại *Hoàng Lê Nhất Thống Chí*" (Rereading the *Hoàng Lê Nhất Thống Chí*) *Tạp Chí Văn Học*, 1979, No. 2, 49-54; Mai Quốc Liên and Kiều Thu Hoạch, "Tìm Hiểu Gía Trị Hiện Thực Của 'Hoàng Lê Nhất Thống Chí,' Một Tác Phẩm Văn Xuối Cổ Điển Tiêu Biểu" (An examination of the Realistic Value of the "Hoàng Lê Nhất Thống Chí," a Representative Work of Classical Prose), *Tạp Chí Văn Học*, 1966, No. 11, 76-84; Kiều Thu Hoạch, "Góp Phần Xách Định Tác Giả *Hoàng Lê Nhất Thống Chí*" (A Contribution to Determining the Author of the *Hoàng Lê Nhất Thống Chí*) *Tạp Chí Văn Học*, No. 4, 1981, 32-40, and the recent book-length study by Châu (1997).

Thống Chí (The Unification Record).[15] Moreover, a number of the extant copies of the text also indicate that the author was Chí. The preponderance of evidence thus appears to suggest that Chí was the author of the first part of this text, but some scholars still question this, even as debate continues about who might have written the subsequent 10 chapters, which were clearly composed after Chí's death. Some authors have suggested that the text's quite positive portrayal of the Tây Sơn must have been the work of a pro-Tây Sơn figure, like Nhậm, though the evidence on that point is sketchy.[16]

In addition to debates about authorship are questions about the historical accuracy of the text. Unlike either the formal dynastic histories, organized by reign years and months within those years, or the privately written histories, which were usually organized on the same basis, the *HLNTC* is organized into "chapters" totaling seventeen in all. It is further divided, according to some versions, into two sections, a primary part and a continuation (*chính biên* and *tục biên*). Each chapter begins with a brief recapitulation of elements from the previous chapter and ends with an aphorism appropriate to the contents of that chapter. For example, chapter eight, detailing military conflict in late 1786 and early 1787, ends with the phrase: "When raven and fox fight, it is not worth paying attention to. When tiger and dragon struggle, oh how horrible that is!"[17] Chapter twelve, describing the Chinese preparations to invade Việt Nam on behalf of the ousted Lê ruler, ends with the lines: "Obeying commands, the general sees to showing off his power. Sending out troops, the great general displays his arrogance."[18] The use of such commentary devices, although found in some texts, such as the *Khâm Định Việt Sử Thông Giám Cương Mục* (The Imperially Ordered Mirror and Commentary on the History of the Việt), which was partially designed to provide commentary, is not typically found in the

[15] Phạm Đình Hổ, *Vũ Trung Tùy Bút* (Following the Brush Amid the Rains). trans. Nguyễn Hữu Tiến. (TP Hồ Chí Minh: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Nghệ Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh, 1998), 195.
[16] Văn Tân. "Mấy Vấn đề Về Ngô Thì Nhậm," (Some Matters Pertaining to Ngô Thì Nhậm) *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử* 154, (1/2, 1974): 34-44.
[17] *HLNTC* (1998), vol. 2, 31.
[18] ibid., 156.

more formal dynastic histories.[19]

The *HLNTC*'s format is more akin to the historical romance tradition of novel writing that developed in China during the Ming period. Specifically, the form, and to some extent the content, of the *HLNTC* have strong similarities to the famous Chinese tale, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. That work, written sometime toward the end of the fourteenth century, is a novel describing a period in the late Han era when three states vied for political supremacy as the Han dynasty slowly unraveled. This novel was apparently extremely popular in Việt Nam in the eighteenth century. The *HLNTC* itself reported that the Lê Emperor, Lê Hiển Tông (r. 1746-1786) regularly directed his daughters in stage productions of scenes from the work.[20] And we know from other sources that Chinese dramas more generally, were popular during the Tây Sơn period and even at the Tây Sơn court itself.[21]

Because of the apparent parallels to the Chinese historical novel tradition, some Vietnamese literary critics have described the *HLNTC* as an historical novel or "*lịch sử tiểu thuyết*." Dương Quảng Hàm, in his 1943 *Việt Nam Văn Học Sử Yếu* (Essential History of Vietnamese Literature) described the *HLNTC* in precisely those terms and also made explicit comparisons to the *Tale of the Three Kingdoms*.[22] More recently, Trần Văn Giáp also used the words "*lịch sử tiểu thuyết*" to describe the work. He noted, however, that unlike the Chinese historical novels on which it is loosely patterned, it was not merely a fanciful tale using historical events as a backdrop. Rather, he observed, it reflected the authors' own experiences or events they were hearing about as they unfolded. Giáp argued, moreover, that much of what was reported in the *HLNTC* was clearly true, and thus the *HLNTC* is much more closely

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[19] Quốc Sử Quán Triều Nguyễn, *Khâm Định Việt Sử Thông Giám Cương Mục* (The Imperially Ordered Mirror and Commentary on the History of the Việt) (2 volumes), trans. Hoa Bằng, Phạm Trọng Điềm, and Trần Văn Giáp. (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Giáo Dục, 1998), vol. 2, 501. (Hereafter *Cương Mục*) For more discussion of this text see below.

[20] *HLNTC* (1998) vol. 1, 139.

[21] Lord MacCartney's Journal Entry, 4 June, 1793, in Alistair Lamb, *Mandarin Road to Old Hue* (London: Archon Books, 1970), 166.

[22] Dương Quảng Hàm, *Việt Nam Văn Học Sử Yếu* (The Essentials of Vietnamese Literary History) (Tiền Giang: Nhà Xuất Bản Tổng Hợp Đồng Tháp, 1993), 318.

related to the genre of *dã sử* (unofficial history) than it is to the historical novel.[23] Another Vietnamese literary critic, Nguyễn Lộc, also concluded that the high degree of real and verifiable fact contained in the *HLNTC* places this work not into the category of the historical novel, but rather into what he saw as a relatively new genre of eighteenth-century writing – the *ký sự*. The *ký sự* or memoir, developed in this period as a popular means to record events in a manner not constrained by the conventions of historical writing that existed in this period. Even the *dã sử*, which represented unofficial (private) records of historical events, largely followed conventional formats dictating the organization of information along strict chronological lines.

If then, the work is more a *ký sự* than a *lịch sử tiểu thuyết*, to what extent can its content be seen as factual? While the form of the *HLNTC* may be that of an historical novel, rather than a conventional historical narrative account, it appears, as Trần Văn Giáp noted, that it cannot readily be classified simply as an historical novel. There are no invented characters, and an historical period has not simply been adopted to serve as a backdrop to some dramatic tale. Moreover, the author(s) of the *HLNTC* did not describe some distant past, but rather were writing about events as they happened or at most a few years after their occurrence. Thus it is difficult to describe the work as having been created to be "historical." Rather it appears to have been constructed more along the lines of a chronicle of events. The characters are all very real, and the dates, associations and many of their actions are not only plausible, but probable. Moreover, the author(s) went out of their way to lend weight to the veracity of their account by including various (verifiable) dates for major events.

We cannot ultimately know the precise mixture of fact and fiction contained in the *HLNTC*, for it is difficult to substantiate whether this or that person actually made a particular speech or held a secret counsel involving precisely the figures placed there by the authors. Many of the events it describes, however, can be

[23] Trần Văn Giáp, *Tìm Hiểu Kho Sách Hán Nôm, Nguồn Tư Liệu Văn Học Sử Học Việt Nam* (Investigating the Han Nom Treasury: The Foundational Documents of the Literary and Historical Study of Việt Nam). (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1990), 125-126.

substantiated by independent observers as has been shown in one recent study of the work, by Nicole Louis-Henard and Phan Thanh-Thùy. In their *Hoàng Lê Nhất Thông Chí (Unification du Royaume sous les Lê) Traduction et notes*, the authors use missionary letters to corroborate a number of events reported in the *HLNTC* dating from the 1760s to the late 1780s.[24] Since the missionary letters can be definitively dated, unlike many Vietnamese sources for this period, they provide the most reliable external evidence for verifying many of the accounts contained in the *HLNTC*. Based on their analysis, the authors conclude that:

> The H.L.N.T.C. does not appear to us to be classifiable in the category of historical fiction, for it neither contains fictitious central characters, nor does it report events after the fact as in the novel, *The Three Kingdoms*. The H.L.N.T.C. appears for the most part to constitute the memoirs of the Lê dynasty, as reported by the Ngô family.[25]

Given its great importance, as well as the prominence of its putative authors, it is not surprising to find that the contents of the *HLNTC* have permeated the Vietnamese historiographical landscape. Indeed, the influence of this work is such that authors of many of the extant nineteenth-century historical manuscripts (primarily the *dã sử* or private histories) appear to have merely copied large sections of the *HLNTC* into their writings. Examples of these texts include the *Lịch Triều Tạp Kỷ* (Miscellaneous Records of Past Dynasties), the *Lê Quý Ký Sự* (A Record of Events of the Esteemed Lê) and the late eighteenth-century *Đại Việt Sử Ký Tục Biên* (A Continuation of the Historical Records of Đại Việt). On first encountering these texts I viewed them as corroborating information found in the *HLNTC*, but it quickly became clear that these texts themselves had gathered or copied their information from the *HLNTC*.

Indeed, the pervasive importance of this text can be seen not merely in the fact that the Nguyễn-era historians relied on it, but the degree to which its information, in

[24] Nicole Louis-Henard and Phan Thanh-Thùy, *Hoàng Lê Nhất Thống Chí (Unification du Royaume sous les Lê) Traduction et notes* (vol. 2) [Paris: École Française D'Extrême-Orient, 1996), vol. 2, I-XIX.
[25] ibid., I.

the twentieth century, entered what might be called the realm of common knowledge. Most accounts of the Tây Sơn by modern Vietnamese historians include sections of the *HLNTC*, typically its conversations (which are reproduced verbatim), to reflect the attitudes and actions of Tây Sơn era figures.[26] However, the *HLNTC* is rarely cited as the source for this information, an indication that the information has somehow become detached from its origins. And when the *HLNTC* is used in these instances, it is rarely used critically. That is, its shortcomings are not acknowledged, and its information is merely used as evidence without comment. This is clearly problematic for a text that has become, at least for the northern part of the country, a type of Ur-text for studies of the Tây Sơn period.

Interestingly, the heavy reliance on the *HLNTC* by subsequent interpreters has contributed to the obscuring of the peasant dimension of the Tây Sơn movement, for this text is, in almost every respect, a history of the elites, their personal struggles and factional strife. To the extent that any "ordinary people" appear in this work, they are almost entirely incidental to the telling of the story. They show up infrequently as bit players in a drama which is not their own. They sometimes capture and turn in this or that member of a particular political faction, but never do they express their collective or individual will. There is undoubtedly great value in understanding the complex politics of the capitol, but in an era that so painfully involved the peasants, who died by the tens of thousands in the wars of this period, much remains to be explored. It is ironic, that a period later historians often called "the century of peasant uprisings" is just as frequently studied as a complex of somewhat arcane decisions being made by people driven more by personal ambition than consideration for the greater good of the state or its majority inhabitants.

It is particularly ironic that this text should have come to take on such significance in the contemporary Vietnamese historiographical tradition, which gives

[26] A sample of prominent texts that include as fact, materials (without citation) from the *HLNTC* include: Văn Tân, *Cách Mạng Tây Sơn* (1957), Văn Tân, *Nguyễn Huệ Con Người Và Sự Nghiệp* (1967), Quách Tấn and Quách Giao, *Nhà Tây Sơn* (1988). Other texts, such as those by Phan Trần Chúc (1940) and Ta Chị Đại Trướng (1973) also use it extensively, though they at least say as much in their introductions.

such weight to the Tây Sơn as a peasant movement. It has always been somewhat surprising to find that despite historiography that glorifies the peasant dimension of the Tây Sơn period, the peasants remain relatively obscure and abstract figures in that historiographical tradition. In light of the heavy emphasis on the use of the *HLNTC*, this fact is considerably easier to comprehend. The *HLNTC* is generally quite useful for allowing Vietnamese historians to burnish the image of Quang Trung and some of the northern intellectuals who supported him. It is far less useful for helping to gain any sense of popular participation either in the ranks of the Tây Sơn or of their rivals. If there is any true theme within the *HLNTC* with regard to popular participation in the political and military conflicts of this period it must be one of remarkable ambivalence.

Other Eighteenth-Century Texts Regarding the Tây Sơn

Although the *HLNTC* must be recognized as the preeminent eighteenth century source for studies of the Tây Sơn, it is not the only historical account of the movement to date from this period. Another important eighteenth-century Vietnamese account of the Tây Sơn is found in the *Phủ Biên Tạp Lục* (The Frontier Chronicles). This text was written by the famous eighteenth-century literatus Lê Qúy Đôn (1726-1784) while he served as an official for the Trịnh lords in the newly captured Nguyễn territories during the years 1775-1776. Đôn was closely connected to the Trịnh rulers, serving in various high-level positions from the time he passed the imperial examinations at the highest levels in 1752 until the year before his death in 1784. His account is a survey of the economy, polity and cultural life of these Nguyễn territories, about which little had been known in Thăng Long prior to this time. The *Phủ Biên Tạp Lục* is a profoundly important work for the study of southern society in the eighteenth century, and has been assessed as such elsewhere.[27] Here I wish merely

[27] See for example Alexander Woodside's informative "Central Vietnam's Trading World in the Eighteenth Century as seen in Lê Quý Đon's 'Frontier Chronicles,'" Paper for the SEASSI Symposium on Vietnamese History, Cornell University, July, 1991.

to call attention to Đốn's (relatively brief) descriptions of the early Tây Sơn years. While the account lacks the historical perspective available to later writers, it is useful because it addressed what were seen as the root causes of the uprising and the nature of its leadership in these early years.

Đôn's brief account of the uprising focused on the misgovernment and cruelty of the Nguyễn regent, Trương Phúc Loan (? - 1776) as the impetus for the Tây Sơn rising in rebellion. He noted too, that once Quảng Nam had been taken by the Trịnh, "some good-for-nothing merchants rose up in response and followed Nguyễn Văn Nhạc."[28] Despite such characterizations, Đón's account was not particularly critical of the Tây Sơn for an important reason – the rebels had by this time been incorporated into the ranks of the Trịnh military and polity as their vanguard in attacking the Nguyễn and holding the regions south of the Hải Vân pass, tasks the Trịnh themselves could not manage. In one regard Đón's account paved the way for later Nguyễn historians, for it blamed the initial uprising in large part on the debauched southern regent, Trương Phúc Loan. To some degree, Đôn's implicating Loan reflected popular perceptions of the regent's actions. But it also deferred a more detailed examination of problems in the south. For Nguyễn historians who followed Đôn's interpretation, placing the blame on this one man enabled them to deflect attention from any shortcomings of their own ancestors. On the other hand, the Nguyễn historians were to part company with Đón in their depiction of the Tây Sơn, for while the Trịnh viewed them as enrolled officials and soldiers, the Nguyễn depicted them merely as rebels.

The *Phủ Biên Tạp Lục* was not the only contemporary narrative history relating to the Tây Sơn produced from the Trịnh perspective. Linked to this account is the *Bình Nam Thực Lục* (The Veritable Records of the Pacification of the South), a description of the Trịnh military campaigns to the south, covering the period from 1774 to 1777 and the less definitively datable *Bắc Nam Thực Lục* (North South

[28] *PBTL* (1972), vol. 1, 121.

Veritable Records) which largely discussed the same events.[29] These volumes include correspondence between the generals and the Trịnh ruler, descriptions of supply requisitions, troop movements, and rewards for military service granted to officers and troops. The *Bình Nam Thực Lục* was ordered compiled by Trịnh Sâm (r. 1767-1782) and printed (in woodblock form) at some point thereafter, probably prior to Sâm's death in 1782. As a description of the military events in this period it is an extremely valuable source. These texts focus largely on Trịnh decision-making and discussions of their military campaigns, but also include important descriptions of the interactions between the Trịnh and the Tây Sơn. In these texts the Tây Sơn are depicted chiefly as gift-bearing supplicants to the Trịnh seeking appointments to military and political positions as Trịnh representatives south of the Hải Vân pass.

Finally, from the northern perspective, we have the *Đại Việt Sử Ký Tục Biên* (The Continued Historical Record of Đại Việt). This text, of which a variety of versions survive, provides a narrative record of events in the north and to a lesser extent the south (after 1774). It was clearly begun during the eighteenth century at the behest of the Trịnh rulers, and designed as an effort to update the existing court histories. When it was written is difficult to determine, and some surviving versions were apparently somewhat altered in the nineteenth century to reflect the sensibilities of the Nguyễn. On the other hand, most evidence suggests that the entire text was composed in the eighteenth century. The editors and translators of the currently available *quốc ngữ* version (1991) demonstrated that the section dealing with the historical record from 1676 to 1740 was completed by a group of scholars including Lê Quý Đôn, Ngô Thì Sĩ and Ninh Tốn, probably in the 1770s.[30] As to the preparation of an historical record that extended from 1740 into the 1770s or 1780s, there is no definitive evidence that it took place during this time. Nguyễn Kim Hưng, writing in

[29] *Bắc Nam Thực Lục* (North South Veritable Records) (VHv. 1472, Viện Hán Nôm, Hà Nội) and *Bình Nam Thực Lục* (Veritable Records of the Pacification of the South) (VHv. 185, Viện Hán Nôm, Hà Nội). The former text exists in a wood-block printed form which was almost certainly produced in the 1770s. The *Bình Nam Thực Lục* has been translated into *quốc ngữ* and an unpublished typescript of this translation is held at the Bình Định Provincial Library, item number DC-79.

[30] *Đại Việt Sử Ký Tục Biên* (A Continuation of the Historical Records of Đại Việt). trans. Ngô Thế Long and Nguyễn Kim Hưng, ed. Nguyễn Đổng Chi (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1991), 6.

the introduction to the 1991 translation, however, argued that numerous historical materials were clearly being gathered at this time since there are a relatively large number of private histories written about this period. Consequently, it is not improbable that the same group that had written the earlier history was still collecting materials for an even more updated account.[31] The *Đại Việt Sử Ký Tục Biên* is noteworthy as marking the first text to include what later became the standard form for presenting the history of the Tây Sơn period. This is a narrative that switches back and forth between events unfolding in the south and north of the country. Since this text ends in 1789 it does not extend to the point at which these separate streams come together in 1801, but it did pave the way for subsequent texts of the nineteenth and twentieth century, which were to adopt this same approach to presenting the history of this period. In terms of its assessment of the Tây Sơn, the *Đại Việt Sử Ký Tục Biên* is not unlike the other extant eighteenth-century texts, for it too was prepared by Trịnh loyalists. The Tây Sơn leaders were portrayed as supplicants to the Trịnh and as seeking to preserve good relations with their northern superiors, while at the same time attempting to crush the Nguyễn resistance to the south.

These four texts are the main Vietnamese narrative works describing the history, or more precisely, aspects of the history of the Tây Sơn movement that are known with some certainty to date from the eighteenth century. Their importance lies in their having been produced by contemporaries of the events, and in the case of the *HLNTC* by men on intimate terms with many of the instrumental political and military figures of that era. It also stems from the fact that these works had a profound influence on subsequent scholars, especially the *HLNTC*, and to a lesser extent the *Phủ Biên Tạp Lục*. These are not, I want to emphasize, the only eighteenth-century Vietnamese materials we have that can be used for study of the Tây Sơn period, however, merely the only ones that contain historical accounts of the Tây sơn.

[31] ibid., 6. Though Ngô Thì Sĩ and Lê Quý Đôn were both dead by 1784, the history board had a larger membership that could have provided continuity into the later 1780s.

The Nineteenth-century Nguyễn Histories

Although partial histories of the Tây Sơn period were already being compiled in the late eighteenth century, the most comprehensive and systematic sources pertaining to the Tây Sơn are those that were produced by nineteenth-century court-appointed historians. The nineteenth-century sources, offering somewhat greater historical perspective than those of the previous century, were at the same time shaped by the sentiments of a new dynasty and its adherents. Not surprisingly, these texts provided the Nguyễn perspective on events in the Tây Sơn era, and with the advantage of hindsight portrayed the ultimate Nguyễn victory as an inevitability. Produced in the nineteenth century, these histories might be regarded as secondary sources and thus perhaps inherently less reliable than the eighteenth-century narratives. The Nguyễn texts were, however, produced by scholars who had access to surviving eighteenth-century materials as well as to eyewitnesses and survivors of the Tây Sơn turmoil. Moreover, as with the *HLNTC*, the broad outlines of events portrayed in the Nguyễn materials can generally be corroborated by contemporary missionary letters. Thus, while the tone of such texts may be very critical of the Tây Sơn, the content is at times surprisingly frank about Tây Sơn military victories and other successes and the failures of the Nguyễn.[32] This suggests that the nineteenth-century Nguyễn histories can be used, as they usually are, as indispensable sources, particularly for laying out the broad narrative patterns of the military and political struggles of the Tây Sơn period.

While no history of the Tây Sơn dynasty was written by the Nguyễn dynasty, its historians naturally wrote histories of what might be called the Tây Sơn era.[33] The Nguyễn dynasty oversaw the production of an unparalleled number of court-ordered texts on history, biography, protocol, and ritual, many of which dealt with the events of Tây Sơn period. These texts include the *Khâm Định Việt Sử Thông Giam Cương*

[32] Woodside (324), argues that given their audience and objectives, the evidence in the *Đại Nam Thực Lục* is relatively reliable, and that its authors did not suppress evidence unfavorable to their rulers.

[33] Though these historians no doubt viewed it more as a prologue to the Nguyễn era.

Mục (The Imperially Ordered Text and Commentary of the Complete Mirror of the History of the Việt), the *Đại Nam Thực Lục Tiền Biên* and *Chính Biên* (The Veritable Records of Đại Nam - Preliminary and Primary Sections), the *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện Tiền Biên* and the *Đại Nam Chính Biên Liệt Truyện* (The Preliminary and Primary Records of the Tales of the Celebrated Figures of Đại Nam), the *Đại Nam Nhất Thống Chí* (The Unification Records of Đại Nam), and the *Quốc Triều Chính Biên Toát Yếu* (The Primary Records of the Essentials of the National Court), to name just the most prominent.[34] Among these texts, arguably the most important for any study of the Tây Sơn are the *Đại Nam Thực Lục* (Thực Lục) and the *Khâm Định Việt Sử Thông Giam Cương Mục* (Cương Mục) [35]

The *Đại Nam Thực Lục* (The Veritable Records of the Great South) is perhaps the single most comprehensive extant historical record of events in Việt Nam since the sixteenth century.[36] It is in some respects the southern counterpart to the eighteenth-century *HLNTC*, offering the most detailed description of events in the Nguyễn-controlled regions of the south. The *Thực Lục* was compiled in the first half of the nineteenth century, and was intended as a record of important events at the court and in other parts of the realm, and was produced in a relatively terse chronological form tied to the reign years of the Nguyễn Emperors. The *Thực Lục* provides a considerable amount of information gathered by the Nguyễn to describe their antecedents and rise to power. Its focus is on events in the south, the territory under the control of the Nguyễn seignorial family beginning in the mid-sixteenth century, and it describes the eighteenth century from that same vantage point. It

[34] For the definitive study of nineteenth-century Nguyễn historiography see the Philippe Langlet's very impressive *L'Ancienne Historiographie D'État Au Vietnam, Tome I* (Paris: École Française D'Extrême-Orient, 1990). In it Langlet demonstrates the manner in the Nguyễn used their historiography to bolster their claims to power, particularly in light of the struggles that were necessary to bring them to the imperial throne. (The term *Thực Lục*, perhaps best rendered "accurate records" was clearly borrowed from the Chinese *shi lu*, where it was used to denote the traditional court-compiled historical record.)

[35] Alexander Woodside (323) has referred to it as "the single most important source for early nineteenth-century Vietnamese history.

[36] Although the court agreed to change the country's name to Việt Nam in the early nineteenth century, the term is rarely found in official records of the Nguyễn, which instead used the appellation Đại Nam.

contains the texts of edicts and decrees issued by Nguyễn Ánh, purports to recreate various conversations between key figures, and provides very detailed descriptions of military matters. It also emphasizes the tolerant and humane policies being implemented by the Nguyễn in their efforts to win over the support of southern populations. Not surprisingly, it is heavily weighted toward events concerning the Nguyễn in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

After a relatively short survey of the origins of the Nguyễn lords and their efforts to establish a government in the south, it addresses the events of the Tây Sơn period which ultimately propelled the new Nguyễn "Generational Ancestor" (*thái tổ*) Nguyễn Ánh, to the imperial throne as Gia Long in 1802. In this account, the Tây Sơn are depicted as the rebel foil to the struggles of the Nguyễn as the latter slowly rebuilt their political credibility and military strength after being nearly annihilated. Indeed, for the Tây Sơn period, the *Thực Lục* is ultimately most concerned with explaining the Nguyễn success, or perhaps more specifically justifying it. This account often relies on the supernatural to indicate turns of fate, always, of course, favoring the Nguyễn forces and leaders. This can be seen both as a means to demonstrate the divine sanction that the Nguyễn cause enjoyed, and as an implicit challenge to Tây Sơn claims to that same divine support. The *Thực Lục* treats the Tây Sơn leaders as "bandits" or "rebels" and distinguishes them from "the people." In this Nguyễn account the Tây Sơn attempted to lure the people through "petty favors" rather than constituting a legitimate political alternative. Later, the *Thực Lục* describes the people living under Tây Sơn political control as longing to be liberated from the oppressive rebels by the Nguyễn forces. These were hardly surprising characterizations of this period, but they provide a useful sense of how the Nguyễn viewed this era in terms of its effects on the general population.

Not surprisingly, the *Thực Lục* is far more critical of the Tây Sơn than such earlier narratives as the *HLNTC*. Thus, for example, the *Thực Lục* described Quang Trung's death in terms of a fate resulting from his daring to attack the imperial ancestors and usurp the throne, while the *HLNTC* described it more prosaically as the

result of illness.[37] On the other hand, when the *HLNTC* described the great Tây Sơn victory over the Chinese invading forces in 1789, it credited Quang Trung's military prowess and ingenious strategy, the *Thực Lục* merely notes laconically that "The Qing forces fought fiercely with the Tây Sơn rebels of Nguyễn Huệ at Thanh-trì and lost."[38] There is clearly a shift from the northern eighteenth-century chronicle to the southern nineteenth-century work, reflecting both their respective geographical and historical perspectives.

The *Cương Mục*, in contrast to the *Thực Lục*, was the Nguyễn dynasty's formal history of the dynasty they acknowledged as their immediate predecessors, the Lê. As such, it deals with events in the region north of the Giang River, which constituted the proverbial Vietnamese heartland. While similar to the *Thực Lục* in some respects, this text is more explicitly pedagogical, with its commentary providing assessments of various events and actions by rulers. In this case it constituted the commentary of the Nguyễn rulers regarding the actions of their Lê predecessors, and more generally events of the Lê period. Not surprisingly, the *Cương Mục* owed a considerable debt to the *HLNTC*, and used that source for recreating some of the many conversations that took place in the northern court particularly after 1786.[39] In the final section of the *Cương Mục*, that dealing with the Tây Sơn years, the text and its commentary became the Nguyễn opportunity to have the final say in their rivalry with the Trịnh. This official commentary is highly critical of the Trịnh rulers and their perceived incompetence. The collapse of the northern political order and the Tây Sơn successes are seen as being a direct result of the Trịnh involvement in government – the idea that a state with two heads cannot effectively be held together. Moreover, it is always the Trịnh who are criticized in the *Cương Mục*, not the Lê. The Lê are portrayed merely as victims of the Trịnh, and the Nguyễn had no

[37] *Đại Nam Thực Lục*, vol. 2, 86; *HLNTC* (1998), vol. 2, 220.

[38] *Đại Nam Thực Lục*, cited in Alexander Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model* (1988), 24.

[39] Langlet (1) argues that the *Cương Mục* was much more heavily indebted to two other texts: the eighteenth-century Lê history, the *Đại Việt Sử Ký bản kỷ tục biên*, and a *dã sử* the *Lịch Triều Tạp Ký*, written by Ngô Cao Lãng in the early nineteenth century. This may indeed be true for the earlier periods, but for the 1780s the *HLNTC* seems a more important influence, and in any case, the *Lịch Triều Tạp Ký* itself borrowed heavily from the earlier text.

interest in attacking the imperial family. The Lê continued to have their supporters in the north, and the Nguyễn historians who compiled the *Cương Mục* sought to appease them as had been Nguyễn practice since their early days in power.

The *Cương Mục* and the *Thực Lục* thus provide very different perspectives on the events of the eighteenth century, and particularly the Tây Sơn years. The *Cương Mục*, a history of the nation that led up to the rise of the Lê and ended with the flight of the last Lê Emperor to China in 1789, sees the Tây Sơn from the perspective of the court in Thăng Long. It was very much the chronicle of a dying dynastic power, to which the Tây Sơn deal a death blow. In this text, the demise of the Lê has a certain inevitability, marked by rulers unable to wield sufficient political or military power to ward off their challengers. The *Thực Lục*, in contrast, is something else entirely. It is a history of the rise of the Nguyễn, who viewed the Tây Sơn years through the lens of a court in exile (from Phú Xuân, the old Nguyễn seignorial capital) struggling to restore its power and destroy the Tây Sơn. It is, moreover, a history of the birth and development of a new dynasty, a birth which was itself a product of the Tây Sơn challenge. The *Thực Lục* depicted a young and dynamic leader revealing himself as a compassionate and yet determined dynast, resurrecting the political claims of his predecessors, while forging a new state with a power base in the far south. In the *Thực Lục*, the inevitability is of the ultimate triumph of the Nguyễn, as foretold in various signs from the gods. Despite the hardships and military setbacks that the Nguyễn historians were forced to acknowledge, the signs of divine approbation recur to point to an ultimate and inevitable triumph.

Dã Sử: Private Historical Writings on the Tây Sơn

The Nguyễn court did not have a monopoly on nineteenth-century writings about the Tây Sơn, and while court historians labored under the general expectations of the Nguyễn Emperor, other intellectuals were less constrained. There are numerous nineteenth-century accounts of the Tây Sơn period by private scholars, writings that

can be grouped under the rubric *dã sử*, which can be literally translated as "rustic/savage" history, but is more generally rendered as "unofficial history." While *dã sử* were outside the formal court historical tradition in that they were produced by private individuals, for the most part they paralleled the structures and interests of the court-ordered histories. That is, they provided largely chronological accounts of military and political events following the annalistic structure that described events by reign year and month. They are often useful, however, for providing details not found in the court records, reflecting either the author's particular contacts, or frequently his access to local materials either unavailable to or perhaps deemed uninteresting by the court historians. The authors of *dã sử* were not necessarily outside the mainstream of official historians. Some, like Nguyễn Thu, the author of the *Lê Quý Kỷ Sử* (A Record of Events of the Esteemed Lê), had served on the team preparing the official Nguyễn histories in the first half of the nineteenth century. Others, such as Trịnh Hoài Đức, author of the *Gia Định Thành Thống Chí* (Transmitted Records of the City of Gia Định), had been very close confidants of Gia Long. These men produced their own histories in addition to those they helped prepare for the state, in part because doing so was an important part of the prose tradition among Vietnamese literati.

A search of the holdings of the Viện Hán Nôm in Hà Nội reveals a rich tradition of *dã sử* discussing among other periods that of the Tây Sơn. These include: three different texts entitled *Nam Sử* (Southern History), the *Hậu Lê Dã Lục* (the Latter Lê Unofficial Records), the *Bản Quốc Kỷ Sự* (The Original Country Record of Events) the *Hoàng Triều Sự Tích* (The Imperial Court Tales of Events) the *Phong Tục Sử* (Customary Histories), the *Hoàng Việt Thực Lục* (The Imperial Việt Veritable Records) the *Nam Sử Lám Yếu* (The Southern Historical Essentials) and the *Việt Sử Bổ Di* (Annex to the History of Việt) to list just some examples of this genre. There is also a small body of such (possibly nineteenth-century) writings focused solely on the Tây Sơn, including *Tây Sơn Thực Lục* (The Veritable Records of the Tây Sơn), the *Tây Sơn Thuật Lược* (A Summary Recounting of the Tây Sơn), and the *Nguyễn*

Thị Tây Sơn Ký (The Record of the Tây Sơn of the Nguyễn Clan).[40] Based on their content and references to the Nguyễn, as well as their language and political leanings, most can be dated to the nineteenth or perhaps early twentieth centuries, but not more specifically than that. Finally, there are a number of more prominent *đã sử*, whose authors are known, and which have been translated into *quốc ngữ* and published, such as the *Lịch Triều Tạp Ký* (Miscellaneous Records of Past Dynasties), the *Nghệ An Ký* (Nghệ An Chronicle), the *Lê Quy Dật Sử* (History of the Precious Lê), the *Gia Định Thành Thống Chí*, and the *Lê Qúy Kỷ Sự*. Most of these *dã sử* provide a rehash of the political and military events also contained in the Nguyễn official histories, while some contain small details not found elsewhere. Individually they are of limited value, but collectively they contribute to our understanding of this period through the minor details they provide.

While some of these *dã sử* clearly adhered to the characterizations of the Tây Sơn found in the Nguyễn histories, the more prominent *dã sử* (mostly produced in the north), while generally following Nguyễn convention in referring to the Tây Sơn as rebels (*giặc*), are less quick to demonize the Tây Sơn and appear more ready to accept the possibility that the Tây Sơn might have been a legitimate dynasty. The relatively neutral nature of these *dã sử* may in part reflect the fact that the northern Tây Sơn administration was relatively stable and thus perhaps viewed in a positive light compared to the chaos of the last years of the Lê and Trịnh rulers. If anything, northern writers at least of the first half of the nineteenth century were most likely to have retained a loyalty to the Lê, and to have viewed the Nguyễn as usurpers who had never even made a pretense of restoring the Lê. For all their faults, and their eventual seizure of the throne, the Tây Sơn had made several attempts to restore the political position of the Lê rulers in the latter 1780s.

One can cite numerous examples of these northern *dã sử* that are not inherently hostile toward the Tây Sơn. These include, for instance, the *Bản Quốc Kỷ Sự*, which referred to the first Tây Sơn leader, Nguyễn Nhạc as the *Thái Tổ Hoàng Đế* (the

[40] These texts are undated, and so their age cannot be readily ascertained.

Imperial Great Ancestor) of the Nguyễn (Tây Sơn) clan.[41] Such a reference would never have been found in the Nguyễn texts, which specifically did not recognize the Tây Sơn claims to rulership. The same text later refers similarly to Cảnh Thịnh, Quang Trung's heir, as a *Hoàng Đệ* (Emperor).[42] Another more prominent example is the *Lịch Triều Tạp Kỷ*, written by Ngô Cao Lãng, a native of the northern province of Thanh Hóa. The final section of this lengthy survey of the Lê in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries discussed the Tây Sơn rule in the north, devoting particular detail to Tây Sơn-Chinese diplomatic correspondence. While the author was clearly quite interested in the fate of the Lê in exile, the account was not overtly critical of the Tây Sơn, merely reporting their political position and contacts with the Chinese.[43] Moreover, Lãng used the Tây sơn reign dates in establishing his chronology and did not use the Nguyễn fiction of continued Lê rule after Lê Chiếu Thông's exile and subsequent death in 1793. Indeed, as was noted earlier, this text clearly relied on the *HLNTC* for some of its content, and so it is perhaps not surprising that it is similarly sympathetic toward the Tây Sơn.

A final important northern *dã sử* is Bùi Dương Lịch's *Lê Quý Dật Sử*. Lịch was one of the northern scholars who reluctantly came out to serve the Tây Sơn. This account, written some time between 1802 and his death in 1827, contains many important details on the Tây Sơn arrival in the north and their rule in that region after 1789. This text describes events in the north from 1758 to 1793, with a heavy emphasis on the events of the tumultuous 1780s. The author, a native of Nghệ An, was witness to much of what he describes, for his native region lay on the path the Tây Sơn armies took during campaigns in 1786, in 1787 and in 1788. The author is one of the characters in this narrative as well, making it a very personal account. This text offers a considerable degree of detail for the events of this era, and reveals the sympathies of a Lê loyalist. It is particularly useful as a counterpoint to the

[41] *Bản Quốc Ký Sự* (Records of the Affairs of Our Country), A. 989, 102b. Viện Hán Nôm, Hà Nội.
[42] ibid., 105a
[43] Ngo Cao Lãng. *Lịch Triều Tạp Kỷ* (Miscellaneous Records of Past Dynasties). trans. Hoa Bằng and Hoàng Văn Lâu (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1995), 585-694.

description of events found in the *HLNTC*. While Lịch's political sentiments were not dissimilar to those of the author(s) of that work, he wrote from a different geographical perspective in his home province of Nghệ An, an important Tây Sơn political center and the scene of considerable political and economic disruption. While there are many indications that Lịch and other scholars of his generation lamented the collapse of the Lê, the account nonetheless was not full of the vitriol and vituperation common to southern descriptions of the Tây Sơn period.

The northern *dã sử* tradition thus stands as an important counterpoint to the writings of the Nguyễn official historians. The *dã sử*, while also more interested in political and military heroes than in the Vietnamese peasantry of the period, are inclined to view the Tây Sơn as having constituted a legitimate dynasty, however brief its reign. Moreover, *dã sử* written by northerners tended to be less critical of the Tây Sơn regime, while accounts by southern writers, including both the Nguyễn regime (which in spite of the location of its capitol in the center at Phú Xuân, should still be considered a "southern" regime) and French missionaries, evinced a much greater degree of hostility toward the Tây Sơn. To some extent this reflected the nature of the conflict in each area – the virtually continual and large-scale warfare in the south from 1773 until 1785 (and resumed between 1788 and 1802) contrasted with the relatively brief Tây Sơn attacks to the north in 1786, 1787 and 1788/89. Moreover, I believe this difference in attitudes can also partially be attributed to timing – the southern conquest by the Tây Sơn took place as the movement was still evolving both in terms of its direction and its relationship to the general populace, while the northern conquest was undertaking by a somewhat more mature and focused leadership. Of course the southern accounts also reflect the profound Nguyễn antipathy for their former enemy as well as their actions and political pretensions. Southern accounts, whether private or official, thus tended to view the Tây Sơn in line with the sentiments of the imperial rulers.

Early quốc ngữ sources

Virtually all of the contemporary Vietnamese sources were written in classical Chinese or in Nôm, the Vietnamese demotic script. However, by the late eighteenth century, largely through the efforts of French missionaries, the newly developed alphabetic script – *quốc ngữ* – was beginning to be used by Vietnamese Catholics in a very limited manner. Many of the surviving eighteenth-century *quốc ngữ* writings of which I am aware are preserved in the Archives of the Missions Étrangères de Paris in Paris. These chiefly represent letters written by Vietnamese religious communities to the headquarters of the Paris Mission Society, usually appealing for the dispatch of more priests. The other, and perhaps more important body of *quốc ngữ* writings, is that of the Vietnamese Jesuit, Philiphê Bỉnh (1759 - 1832).

Philiphe Bỉnh, was a Vietnamese Catholic who arrived in Europe in 1796 and remained there until his death in Lisbon in 1833. While he wrote in *quốc ngữ* virtually all of his surviving writings date from his residence in Europe. The Vatican Library holds 23 volumes of his writings, comprising more than 10,000 pages. Many of these are histories of major figures in the Jesuit movement, or Vietnamese liturgies, but there are secular works as well. Several volumes deal with Vietnamese history, one contains his journal and another poems written en route to Europe and letters exchanged with friends at the turn of the nineteenth century. Bỉnh's works contained relatively limited information on the Tây Sơn as a movement, though they are important for describing the life of a Vietnamese Catholic during this era of uncertainty. In any event, Bỉnh's writings are important because they provide a very different perspective on this period – that of a Vietnamese intellectual outside the prevailing Confucian scholarly tradition.

His *Truyện Anam*, records "tales" of Annam, as compiled by this figure whose life spanned half of the eighteenth century and more than three decades of the nineteenth. While much of this two-volume work contained detailed accounts of the history of western missionary involvement in Việt Nam, it also discussed many aspects of seventeenth and eighteenth-century Vietnamese history, including the

events of the Tây Sơn years. Included in this work is a brief assessment of the origins of the Tây Sơn movement.

> At that time they were in the forested region, and the two brothers Thái Đức and Quang Trung were brought up together. Their father was a Christian, but he could not instruct his sons (in that faith) because in the early evenings when the father and mother read the Bible and sang songs and called to them, . they would flee as they could not bear reading the Bible and singing with their father and mother. When their mother and father tried to punish them, the brothers immediately took themselves away up into the forests and became robbers.[44]

Although perhaps not providing the most convincing account of the origins of the Tây Sơn movement, Bình's analysis is significant because of its emphasis on religious elements in the Tây Sơn era. This emphasis aligns him with the missionary writers of his time, who similarly viewed the events of this era through the lens of religion. Just as importantly, Bình's large work marked a break from existing Vietnamese historiographical traditions in that it did not merely speak of kings, but also of the lives of ordinary people.[45] Although it did not yet emphasize the peasant dimension of the Tây Sơn years, it suggested the possibility that future works might move in that direction. In addition, unlike earlier Vietnamese histories, Bình's study was comparative, drawing numerous parallels with both European and Biblical history. Furthermore, while generally chronological, Bình's writing was not formally annalistic, with references to reign years serving merely as chronological markers rather than devices for structuring the narrative. Finally, Bình's writings constituted among the earliest accounts of Vietnamese history being written in *quốc ngữ*, the romanized alphabetic writing system developed by European missionaries.[46]

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[44] ibid., 657.

[45] For more on Bình's contributions in this respect, see Thanh Lãng's useful introduction to the life and works of Philiphê Bình, in *Sách Sổ Sang Chép Các Việc* (Thanh Lãng Giới thiệu) (Sài Gòn: Viện Đại Học Đà-Lạt Xuất Bản, 1968), VII-XXXVI.

[46] They were, however not the very first. Bento Thiện wrote a *quốc ngữ* history of Việt Nam, *Lịch Sử Nước Annam* in 1659. See John Whitmore, "*Chung-hsing* and *Cheng-t'ung* in Texts of and on Sixteenth-Century Việt Nam," in *Essays into Vietnamese Pasts*, ed. K.W. Taylor and John K. Whitmore (Ithaca: Cornell University SEAP, 1995), 131.

Early French Language Accounts of the Tây Sơn

In addition to the early Vietnamese accounts, there were also extensive descriptions of the Tây Sơn period by European eyewitnesses. The most detailed of these descriptions are found in the letters of European (primarily French) missionaries present in Việt Nam at this time. These missionary sources, however valuable, suffer from some important drawbacks. Most notably, and hardly surprising, is the fact that the missionary letters focus on religious issues, and tend to view virtually everything through a religious lens. A history based exclusively on these letters would suggest that the Tây Sơn period was dominated by debates about religious policy among the various Vietnamese political forces. In fact it is striking to note that while these letters constantly discuss various religious matters, including the policies of the Tây Sơn, Trịnh and Nguyễn governments toward Christianity, the Vietnamese sources are almost entirely devoid of references to either Christianity or the presence of the missionaries. Aside from a very small number of Tây Sơn edicts proscribing the religion and some references to Pigneau de Behaine (by his Vietnamese name Bá Đa Lộc) in the *Đại Nam Thực Lục* and the *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện*, the Vietnamese sources would appear to suggest that Christianity did not exist in the country at this time.

Aside from their viewing virtually all issues through a religious lens, and generally focusing primarily on matters pertaining to their religious orders in their letters, one cannot readily characterize the political biases of the French missionaries. Their attitudes varied by time and place. At times they were hostile to the Tây Sơn regime, and at other times they commented favorably on the religious freedoms they enjoyed (particularly in the region north of Phú Xuân during much of the 1790s. Finally, one should note that the missionaries often reported information not as eyewitnesses, but as it was reported to them. Consequently they were at the mercy of the many wild rumors that swirled around them during the Tây Sơn years.

Based on the information they did receive, some missionaries began to compose brief histories of the Tây Sơn, examining the origins of the movement and

its broad outlines. Most of these accounts were extremely brief, but some were more detailed including the following, which was contained in an unsigned letter dated 1793:

> The grandfather of the present king earlier persecuted the religion, and put to death in these torments a great number of Christians . . . During this time, there were three brothers, who are called Tay Son, that is to say montagnards, from a wealthy family . . . They gathered a certain number of brigands whom they found in the area, and they retreated into the forests in the mountains from where they defended themselves for a while and ravaged all of the neighboring villages. They were able to get all the scoundrels to follow them. The father of the king was killed, I do not know how, and his uncle made himself possessor of the throne. And the party opposed to us told us nothing but that he suffered the wearing of the vestments of a eunuch.
>
> Then [the Tây Sơn] announced that Heaven had clearly declared for them, and that, for the well-being of the country, they had to follow their destiny . . . They then spread a thousand tales of dreams and revelations of signs from heaven, which they said proved their mission, etc., etc. . . . They then revealed the marks of their tyrannies. They first of all destroyed all of the churches, proscribed the religion and put to torture all the Christian chiefs to make them abjure (the religion) or at least to receive cash payments. The peasants were also not spared, and they were forced to pay tax surcharges and to do public labor . . .[47]

This account was fairly straightforward in describing the origins of the movement and its growing strength. It is quite critical of the Tây Sơn rise to power and their reign, describing the anti-Christian activities of the rebels and their harsh treatment of the peasantry. This account was written by a missionary active in the southern part of the country, that ruled by Nguyễn Nhạc, who was notably anti-Catholic, and thus cannot be seen as entirely representative, for as will be seen in Chapter Four, the situation for Christians was frequently far better in the northern part of the country. Nonetheless, the descriptions of peasant difficulties are found in virtually all missionary accounts, and not merely those from the south.

[47] Possibly written by Pierre-Marie LeLabousse (based on handwriting comparison), dated 20 June, 1793, found in volume 746 of the Archives of the Missions Étrangères de Paris, 404-411. Hereafter MEP followed by volume number.

Finally, one nineteenth-century French language account of the Tây Sơn is also worth noting. Published in 1875 in the context of French colonial domination, Trương Vĩnh Ký's *Cours D'Histoire Annamite*, was designed as a textbook for French language schools for Vietnamese students in "Basse-Cochinchine." It may well have been the first full-length French language treatment of Vietnamese history, and is perhaps the first full-length western-style history of the country of Việt Nam.[48] Ký was a Catholic and French collaborator who hoped for an enlightened colonial regime that might benefit his country. Just as importantly, he was a remarkable linguist and early champion of the use of *quốc ngữ*, having served as editor of the first Vietnamese newspaper, the *quốc ngữ* journal *Gia Định Báo*.

In Ký's account, the Tây Sơn are depicted relatively sympathetically, though still from the Nguyễn perspective. The origin of the Tây Sơn movement is depicted as Nhạc's gambling debts, and the movement's early followers are described, as in the Nguyễn records, as "malcontents, criminals and brigands."[49] Moreover, the Tây Sơn are not considered to have been a dynasty, as the account jumps from the Lê to the later Nguyễn. Ký also continually refers to Nguyễn Anh in the 1770s through 1790s by his later imperial title – Gia Long – suggesting somehow that his imperial status was always already ordained. The account has, not surprisingly, numerous references to the situation of the Catholic faith and the involvement of various Frenchmen, and foreshadows subsequent French histories with their emphasis on religious issues, the role of French mercenaries, and the plight of the missionaries. Ký concludes his history by arguing that the imposition of French colonialism was a benefit to a country racked by poor governance after the death of Gia Long.[50]

The Twentieth-century Historiographic Tradition: Pre-1954

[48] While Philiphê Bình's account is in this vein, it cannot be considered to be comprehensive, but rather episodic, and in any case focused more on the history of the Catholic mission than on the Vietnamese people more generally.

[49] Trương Vĩnh Ký, *Cours D'Histoire Annamite* (Sài Gòn: Imprimerie Du Gouvernement, 1875), 180.

[50] ibid., 251-252.

Entering the twentieth century, accounts of the Tây Sơn began to be written with a greater sense of historical perspective. The Nguyễn texts were examined critically for the first time, and the Tây Sơn and their historical significance subjected to considerable reevaluation. These twentieth-century writings on the Tây Sơn obviously took place within a very different atmosphere than did the Nguyễn writings of the first half of the nineteenth century. At the beginning of the century, the country was a French colony and protectorate and any reconsiderations of earlier history were now markedly influenced by the colonial relationship. Later, rising Vietnamese nationalism and the emergence of a communist-led revolution and eventually all-out war had equally profound influences on the trends in writing about the Tây Sơn. Thus, in the 1940s there were writings about Quang Trung as a national hero (a Vietnamese Bonaparte), in the 1950s depictions of the Tây Sơn as revolutionaries, in the 1960s the Tây Sơn as participants in an era of geographic expansion, and finally in the early 1970s the Tây Sơn years as marking a period of Civil War. These discursive shifts in writing about the Tây Sơn revealed as much about the eras in which the writers were producing their histories as the works did about the Tây Sơn themselves. Indeed, it could be argued that the Tây Sơn became merely a means by which to articulate contemporary political affiliations and interpretations. Seen in this light the Tây Sơn era was a blank slate waiting to be inscribed by ideologically motivated historians in both the north and the south.

As I turn now to an examination of twentieth-century writings on the Tây Sơn, it will become clear, particularly after 1954 (but already after 1940), that the northern historians continued to be much more positive in their outlook toward the Tây Sơn, while the opposite was true in the south. There are many reasons for this, not least of which was the division of the country into hostile political camps. But other factors dating to the nineteenth century, including the role of Catholic missionaries and the nature of the French colonial rule also contributed to this divergence of outlooks. Ultimately, however, divergent interpretations of the Tây Sơn based on geographical affinities that became emphasized in the twentieth century,

reflected patterns that had, as we have already seen, developed as early as the Tây Sơn period itself.

Early Twentieth-century Tây Sơn Histories

Despite the new political and cultural environment of the colonial period, there was initially a considerable degree of continuity of interpretation with the nineteenth-century Nguyễn official accounts and their highly critical depictions of the Tây Sơn merely as unruly bandits. As David Marr points out:

> Interestingly enough, modernizing literati of the first two decades of the twentieth century seem to have missed the important social and political lessons contained in the Tây Sơn experience. Perhaps the Nguyen court historians had done their work well; perhaps peasant uprisings were still too unsettling even for the likes of Phan Boi Chau. At any rate, books into the early 1920s continued to canonize Gia Long and his commanders, especially Le Van Duyet and Vo Tanh, while either ignoring or denigrating the Tay Son.[51]

Phan Bội Châu, for example, barely touched on the Tây Sơn in his 1905 assessment of Vietnamese history in the face of French colonialism – *Việt Nam Vong Quốc Sử* (A History of the Lost Nation of Việt Nam). In it he made only passing reference to Quang Trung's heroic military victory over the invading Siamese in 1785, though he did quite conspicuously credit that same Tây Sơn Emperor with having "expelled ships of the western enemy."[52] Just as interestingly, Phan Bội Châu made no reference to Quang Trung's having expelled Chinese forces in 1789. It is possible that this omission was an attempt to avoid antagonizing sympathetic Chinese nationalists, though reference was made to Lê Lợi's defeat of the Ming in the early fifteenth century.[53] Châu's account thus did not view the Tây Sơn era as a profoundly important one for Việt Nam's history, much less as a time in which

[51] David Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1981), 268.

[52] Phan Bội Châu, *Việt Nam Vong Quốc Sử* (Houston: Xuân Thu, 1969?), 23. This was perhaps a reference to a number of Tây Sơn attacks on western merchant vessels visiting the Vietnamese coast during this period.

[53] It could be that the Ming reference was politically acceptable, while mention of a defeat of the Qing (then still in power), might be viewed as antagonistic.

peasants became important players on the national stage. As Alexander Woodside has observed of Châu:

> For Phan Boi Chau . . . the peasantry . . . was not regarded as being able to play any role at all [in revolution]." Indeed, "unlike what the communists were to assert after 1940, he did not venerate the memory of Vietnamese peasant uprisings . . . [and] . . . assumed that Vietnamese peasants were stupid, selfish and divided, more willing to quarrel among themselves than to fight outsiders.[54]

In addition to a reluctance to highlight Tây Sơn military accomplishments or to give a prominent place to the peasant dimension of the Tây Sơn uprising, early twentieth-century historians also placed a particular emphasis on the role that the French had played in the Nguyễn crusade to suppress the uprising. David Marr observed, for example, that:

> The story of Pigneau taking Gia Long's son and heir, little Prince Canh, to France for an audience at the soon-to-vanish court of Versailles was romanticized into an allegory on contemporary French tutorship and eternal Vietnamese loyalty. It was the perfect historical vignette for French purposes, complete with Canh's Confucianist respect for his foreign teacher and Gia Long's later sorrow that neither of them quite lived to share in his victory.[55]

One prominent example of this genre is *Gia Long Phục Quốc* (Gia Long Restores the Nation) published in 1914 by a southern historian, which gave considerable attention to the relationship between Nguyễn Ánh and the French Bishop Pigneau de Behaine.[56] As the title suggests, it is the founder of the Nguyễn who was glorified in this account, and the Tây Sơn who were treated as common hooligans. Here then we see the Vietnamese historians, under the tutelage of French colonial discourse, "discovering" the existing French historical tradition which had already since the

[54] Alexander Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1976), 57-58.
[55] Marr, 269.
[56] Lê Văn Thom, *Gia Long Phục Quốc* (Gia Long Restores the Nation) (Saigon: Imprimerie F.H. Schneider, 1914).

early nineteenth century emphasized the significance of French contributions to the Nguyễn victory. One must, however, be careful about ascribing this shift entirely to the influence of the French colonial relationship. There were certainly sufficient numbers of Catholic scholars in the south who would have been happy to pay tribute to the missionary contributions by highlighting Behaine's role as a Catholic rather than as a Frenchman.[57] In any event, the prominence of the Bishop's tomb in Saigon could not help but serve as a reminder of that figure's role in the rise of the Nguyễn.[58]

Given this initial reluctance among Vietnamese scholars to put forth new interpretations of the Tây Sơn, it is not until the mid-1920s that one finds the first serious re-examinations of the Tây Sơn. The fora for these new writings were the myriad journals that were appearing in various parts of the country in the 1920s and 1930s. Among the most prominent of these was the southern journal, *Nam Phong* (Southern Wind), but there were others as well, including *Đông Thanh Tạp Chí* (The Journal of the Young East). Among the first such reinterpretations of the Tây Sơn was that by the scholar Lê Du (also known as Sở Cuồng). In a 1925 *Nam Phong* article, he called "for an end to the adjective 'spurious' (nguy) affixed to everything pertaining to the Tay Son. He lavished praise on Quang Trung as an invincible military commander, masterful diplomat, and domestic reformer comparable to twentieth-century leaders in 'civilized' (van minh) countries. If Quang Trung had not died prematurely, Le Du asserted, Vietnam would have gotten back some northern border territories lost to China in earlier centuries."[59] He was also to write a brief summary history of the Tây Sơn in Chinese characters, the *Tây Sơn Ngoại Sử* (An Unofficial History of the Tây Sơn), an account which appears to have relied heavily on the *HLNTC*, and thus evinced a fairly positive outlook toward the Tây Sơn leader Quang Trung, even as it continued to refer to the Nguyễn military leader as the

[57] As we have seen, the accounts by Bissachere and Binh were already giving prominent attention to the role that Behaine played in this period.

[58] Georges Taboulet, *La Geste Française en Indochine: Histoire par lest textes de la France en Indochine des origines à 1914* (Paris: Librarie d'Amerique et d'Orient), vol. 1 contains an illustration of the nineteenth-century tomb to the Bishop (plate no. 6 between pp. 192-193).

[59] Marr, 270. Du had been a participant in the Đông Du movement, and later worked as a researcher at the Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient in Hà Nội

"Generational Ancestor," once again prefiguring his rise to power in common with the nineteenth-century southern historical tradition.[60]

Shortly after Sở Cuồng's writings appeared, Trần Trọng Kim published his influential 1926 work, *Việt Nam Sử Lược* (An Outline History of Việt Nam), which was, as the title suggests, a survey history of Việt Nam. Kim, a native of the northern province of Hà Tĩnh, was an important historian and scholar of Vietnamese Confucianism.[61] The *Việt Nam Sử Lược*, a relatively conventional military-political history, is still in print in various forms, suggesting its prominence as one of the first comprehensive modern examinations of the full sweep of Vietnamese history to be written in *quốc ngữ*.[62] Following the logic found in Cuồng's earlier article, Kim's book argued that the Tây Sơn should not be viewed as rebels, but should be seriously considered as a dynasty in their own right. Kim assessed the traditional Nguyễn argument that the Tây Sơn should be classified as a false dynasty (*ngụy triều*), and concluded that this was an unjust classification. "Quang Trung Nguyễn Huệ," he wrote, "is a king who stands together on the same level as the king Đinh Tiên Hoàng and the king Lê Thái Tổ, and the Nguyễn Tây Sơn House is also an orthodox one like the Houses of Đinh and Lê."[63] Accordingly, Kim entitled his chapter on the movement "Nhà Nguyễn Tây Sơn (1788-1802) (The Nguyễn Tây Sơn Dynastic House)."[64] This was clearly important because it portrayed the Tây Sơn as having formally displaced the Lê with the ascent of Quang Trung to the throne in late 1788. It was thus a specific repudiation of the Nguyễn convention that retained the fiction

[60] *Tây Sơn Ngoại Sử* 西山外史, ms. Durand Collection, Manuscripts Division, Yale University Library, New Haven. CT.

[61] He later served briefly as the first Prime Minister of the "independent" Vietnamese government established by the Japanese after their March 1945 coup brought an end to French colonial rule.

[62] Here I use a 1990 reprint by Xuân Thu Xuất Bản, of the 1971 edition published by the South Vietnamese Ministry of Education. For a useful brief discussion of this text see Marr (1981), 271.

[63] Trần Trọng Kim. *Việt Nam Sử Lược* (A summary History of Việt Nam) (Sài Gòn: Bộ Giáo-Dục Trung-Tâm Học-Liệu Xuất Bản, 1971; reprint, Los Alamitos: Xuân Thu Xuất Bản, 1990), vol. 2, 129.

[64] Because of his reference to the "Nguyễn" Tây Sơn, Kim had to distinguish the Tây Sơn from their successors, and so in a geneaological chart he referred to them as the "tiền Nguyễn" that is, the "former" or "earlier" Nguyễn. This paralleled the conventional references to the "former" and "latter" Lê (tiền Lê and hậu Lê), but appears to be unique in referring to the Tây Sơn, and I have come across no other author who uses this convention.

of a Lê Emperor in power until he was replaced by Gia Long in 1802.[65]

Despite these new interpretations, Kim's account still shared with Phan Bội Châu's a reluctance to focus on the role and status of peasants in the Tây Sơn era. The rebel brothers' birthplace and genealogy were described, but no reference is made to them as peasants or to their subsequent movement as a "peasant movement." Moreover, Kim described their early actions not as a "righteous uprising" (*khởi nghĩ*), but as a "disorderly uprising" (*khởi loạn*).[66] Indeed the Tây Sơn brothers appeared in this account to arise virtually out of nowhere, and quickly to transform themselves into kings. And it was only when they become kings that they begin to interest Kim. While he did not glorify their early economic agenda, he was willing to consider them as legitimate dynasts and accordingly placed them into the ranks of Vietnamese dynasties. Later in the century, Kim's work would come under considerable criticism from communist historians for, among other things, being insufficiently critical of the Nguyễn. He would also be chastised for giving credit to Nguyễn Ánh rather than Nguyễn Huệ for reunifying the country, falling victim to one of the more bitter debates to divide northern and southern historians in the 1960s. Whatever its shortcomings, Kim's work is still of considerable significance that marks a shift in treatments of the Tây Sơn and their leader, Nguyễn Huệ.

Writings on the Tây Sơn in the 1940s

The tradition of writing on the Tây Sơn became quite rich in the 1940s with the publication of numerous books and articles by a group subsequently termed the *Tri Tân* intellectuals, a name derived from a weekly journal published in Hà Nội. *Tri Tân* only appeared for five years, from 1941 to 1945, but marked an important period of activity by Vietnamese intellectuals. The dates of the magazine's existence coincided with the period during which Việt Nam was under Japanese occupation, a time when the myth of French invincibility had been shattered. There was now a

[65] The former Lê Emperor had already died in exile in 1793.
[66] Kim, 102.

changed intellectual atmosphere that allowed Vietnamese writers and thinkers to glorify their historical and literary past. Interestingly, however, these historians still looked as much to the rise and strong reign of Gia Long (Nguyễn Ánh) as they did to that of Quang Trung. Indeed, *Tri Tân* produced considerably more articles about the former than the latter.[67] Moreover, while *Tri Tân* published a number of articles on Quang Trung, as well as numerous articles on Tây Sơn era literary and military figures, it did not include any studies of the Tây Sơn as a movement, much less as a "peasant movement." The focus of the journal was still very much on individual historical figures and important literary works. Prominent among these *Tri Tân* contributors was Hoa Bằng, who wrote several articles on Quang Trung, and whose research culminated in his detailed 1943 study, *Quang Trung: Anh Hùng Dân Tộc*. Other contributors included Nguyễn Triệu and Nguyễn Tường Phượng, both of whom wrote numerous short biographies of Tây Sơn era figures.

Another northern author, Phan Trần Chúc, while not a *Tri Tân* contributor, was also a resident of Hà Nội and an important historian who wrote numerous works on the Tây Sơn, including the earliest full-length study of the Tây Sơn leader, Nguyễn Huệ.[68] *Vua Quang Trung Nguyễn Huệ (Lịch Sử)* (The King Quang Trung Nguyễn Huệ (A History)) (1940) is one of the first Vietnamese works explicitly to compare Quang Trung to Napoleon, calling him "the Napoleon of Việt Nam."[69] In an era in which the Vietnamese were witness to the vulnerability of the once apparently invincible French, this was an opportunity to raise their own historical heroes to a level equal to that of their colonial overlords. That Quang Trung and Napoleon were virtual contemporaries made the comparison all the more significant. While the title

[67] See the very useful index compiled by Hồng Nhuệ Nguyễn Khắc Xuyên, *Mục Lục Phân Tích Tạp Chí Tri Tân (Tạp Chí Văn Hóa Ra Hàng Tuần) 1941-1945* (An Indexed Bibliography of the Journal *Tri Tân* (A Weekly Cultural Journal)) (Hà Nội: Hội Khoa Học Lịch Sử Việt Nam, 1998).

[68] The author himself however, in his afterword, acknowledges that his is not the first such study. He cites Sở Cuồng's *Tây Sơn Ngoại Sử*, and Ngô Đình Chiên's *Nguyễn Huệ*, apparently published sometime in the mid-1930s. The former work is more a relatively brief survey of the Tây Sơn. I have not seen Chiên's work. In any event, Chúc's has become the most prominent of the three.

[69] Phan Trần Chúc, *Vua Quang Trung Nguyễn Huệ (Lịch Sử)* (A History of the King Quang Trung Nguyễn Huệ) (Sài Gòn: Chí Ký Xuất Bản, 1957 reprint), 1. It is the earliest account of which I am aware, though there may be earlier ones.

suggested that the book was a biography of the Tây Sơn Emperor, much of the book was merely a prelude to a lengthy description of Quang Trung's crushing defeat of the 1789 Chinese invasion on behalf of the Lê Emperor. In fact, Chúc's work surprisingly gives more attention to Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh, a high-profile northern defector who aided the Tây Sơn, than to the Tây Sơn leader himself.

Chuc's account pays no more attention to peasants than any of the previous studies – in fact the first 15 years of the Tây Sơn uprising are briefly summarized by page 20, while the next 200 pages deal with events in the north after 1786. In summarizing the accomplishments of Quang Trung, Chúc cites only two: the defeat of the Siamese invasion of 1785 and the defeat of the Chinese invasion in 1789.[70] No emphasis is placed on any of his social or economic accomplishments, much less of Quang Trung's previous incarnation as Nguyễn Huệ, the southern rebel general. It is worth noting too, that Chúc explicitly credits Nguyễn Huệ with the unification of the country in 1786, apparently the first modern account to make this claim for the Tây Sơn leader.[71] In addition to his study of the Tây Sơn leader, Chúc published two other works about the period. His *Bằng Quận Công* is the first and only detailed biography of the northern official, Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh, who defected to the Tây Sơn and helped guide their 1786 invasion of the north. Finally he also wrote a survey history of the Tây Sơn, *Triều Tây Sơn*, which might be considered the first "modern" account of the Tây Sơn movement as a whole, before his untimely death in 1946 at the age of 39.[72]

Only a few years after Chúc's work appeared, another major biography of the Tây Sơn leader was published. Hoa Bằng's *Quang Trung: Anh Hùng Dân Tộc* (Quang Trung: National Hero) (1944), has been called by Alexander Woodside "quite possibly

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[70] ibid., 222.

[71] ibid., 8, "sây dựng nền thống nhất cho nước Việt Nam."

[72] For a useful brief biographic sketch see Nguyễn Q. Thắng and Nguyễn Bá Thế, *Từ Điên Nhân Vật Lịch Sử Việt Nam* (Dictionary of Historical Personages of Việt Nam) (Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Hóa, 1993), 801

the single most interesting work on the Tây-sơns published in this century."[73] Bằng's is a nuanced and detailed account drawing on a range of Vietnamese sources (particularly various *dã sử*) not matched since in any major study of the Tây Sơn. Unlike some earlier accounts, such as that of Trần Trọng Kim for example, he does refer to the Tây Sơn actions as a "khởi nghĩa" and obviously views the Tây Sơn as legitimate and very important political figures. At the same time, this account gives no more prominence to the peasantry than did earlier accounts. Its focus, like that of Chúc's before it, is on military and political leaders and diplomatic relations with the Chinese.[74]

Hoa Bằng's account, while briefly examining the early days of the Tây Sơn movement, is chiefly interested in a close study of the years from 1786 until the death of Quang Trung in 1792. Moreover, as the title "Quang Trung: National Hero" suggests, his account centers directly on the most prominent Tây Sơn leader and his military and political skills, and again largely ignores his years as Nguyễn Huệ, a southern general in the shadow of his elder brother. Like Chúc's account, Hoa Bằng's also makes an explicit comparison with Napoleon and notes the fact that both men were historical contemporaries.[75] On the other hand, he laments that while Napoleon's body was returned in triumph to Paris and interred at the Invalides where he could be honored, Quang Trung's grave was desecrated, his remains dispersed and his relatives hunted down. Moreover, even at this time in the early 1940s, the Tây Sơn military hero continued to linger in relative historical obscurity. Thus, Bằng's account was

[73] Personal correspondence, letter of May 31, 1997. As Tạ Ngọc Liễn rightly points out in his useful introductory essay to the 1998 reprint, there has not been a study of Quang Trung since the publication of this work that has surpassed it. Hoa Bằng Hoàng Thúc Trâm, *Quang Trung Anh Hùng Dân Tộc 1788-1792* (Hà Nội: Tri Tân and Đên Dương, 1944; reprint, Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Hóa Thông Tin, 1998), 12.

[74] In addition to this important study of Quang Trung, Hoa Bằng, writing under his given name of Hoàng Thúc Trâm, also wrote the first serious study of Nôm literature in the Tây Sơn period, *Quốc Văn Đời Tây-Sơn* (National Literature of the Tây Sơn Period) (Sài Gòn: Vĩnh Bảo, 1950). This work has served as a point of reference for all subsequent literary studies of the Tây Sơn era, and was a strong reminder of the significance of the eighteenth-century Nôm tradition and the degree to which the Tây Sơn were involved in that tradition.

[75] Hoa Bằng, 1998, introduction to first edition (1944), 6.

clearly designed, at least in part, to help resuscitate Quang Trung's memory and to recall his political contributions – chief of which was his defeat of the attempted Chinese occupation in 1789.[76]

Both Chúc and Bằng, writing at about the same time, and from the same northern vantage point, viewed the Tây Sơn through the distinct lens of northern elites. Rather than extolling his peasant roots, these writers sought to emphasize his military and diplomatic achievements, which were chiefly accomplished in the period after he had carried out his first campaign to the north. Nguyễn Huệ-Quang Trung was for these men a hero not because he had led a peasant uprising, but because he had served as Emperor and perhaps even more importantly, had demonstrated an incomparable military acumen. Thus, as late as the mid-1940s, Vietnamese historians continued to shy away from a closer examination much less a glorification of the Tây Sơn's peasant origins. This focus would not emerge until a decade later among Vietnamese Marxist historians writing both in France and in Việt Nam.

Finally, attention should also be given to two other major works written during this period by Vietnamese scholars working in exile in France in the early 1950s. The first, by Hoàng Xuân Hãn, *La Sơn Phu Tử* (The Master of La Sơn) (1952) was an examination of the important Nghệ An literatus, Nguyễn Thiếp. Based on a remarkable cache of documents Hãn discovered in his home region of Nghệ An, this study examined the relationship between Thiếp and the Tây Sơn leader, Nguyễn Huệ (later Quang Trung). The documents consist of a series of letters exchanged between the two men between 1786 and 1792, and provide considerable insight into the thinking of the Tây Sơn leader. While the account is chiefly a biography of Thiếp, it has profoundly influenced the field of Tây Sơn studies. Since its publication, the material revealed in this work has become indispensable to studies of the Tây Sơn in general and Quang Trung in particular.

The second work is Lê Thanh Khôi's *Le Viet Nam: Histoire et Civilisation* (1955). This book has become a standard western language reference work on the

[76] ibid., 5-6.

history of Việt Nam, and its 1981 revision, *Histoire du Viet Nam: Des Origines à 1858*, has been called "the most important general history of Vietnam written in a Western language."[77] Written by a Marxist historian, Khôi's account was one of the earliest to offer a sympathetic and detailed treatment of the peasant roots of the Tay Son. Indeed, Khôi's work remains one of the best succinct analyses of the socio-economic roots of eighteenth-century peasant discontent in both the north and south and is valuable on that score alone. His survey of the conditions of the eighteenth century and the rise and expansion of the Tây Sơn is well-balanced and thorough.[78] Khôi's book also offers a very detailed analytical evaluation of the decline of the Tây Sơn regime and reasons for the subsequent Nguyễn triumph, which are described not merely as the result of the intervention of French military advisors and machinery, but as stemming from more complex domestic factors. Despite his focus on issues and perspectives favored by the Vietnamese communist historians, Khôi's work, like that of Trần Trọng Kim, would come under criticism in the early 1960s by these same historians. Like Kim, Khôi would be criticized for his conclusion that it was Nguyễn Anh and not Nguyễn Huệ who had unified the country in the late eighteenth century.

The twentieth-century Tradition: Post-1954

The division of Việt Nam after the Geneva Conference in 1954 marked the beginnings of a notable division in modern writings about the Tây Sơn, and a shift in the emphases of Vietnamese historians. Northern scholars came increasingly to glorify the Tây Sơn, sometimes as a revolutionary force, but always as a profound expression of the needs and the potential of the peasantry. Thus, these Marxist historians sought increasingly to emphasize the peasant dimensions of the Tây Sơn uprising, while at the same time continuing to laud the achievements of the movement's great military leader Quang Trung in unifying and defending the nation. Southern scholars, on the

[77] David Joel Steinberg et al, *In Search of Southeast Asia: A Modern History* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), 500.

[78] Lê Thanh Khôi, *Le Viet Nam: Histoire et Civilisation* (Paris: les Editions du Minuit, 1955), 296-322.

other hand, increasingly came to see the Tây Sơn era as one of turmoil and disorder, not one of national unification. They viewed the Tây Sơn less as heroes and more as chaotic rebels, and portrayed the French not as incipient colonialists, but rather as supporters of indigenous efforts to restore political unity and order within the nation. These competing visions reflected traditional, geographically-defined visions of the Vietnamese past, but also emergent political divisions that developed in the post-French era.

Debates about the Tây Sơn period took on a new dimension when projected onto the Vietnamese political realities of the 1950s and 1960s. Seemingly obscure historical debates became thinly veiled (and occasionally open) commentaries on contemporary issues, reflecting some of the obvious (though often unspoken) parallels between the two eras. Once again one saw a relatively stable north under a militarily powerful regime while its southern representatives fought their wars in a tumultuous environment in the south. Once again a northern regime hoped to impose its political will on a resisting and still coalescing southern government. Moreover, despite the relatively rigid lines that were being drawn at this time, the divisions continued to reflect established nineteenth-century patterns, suggesting that post-1954 historiography concerning the Tây Sơn was merely an extension of earlier tendencies. Northern writers continued to identify with the Tây Sơn in part on the basis of the successful Tây Sơn rule in the north, while southerners continued to identify more closely with the Nguyễn and the Nguyễn interpretation of the Tây Sơn era.[79]

Although the broad affinities remained the same, there were some noticeable shifts as the debate became progressively more politicized. Northern writers, to a much greater extent than their southern counterparts, came increasingly to focus on the peasantry, forcefully criticizing the Nguyễn for having destroyed the Tây Sơn and

[79] There are of course exceptions to these generalizations. One interesting example is Nguyễn Phút Ta's *A modern history of Vietnam: 1802-1954* (Sài Gòn: Khai-Tri, 1964), which gives a glowing account of Quang Trung that is published in Saigon. Ta, moreover not only appears to view the Nguyễn rise to power as an unfortunate consequence of the collapse of the Tây Sơn, but refers to the Tây Sơn movement as a "revolution." Clearly, the idea of the Tây Sơn as revolutionary is not one confined to the north, or to the 1950s rhetoric.

by extension for having attempted to crush the aspirations of the peasantry. The communist historiography regarding the Tây Sơn focused on several issues – the Tây Sơn as representing the desire of the popular masses to struggle against the economic and political oppression of "feudal" elites; the Tây Sơn as unifiers of a divided nation; and the Tây Sơn as defenders of the nation against outside aggressors. These themes obviously echo the issues motivating the revolutionary struggle of the 1920s to 1950s, and then the wars of the 1960s and 1970s.

While they were trying to glorify the Tây Sơn, Vietnamese communist historians were confronted with a number of dilemmas. First of all, they had to explain the ultimate failure of the Tây Sơn as a government. Did it reflect an inherent weakness in the nature of the movement, the personalities of its leaders, or the strength of its adversaries? Secondly, they needed to confront the fact that the Tây Sơn had reestablished a monarchy, and had not swept away this "feudal" form of government. Did this indicate a lack of socioeconomic awareness on the part of the Tây Sơn, a lack of political vision, or the constraints of the general period in which the movement took place? Finally, they had explain the apparent divisions exacerbated, or perhaps merely perpetuated, by the Tây Sơn. Did this represent a continued division of the country, or if not, in what sense did it constitute the "unification" that was so often articulated as a major accomplishment of the Tây Sơn by communist historians? The answers to these questions varied over time. Sometimes these were convincing, but frequently they were obscured by political rhetoric or conveniently sidestepped.

Lastly, northern communist historian went to great lengths to ensure the apotheosis of Nguyễn Huệ. Huệ was frequently given sole credit for many actions that all evidence suggested were the result of collaborative efforts. In addition, his elder brother Nguyễn Nhạc, who led the movement for at least half of its existence, was often moved aside or denigrated in this historiography. To some extent this northern attitude toward Quang Trung was not merely a reflection of the communist historians' belief in this Tây Sơn leader as a heroic peasant leader, but also of his

accomplishments in the north. The great achievement of Quang Trung, *sine qua non*, according to northern historians, was his victory over the Chinese at the battle of Đống Đa in Thăng Long in 1789. It was not his early participation in a movement of peasant unrest. He is always remembered as Quang Trung – the figure who emerged in preparation for the encounter with the Chinese – rather than as the younger Tây Sơn brother, Nguyễn Huệ. That this battle site remained under the control of the communist regime was, I believe, not incidental to the manner in which Quang Trung was glorified by its historians.

The writings by southern intellectuals, in contrast to those of their northern counterparts, were not accounts of the triumph of the oppressed peasantry, but rather of the reestablishment of national unity and the imposition of political, economic and social order. The southern historians, not surprisingly, placed a greater emphasis on the perspective of the Nguyễn and their ultimate triumph in this period.[80] The Mekong Delta region and Gia Định were the headquarters of the Nguyễn through most of their struggle with the Tây Sơn. Moreover, it was under the Nguyễn, during the Tây Sơn years, that Gia Định was first established as a political center. Thus, the southern narratives used the Nguyễn as their political touchstone, and the south as their geographical referent. In addition, the fact that the old Nguyễn imperial capitol of Huế was under the control of the southern regime, appears to have further strengthened the southern historians' preference for the Nguyễn regime. Consequently, while the southern government might thus lay claim to being heir to the imperial tradition, it also (from the perspective of the communists) bore with that the legacy of being associated with the side that ultimately attacked and destroyed the Tây Sơn.

Another distinctive feature of what might be called "southern narratives" of this era, is that they were much more likely than their northern counterparts to use the French sources for their writings. There may have been several reasons for this: the first was that southern intellectuals were often Catholic exiles, and thus more likely to be familiar with the availability of the missionary sources. Secondly, these

[80] I use the terms "southern" and "northern" here to describe historians writing (post-1954) in the DRV and the RVN respectively.

missionary materials provide considerable detail on the role of the French in supporting the eventual Nguyễn victory in the south. Whatever the reason, there is a marked contrast in the use of these sources, and to some extent this may illuminate the different ways that these narratives portray the Tây Sơn. The missionaries were frequently very critical of the Tây Sơn, a tendency which may well have shaped the way in which southern intellectuals in turn described the Tây Sơn.

Inevitably, bitter debates developed between northern and southern historians on a range of historical issues, and interpretations of the Tây Sơn became among the more contentious issues of debate. These debates revolved around several key issues: who unified Vietnam in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries? Were eighteenth-century peasants an organized force seeking political gains or merely rebellious hooligans? Were the French outside aggressors or political allies of a legitimate Vietnamese political force? Had the Nguyễn betrayed the country by seeking external alliances? Were the Nguyễn an oppressive feudal regime, or a legitimate political alternative to the Tây Sơn? These and other questions were debated, albeit indirectly across the nineteenth parallel in the historical and social science journals of the two Vietnamese regimes. At a time when the two sides were often not on speaking terms, a dialogue of sorts emerged between the historians on opposite sides of the artificial political divide at the nineteenth parallel. This dialogue was not always direct, though even when oblique it was not particularly subtle. While the northern historians writing on the Tây Sơn usually aimed their vitriol directly at historians of the southern regime (or the southern regime itself), they sometimes chose an indirect line of attack. In these cases they would focus on what they considered unfair or malicious characterizations of the Tây Sơn found in Nguyễn dynastic histories or even *dã sử* written by historians during the Nguyễn era. Ostensibly, these were two very different forms of attack, but in fact the southern regime appears to have been closely identified with the Nguyễn by both northerners and southerners alike.

The Emergence of a Communist Historiography of the Tây Sơn

With the emergence of a new historiographic tradition in the communist north, one found the Tây Sơn and its peasant leaders and participants being portrayed in new and different ways. Perhaps most strikingly in the post-1954 period one saw the beginnings of references to the Tây Sơn as revolutionaries. Now the Tây Sơn movement was no longer merely a rebellion, but a "cách mạng" – a revolution. The first appearance in a major scholarly forum of the term "revolution" in reference to the Tây Sơn was in a 1956 article by Trần Huy Liệu in the journal *Văn Sử Địa*, entitled "Assessing the Tây Sơn Revolution and the Historical Role of Nguyễn Huệ."[81] This piece was written in the mid-1950s against the backdrop of the struggles for land reform and the crushing of the *Nhân Văn-Giái Phỏng* movement, which had attempted to push for greater literary freedom.

It is interesting to note that Liệu began by praising Trần Trọng Kim's earlier conclusion that the Tây Sơn was an orthodox dynasty, but then argued that Kim's argument was weak and contingent, leaving open the possibility that the traditional "false dynasty" label might still be applied through certain interpretations.[82] Liệu went on to argue that most historians, whatever admiration they might evince for Nguyễn Huệ, did not truly understand him or his great undertaking, and he set out to clarify matters. While he admitted that the Tây Sơn had not introduced new social or economic structures in Việt Nam, he blamed this on the fact that Vietnamese society of that time was not yet developed to the point that such a change was possible. Instead, he praised the Tây Sơn for having at least initiated an attack on feudalism and for having introduced some important innovations:

1) forcing people to go back to their fields to begin working again;

2) encouraging commerce and trade with China and the west by dropping

[81] Trần Huy Liệu, "Đánh Gia Cuộc Cách Mạng Tây-Sơn và Vai Trò Lịch Sử cuả Nguyễn Huệ" (Evaluating the Tây Sơn Revolution and the Historical Role of Nguyễn Huệ). *Văn Sử Địa*, No. 14, (2/56), 30-44.

[82] ibid., 30.

taxes that interfered with this;

3) establishing a national literature through the popularization of Nôm;

4) defending the nation against foreign aggressors.[83]

Liệu concluded by making explicit his view that the Tây Sơn were the forerunners of the twentieth-century communist revolutionaries. In doing so, he appears to have initiated the north-south debates about the Tây Sơn, as he included a direct critique of the southern regime in his assessment:

> At present, in the north (the people) have been entirely liberated, and the people farm in the already divided fields. But in the south, our people are still forced to live under the terrible oppression of the American imperialists and the feudalist landlords and their representative Ngô Đình Diệm . . . .The peasant class in Việt Nam in the nineteenth century did not yet have a progressive leadership class, and thus was unable to turn the Tây Sơn revolution into a bourgeois democratic revolution, but now the peasant class, under the leadership of the working class, is already becoming the main force of the revolution, and the foundation of the battlefront of the united peoples, to complete the August revolution and to bring the battle to victory.[84]

Liệu's conclusion highlighted the tension that became a feature of all Marxist accounts of the Tây Sơn, namely the desire to emphasize the peasant dimension of the Tây Sơn period while still insisting that such movements required a leadership that lay outside of the peasant realm. As he notes, this was the hallmark of the twentieth-century Vietnamese revolution, and it is for this reason that Marxist accounts of the Tây Sơn continued the tradition of glorifying individual heroic figures (such as Quang Trung), because they were deemed necessary for guiding the peasant movement towards its ultimate objectives.

Shortly after Liệu's article appeared, Văn Tân produced the first major post-war history of the Tây Sơn as a movement, *Cách Mạng Tây Sơn* (The Tây Sơn Revolution). As the title of the work suggests Tân's work once again sought to make

[83] ibid., 38.
[84] ibid., 38.

explicit the point that the Tây Sơn were forerunners of the twentieth-century peasant revolution. Despite its polemical title, Tân's work was a relatively straightforward survey of the Tây Sơn and did not yet emphasize some of the central themes that would dominate later communist writings on the Tây Sơn. Most notably, Tân did not credit the Tây Sơn with unifying the country, and in his summary of their accomplishments this unification was not mentioned at all. Moreover, he rejected the notion that it was the aid of the French that allowed Nguyễn Anh to defeat the Tây Sơn, an idea that would receive considerable prominence in later northern historical writing on the Tây Sơn era.[85] He noted instead that Anh had retaken the south prior to the arrival of French assistance, and moreover, much of the weaponry used by the Nguyễn forces was not imported from the French, but had been crafted in Việt Nam. Thus, rather than deriding the Nguyễn for having apparently relied on the machinations of outsiders, Tân attempted to credit their military strength and technological prowess as Vietnamese.

Tân's account is also interesting for his defense of Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh, a man later often criticized for having betrayed the Tây Sơn and seizing power for himself in 1786-87. Tân argued that Chỉnh's apparent act of betrayal had been spurred by the internecine fighting between Nhạc and Huệ, and that with his execution, the Tây Sơn had lost a talented military and civil official.[86] Finally, Tân, like other historians before him, found it convenient to use Nhạc as a scapegoat for the difficulties of the Tây Sơn.[87] By blaming Nhạc for instigating the conflict with his brother and then solidifying his relatively isolated position at Qui Nhơn, Nguyễn Huệ's prestige was kept intact. Tân concluded his work with a statement designed to bolster the importance of the party vis-a-vis the peasantry, claiming that:

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[85] Văn Tân, *Cách Mạng Tây Sơn* (The Tây Sơn Revolution) (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Sử Địa, 1957), 222.

[86] Despite his important (though not always acknowledged) role in guiding the Tây Sơn campaigns across the Gianh River in 1786, Chỉnh has frequently been anathematized for his efforts to promote himself to positions of political power in the Lê court in late 1786 and early 1787. One will find no streets in Việt Nam named after him.

[87] ibid., 90. Among others who have attacked Nhạc in this regard are Phan Trần Chúc in his *Triều Tây Sơn* (The Tây Sơn Dynasty) (Hà Nội: Mai Lĩnh Xuất Bản, 1942).

> The Tây Sơn revolution proves that: the peasants are truly a powerful force and that when the peasants stand up they can destroy all of the reactionary forces and destroy all foreign invasions. But if there is no leading progressive social force, then the peasants on their own cannot achieve a durable and powerful structure. The peasants constitute a social class that cannot liberate itself. All of the peasant movements in the history of Việt Nam have either been defeated or have merely changed into another dynasty for this reason.[88]

Despite this starkly ideological conclusion, which appears to be little more than a politically-correct afterthought, Văn Tân's account was relatively balanced and generally honest assessment of the Tây Sơn, their successes and failures. His analysis of the Tây Sơn in this work was much less strident than that of subsequent scholars, as well as his own later writings

Attacking the Nineteenth-century Nguyễn Historians

Along with assertive writings about the nature of the Tây Sơn movement and the Tây Sơn regime, Vietnamese historians of this period (particularly in the north) also launched direct attacks against the prevailing characterizations of the Tây Sơn found in nineteenth and early twentieth-century Nguyễn historiography. A prominent example of this genre is another piece by Văn Tân, his 1964 *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử* article, "Quốc Sử Quán Triều Nguyễn Đối Với Khởi Nghĩa Tây Sơn" (The Nguyễn History Board and the Tây Sơn Righteous Uprising). Tân began by describing the Nguyễn policy of savaging the memory of the Tây Sơn, desecrating the remains of the Tây Sơn brothers and then, thirty years after the Tây Sơn defeat, tracking down and killing surviving relatives of the Tây Sơn leaders. Tân noted that the Nguyễn history board had to write a history that disparaged the Tây Sơn without doing harm

[88] ibid., 227. Văn Tân would continue to write extensively on the Tây Sơn, including numerous journal articles (some of which will be discussed below), and a full-length study of Nguyễn Huệ, *Nguyễn Huệ Con Người Và Sự Nghiệp* (Nguyễn Huệ: The Person and His Accomplishments (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học, 1967).

to the Nguyễn reputation.[89] Thus, the Nguyễn emphasized Nhạc's alleged theft of state revenues as the cause of his revolt, and characterized the early Tây Sơn followers as good-for-nothings and adventurers.

After describing the nature of the Nguyễn accounts, Tân took issue with several specific instances in which he argued the Nguyễn accounts were completely inaccurate. The first was Nguyễn Huệ's killing of Võ Văn Nhậm (one of his chief lieutenants), portrayed in the Nguyễn records as prompted by Nguyễn Huệ's jealousy of the other man's abilities. Tân argued instead, that Nguyễn Huệ valued men of talent, and would never have killed Võ Văn Nhậm merely for an excess of talent. Moreover, Tân argued, the *Hoàng Lê Nhất Thống Chí*, a work he maintained was written by Ngô Thì Nhậm, explained that Võ Văn Nhậm was killed for having betrayed the Tây Sơn and no other reason. Secondly, Tân took issue with the Nguyễn claim in the *Cương Mục* that Huệ had forced Lê officials to counsel him to ascend the throne, rather than this having been a spontaneous act on the part of the officials. Again, Văn Tân cited the *HLNTC*, which appears to have suggested that the officials acted out of consensus, rather than in response to coercion. Third, Văn Tân took exception to the Nguyễn chronicles' calling Nguyễn Huệ "immoral and savage." Văn Tân argued that if this had in fact been the case, so many peasants would not have agree to follow this leader.

Later in the article Tân elaborated what he saw as a dichotomy between the Tây Sơn as defenders of the nation and the Nguyễn who had invited in foreign aggressors.[90] He suggested that looking at the missionary eyewitness accounts (which he argued could generally be trusted) rather than relying exclusively on the Nguyễn records, was the best way to gain a clear understanding of the Tây Sơn movement. His reference to these European sources is somewhat ironic, given the limited awareness that most northern historians appear to have had of the missionary record, which is in many cases very critical of the Tây Sơn. Finally, Văn Tân concluded his

[89] Văn Tân, "Quốc Sử Quán Triều Nguyễn Đối Với Khởi Nghĩa Tây Sơn" (The Nguyễn History Board and the Tây Sơn Righteous Uprising), *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử* 65, (August 1964): 14.
[90] ibid., 19.

article by commenting on the attitudes of southern historians under the RVN regime. He noted that the attitudes and prejudices of the Nguyễn historians had come to influence many southern historians who were seen writing about the Tây Sơn as "rebels" (giặc), who "looted" (cướp).[91] For Văn Tân these were ideologically driven terms, and to use them to describe the Tây Sơn was to accept the Nguyễn dynasty's attitudes toward the Tây Sơn. For Văn Tân and his northern colleagues the Tây Sơn were not rebels but righteous peasants in an organized movement.

A second example of a northern attack on Nguyễn characterizations of the Tây Sơn can be found in Duy Minh's 1966 article "Vài Ý Kiến Về Cuốn 'Tây sơn Thủy Mạt Khảo' Của Đào Nguyên Phổ" – (Some Opinions Concerning the Book 'Tây Sơn Thủy Mạt Khảo' by Đào Nguyên Phổ).[92] The author of the book being reviewed/attacked here, Đào Nguyên-Phổ, had died perhaps 50 years earlier. Yet he was still vilified for having (unsurprisingly) written "from the standpoint and perspective of the Nguyễn." It is curious, of course, to attack a man long dead and writing under the constraints of his own era, but the article should probably be read as an attack on the Saigon regime and its own claims to legitimacy rather than as a straightforward book review. In either case, this article usefully laid out some of the standard arguments by northern historians both for the Tây Sơn and against the Nguyễn.

After noting a few minor details of interest in the work, Minh wrote: "In all other places in the *Tây Sơn Thủy Mạt Khảo*, Đào-nguyên-Phổ continues to use the characters 'national court' in order to indicate the Nguyễn court. Thus in standing at the perspective of the Nguyễn court, Đào-nguyên-Phổ has already completely forgotten all of the accomplishments of the Tây Sơn movement, and those of the movement's leader Nguyễn Huệ with respect to the country."[93] Moreover, Minh noted that Đào Nguyên-Phổ, while writing of the military invincibility of Nguyễn Huệ,

[91] ibid., 20.

[92] Duy Minh, "Vài Ý Kiến Về Cuốn 'Tây sơn Thủy Mạt Khảo' Của Đào Nguyên Phổ" (Some Opinions Concerning the Book 'Tây Sơn Thủy Mạt Khảo' by Đào Nguyên Phổ), *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử* 83, (February, 1966), 45-48.

[93] ibid., 46.

concluded that "he did not have virtue (đức), and thus was only able to transfer the throne through two generations before being destroyed." This was a standard argument of the nineteenth-century Nguyễn court historians, whereby the failure of a dynastic house could ultimately be traced to a lack of virtue on the part of the ruler. Minh argued that Đào Nguyên-Phổ had no evidence for making this claim about Nguyễn Huệ, and that he was merely echoing the standard Nguyễn interpretation. Instead, Minh suggested, even a reading of Đào Nguyên-Phổ's own work provided only evidence of the Tây Sơn leader's accomplishments, not any lack of virtue. Minh then enumerated these accomplishments, noting in particular that "truly, with respect to the nation and the people, there is nothing greater than attacking foreign aggressors."[94] Moreover, he argued, the Tây Sơn in attacking the feudal regimes in north and south had united a country that had been divided for hundreds of years.

Virtue, Minh argued, should be measured by what a person has done for the Fatherland (*Tổ Quốc*), rather than the length of his reign. Thus, he argued, the dynasty that Đào Nguyên-Phổ supported (with its Great Ancestor King), did immeasurable harm to the nation from 1862 to 1945. In fact Minh suggested, not only was Đào Nguyên-Phổ wrong to reject Nguyễn Huệ's virtue, but he had also completely ignored the crimes of Nguyễn Ánh: inviting an invasion from Siam, accepting the assistance of the French, and most horribly desecrating the remains of the Tây Sơn rulers. Minh concluded by arguing that Đào Nguyên-Phổ's account of Nguyễn Huệ's death, ascribing it to fear of Nguyễn Ánh's growing strength, was completely false, as evidenced in the decree Quang Trung issued shortly before his death rallying the southern Tây Sơn regions to a massive attack to wipe out the Nguyễn.

Văn Tân and Duy Minh's works thus represent Vietnamese historians who directly confronted the older historiographical traditions regarding the Tây Sơn. However, rather than acknowledging the historical context in which these older writings were produced, these authors directly attacked nineteenth and early twentieth-century historians for somehow not having had the prescience to anticipate

[94] ibid., 46.

the new Communist historiography. Despite this rather unsubtle form of revisionism, the new engagement with the historiographical tradition marked another significant step toward new understandings of the Tây Sơn.

The Văn Tân and Nguyễn Phương debates (1960s)

The direct north-south disputes concerning the Tây Sơn reached their apex in a fierce debate between Văn Tân and Nguyễn Phương, waged in the pages of the northern journal *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử* (Historical Research) and the southern *Báo Bách Khoa* (The Polytechnic Journal). Văn Tân was the editorial secretary of the prominent Historical Institute (Viện Sử Học) in Hà Nội, while Nguyễn Phương was an educator and Catholic priest in Huế. The ostensible question in this debate was: Who unified Việt Nam? Nguyễn Huệ, the great Tây Sơn leader, or his arch-enemy and the founder of the Nguyễn dynasty, Nguyễn Ánh. Văn Tân championed the cause of the Tây Sơn ruler in part as unifier of the Vietnamese lands, but perhaps more importantly as defender of the nation against foreign aggression. Nguyễn Phương, on the other hand, while conceding Nguyễn Huệ's general contributions, saw Nguyễn Ánh as the true unifier of the nation, stitching together a national territory that had only partially been united by the Tây Sơn efforts.

The debate was initiated in a 1959 *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử* review by Văn Tân of Lê Thanh Khôi's 1955 book, *Le Viet Nam: Histoire et Civilisation*. In the review, Văn Tân criticized Khôi for arguing that it was Nguyễn Anh, rather than Nguyễn Huệ, who had unified the country.[95] In his defense of the Tây Sơn as the unifiers of Việt Nam, Tân appears to have moved considerably from his comprehensive 1957 account of the Tây Sơn, *Cách Mạng Tây Sơn*, in which he virtually ignored that issue and made no claims for the Tây Sơn as having unified the country. In fact, that work found him implying that the Tây Sơn had not succeeded in unifying the country

[95] Văn Tân, "Mấy ý kiến với quyển *Nước Việt Nam, Lịch Sử và Văn Minh* của Ông Lê Thành-khôi" (Some Opinions about the Book *Việt Nam: History and Culture* by Mr. Lê Thành Khôi), *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử* 7, (1959): 23-40.

before their eventual demise.[96]

Văn Tân's argument did not elicit an immediate response, but a few years later Phương replied, writing in the Sài Gòn journal, *Bach Khoa* in March of 1963. His article, "Ai Đã Thống Nhất Việt Nam? Nguyễn Huệ hay Nguyễn Ánh?" (Who unified Việt Nam: Nguyễn Huệ or Nguyễn Ánh?) sought to evaluate the various perspectives on the question.[97] Phương used Joseph Buttinger and Văn Tân to represent the argument that the unifier was Nguyễn Huệ, while he took Trần Trọng Kim and Lê Thành Khôi as representative of the argument for Nguyễn Ánh. Phương's article was a direct attack on Văn Tân's characterizations of the Tây Sơn and indeed on Văn Tân's basic motivations:

> Mr. Văn Tân, when he asserts that Nguyễn Huệ had already unified Việt Nam from 1786, has another more pressing motive, and that is his ardent desire to promote his Communism. With this ardent heart, he sees the Tây Sơn in general, and Nguyễn Huệ in particular, as a propaganda weapon, and thus he hastily makes use of them. He argues that the Tây Sơn, and especially Nguyễn Huệ, were the leaders of a righteous peasant uprising, even though according to history there had still not been a righteous peasant uprising to speak of. And then he looks for every means by which to extol Nguyễn Huệ, because in the task of praising Nguyễn Huệ he sees all glory for his -isms. From that point, everything that Nguyễn Huệ did is good, and every thing that was done that was good, was done by Nguyễn Huệ. It appears that Văn Tân does not know that at the beginning the peasants assisted the Tây Sơn only because they were being deceived by the Tây Sơn in this way and that, and that in the matter of supporting them they only did so in a very passive way, meaning only that they did not assist the Nguyễn troops in arresting them, or in not denouncing them to the Nguyễn Chúa.[98]

Moreover, Phương argued that not only had the Tây Sơn not unified the country, but they had further divided it politically:

> Another thing that it seems Văn Tân is trying hard to ignore is the aim of the Tây Sơn uprising. What did they rise up to do? In order to set up a

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[96] Văn Tân, *Cách Mạng Tây Sơn*, 147.

[97] Nguyễn Phương, "Ai Đã Thống Nhất Việt Nam? Nguyễn Huệ hay Nguyễn Ánh" (Who unified Việt Nam: Nguyễn Huệ or Nguyễn Ánh?) *Báo Bách Khoa* 148, (2/63): 19-30.

[98] ibid., 25.

> democratic regime? No, they rose up, to speak in the manner of Văn Tân, to set up another feudal monarchy. And from this perspective, the Tây sơn were many times more feudal than the Nguyễn lords who preceded them or the Nguyễn kings who succeeded them, because the Tây Sơn did not only have one lord or one king, but three kings and then 2 kings with two distinct dynasties.[99]

Finally, Phương also challenged Tân's critique of the notion that the Nguyễn had unified the country by observing that several issues raised by Tân were completely irrelevant to the central question. These included whether the Nguyễn had sought Siamese aid, whether they had sought French aid, and whether the Nguyễn had provoked a civil war. Phương saw these as immaterial to the more basic question of who unified the country, while Tân saw such actions as automatically disqualifying the Nguyễn.

Văn Tân wasted little time in publishing his counter-attack several months later in a June *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử* article, "Ai Đã Thống Nhất Việt Nam? Nguyễn Huệ hay Nguyễn Ánh (Trả Lời Ông Nguyễn Phương *Báo Bách Khoa* ở Sài Gòn)." (Who unified Việt Nam? Nguyễn Huệ or Nguyễn Ánh, a response to Mr. Nguyễn Phương in the *Bách Khoa Journal* in Saigon.). Tân defended himself against Phương's critique by stating that he had never argued that the Tây Sơn had established anything other than a monarchy, and that given the circumstances Nguyễn Huệ could have conceptualized nothing else. But at least the Tây Sơn had driven out two foreign invasions, which was more than could be said for the Nguyễn. Moreover, he ridiculed the idea that the Nguyễn had brought unity and order when the nineteenth century had also been rife with peasant uprisings against that very regime. And finally, responding to Phương's charges that his own arguments were politically motivated, Tân posited an explicit parallel between the Nguyễn decision to invite a Siamese invasion on their behalf, and the Diệm regime's inviting the Americans to enter the same southern region, both constituting violations of Vietnamese territory. In this light, Tân saw Phương's work as constituting merely an apologia for the Saigon regime. Ultimately Tân concluded quite bluntly that Nguyễn Phương "not

[99] ibid., 25.

only knows nothing about peasant uprisings, but also knows nothing about the development of the Vietnamese people either."[100]

As a result of this debate, the question "who unified Việtnam in the eighteenth century?" became an ideological measuring stick, with many northern writers belaboring the point in making their case for the Tây Sơn.[101] While this issue faded somewhat after the end of the war, it remains one of considerable interest. When I visited the noted Tây Sơn historian Đỗ Bằng in Huế in 1999 and suggested that Việt Nam was not particularly unified during the Tây Sơn period, he argued vigorously that any political divisions had been superficial and that the Tây Sơn crossing of the Gianh River had formed a psychological union of the two parts.[102] This of course highlights the basic problem that underlined the entire debate – namely what constituted "unification?" The reality may have been that neither Nguyễn Huệ nor Nguyễn Ánh achieved more than a superficial unification of the country.

A few years after his debate with Văn Tân, Nguyễn Phương elaborated his argument regarding the Tây Sơn in his important study *Việt Nam Thời Bành Trướng: Tây Sơn* (Việt Nam in a Time of Expansion: Tây Sơn) published in 1967. Here he laid out the broad sweep of the Tây Sơn period, providing a useful southern reply to Văn Tân's earlier *Cách Mạng Tây Sơn*, if only for its comprehensive nature. Phương's account suggested that the Tây Sơn movement was an extremely destructive one, and one that had quickly lost the enthusiastic support of its peasant base as the peasants found themselves suffering under the heavy burdens of continuous warfare. In reaching this conclusion, Phương's account relied extensively on the testimony of

[100] Văn Tân, "Ai Đã Thống Nhất Việt Nam? Nguyễn Huệ hay Nguyễn Ánh (Trả Lời Ông Nguyễn Phương Báo Bách Khoa ở Sài Gòn)," *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử*, (June 1963): 10.

[101] See for example: Lê Đình Sỹ, "Nguyễn Huệ Với Sự Nghiệp Thống Nhất Đất Nước Cuối Thế Kỷ XVIII" (Nguyễn Huệ and the Task of National Unification at the End of the eighteenth Century) in Bộ Quốc Phong Viện Lịch Sử Quân Sự Việt Nam, Quang Trung Nguyên Huệ với Chiến Thắng Ngọc-Hồi-Đống Đá (Hà Nội, (no pub), 1992), 208-221; Nguyễn Danh Phiệt, "Một Vài Suy Nghĩ về Phong Trào Tây Sơn Với Sự Nghiệp Thống Nhất Đất Nước Hồi Thế Kỷ XVIII" (Some Thoughts about the Tây Sơn Movement with Respect to the Matter of the Unification of the Country in the Eighteenth Century) *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử*, 6, (Nov-Dec, 1978): 57-75.

[102] Meeting with Đỗ Bằng in Huế, December 15, 1998.

French missionary letters, which indeed describe the hardships faced by the peasantry during the Tây Sơn years.[103] Also, through his use of these missionary letters, Phương produced an account of the Tây Sơn era far more nuanced than any before it, particularly in terms of its descriptions of peasant life in this period.

Though critical of the Tây Sơn movement for the hardships it imposed upon the populations, Phương's account was quite positive in its assessment of Nguyễn Huệ. Phương credited the Tây Sơn leader with important contributions to the nation, both in terms of beginning the process of stitching the country back together, and in terms of defending the nation against foreign invasions. While pointing out that there were considerable political divisions within the Tây Sơn camp, Phương also argued that the Tây Sơn advance to the North in 1786 was profoundly important in terms of helping to create a geographically complete entity. In fact, Phương argued that it was this south to north movement in 1786, rather than the long "Nam Tiến," or move to the south, that was the more important and defining political event in Vietnamese history. This conveniently paralleled the southern historical and contemporary perspective, one that sought to provide some historical impetus to the south. Moreover, by claiming Nguyễn Huệ as a southerner, and depicting him as marching north representing southern power, Phương was directly challenging the northern regime and its claims to Nguyễn Huệ as essentially a northern figure. From a political perspective, of course, the idea of a southern expansion to the north was obviously one far more palatable to the contemporary South Vietnamese, than the alternative.

While Phương described Nguyễn Huệ as a hero, he did not apotheosize him in the manner common among northern historians. He pointed out, for instance, that Nguyễn Huệ was extremely unpopular in the north and that this was one of the reasons that Huệ had repeatedly retreated to Phú Xuân rather than remaining in the

[103] This reinforces the divergent sources being used by northern and southern historians. No northern historian has ever made extensive use of the European sources, while Phương and subsequent southern historians regularly made use of these materials. On the other hand, the northern scholars, best exemplified by Hoa Bằng, made extensive use of the considerable *dã sử* holdings of the Hà Nội-based École Française d'Extrême-Orient, which could not be accessed by southern historians, and which are today largely held at the Hán Nôm Institute library in Hà Nội.

north. Moreover, he argued that Nguyễn Huệ could have done more for the country than he actually did. Phương brushed aside arguments that Huệ's reign was too short, noting that other figures in Vietnamese history had accomplished considerably more in similarly short time-frames. Ultimately, Phương concluded that Nguyễn Huệ's status as a national hero derived as much from his avocation as an adventurer as anything else. It was this sense of adventure, Phương argued, that drove this restless man to his accomplishments, not a more profound and calculated sense of moral purpose as was typically suggested by northern historians.[104]

The overtly politicized northern historians' attacks on the southern regime were revived in 1973 in Hải Linh's *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử* article "Vai trò Phong Trào Cách Mạng Nông Dân Tây Sơn Trong Sự Nghiệp Đấu Trang Lập Lại Nên Thống Nhất Đất Nước Hồi Cuối Thế Kỷ XVIII." (The Role of the Tây Sơn Peasant Revolutionary Movement in the Matter of Establishing National Reunification at the End of the eighteenth Century).[105] In it the author returned to the characterization of the Tây Sơn as a revolution, and specifically a "peasant revolutionary movement." It is worth examining in some detail, for it laid out many of the main differences between the competing historical views as seen from the north.

At the outset, Linh put forth quite explicitly the northern views of the connections between the southern regime and the Nguyễn:

> Recently, a number of books and newspapers of the false power in the southern region of Việt-Nam have made an effort to take advantage of this matter to distort history, and to assist in carrying out some reactionary political schemes of the American imperialists and their lackeys. In terms of the method of presentation and argument, although different from one another, these authors are all united in upholding what they call the accomplishment of the unification of the country by Nguyễn Ánh. They are

[104] Nguyễn Phương, *Việt Nam Thời Bành Trướng: Tây Sơn* (Saigon: Khai Trí, 1967), 401.

[105] Hải Linh, "Vai trò Phong Trào Cách Mạng Nông Dân Tây Sơn Trong Sự Nghiệp Đấu Trang Lập Lại Nên Thống Nhất Đất Nước Hồi Cuối Thế Kỷ XVIII" (The Role of the Tây Sơn Peasant Revolution in the Struggle to Reestablish National Unity in the End of the Eighteenth Century), *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử* 150, (5/6, 1973): 30.

> seeking a means by which to explain Nguyễn Ánh's crime of "inviting in the elephant to trample the snake" and to praise Nguyễn Ánh as a great man, and a patriot.[106]

In response to what he saw as grave distortions of the historical record, Hải Linh also stated that:

> Historians of the northern region have resolved to criticize the false arguments and historical distortions of these reactionary journals and to expose the reactionary political scheming of the lackey pens hiding under the cover of historical essays in order to assist in the *Mỹ-ngụy* (false Americans) task of looting and selling out the nation.[107]

The rest of Linh's study examined the effects of the historical division of the country, placing blame for this division on the Nguyễn, and suggesting that there had been broad popular sentiment for unification based on a desire for economic benefits and stability. Particularly interesting was his articulation of the historical role of the Nguyễn, for it extended the attack on the Nguyễn into the pre-Tây Sơn years, rather than focusing on vilifying the later Nguyễn Ánh:

> After the decisive dispute, and unable to engulf or destroy each other, the two feudal forces, the Trịnh and the Nguyễn, for a long time both plotted a divided condition, transforming each region of the country into the private rivers and mountains of a single ruling lineage, and becoming like independent states. This tendency developed strongly in Đàng Trong with the political power of the Chúa Nguyễn Phúc Khoát, in around the middle of the eighteenth century. That was the time during which Nguyễn Phúc Khoát took a reign name, established a separate imperial court and then ordered an envoy to go to China to seek enfiefment by the Qing and even forced the people of Đàng Trong "to change their clothing and change their customs" and "put forth an order for the officials and people, the men and women of those two regions all to follow the ordinary clothing of the Chinese style." Thus, because of the usefulness of the divided feudal communities, the Nguyễn focused on discarding long-established customs and habits that had united the people from the North to the South, which had been proof of the unifying sentiment of the collective peoples, and they abandoned the popular culture in order to establish division and opposition in every respect between

[106] ibid., 30.
[107] ibid., 31.

the two regions of Đàng Trong and Đàng Ngoài.[108]

Thus, while Hải Linh initially blamed both sides for the division, it was ultimately the Nguyễn, he maintained, who instigated the final break, not only by establishing their own state, but by compounding their sin in imposing a new cultural system taken from outside. This appears, quite clearly, to be yet another thinly veiled attack on the South Vietnamese regime, blaming its apparent ancestor (the Nguyễn regime) for having arbitrarily and unilaterally broken with the north and having sought to establish a separate state.

Linh also addressed the "knotty question" of whether or not the Tây Sơn had truly succeeded in establishing a united country. He challenged the claim that rather than uniting the country the Tây Sơn had divided it into even more "kingdoms" than had existed before. He used Nguyễn Phương as the primary proponent of this viewpoint, but also cited Lê Thành Khôi as arguing that it was not until Gia Long had defeated Cảnh Thịnh in 1802 that the country was truly ruled from one end to the other by a single political power.[109] Hải Linh argued that surely there was a period (however brief), in the summer of 1786, when the Tây Sơn controlled all of Việt Nam from Cao Bằng to Cà-mau, thus ostensibly constituting a "unification" of the entire country.[110] He conceded that there was what appeared to be a political division thereafter between the three brothers, but suggested that this was not a division to the degree that had been seen earlier between the Trịnh and Nguyễn. Moreover, he argued that while there was a division into several regions (*khu vực*), this did not mean that there were separate countries (*nước*). Finally, he suggested that Nguyễn Ánh's policies after 1802 did more to undermine the foundations of national unity than consolidate them, so he could hardly be given the title of national unifier.[111]

Hải Linh concluded his study by praising Quang Trung's successes in defending national independence, without which, he argued, national unity is

[108] ibid., 33.
[109] ibid., 38.
[110] ibid., 39.
[111] ibid., 39-40.

meaningless. He contrasted Quang Trung's defense of the nation with Nguyễn Ánh's inviting in the Siamese, but more so Nguyễn Ánh's opening the door to the French. Linh pointed to the 1787 Treaty of Versailles, in which the Nguyễn leader made numerous concessions to the French. Although the treaty was never implemented, Ánh's willingness to agree to its terms was seen as irrefutable proof of the Nguyễn betrayal of the nation.[112] Finally, Linh extolled Nguyễn Huệ's virtues for promoting national culture and language and promoting economic development, all of which prompted the author to praise the Tây sơn as a "new, progressive feudal polity." The failure of these reforms to take hold was blamed on the brevity of Tây Sơn rule, rather than on any underlying shortcomings. According to Linh, the ultimate failure of the Tây Sơn was due to the fact that:

> Naturally because the historical environment at that time (not yet having a new social class to substitute a more progressive mode of production), and because of a number of subjective shortcomings among the leadership (chiefly of Nguyễn Nhạc), and the restorationist plottings of some of the traitorous feudal powers in the country (chiefly those of Nguyễn Ánh at Gia-định), the national unification for which the people had shed their blood had threatening divisions and limitations.[113]

Linh's argument highlighted some of the main issues being debated by northern and southern scholars during this period. It reveals the degree to which the northern scholars' analysis of the Tây Sơn era was as much about lauding the accomplishments of Nguyễn Huệ as it was an attack on the actions of Nguyễn Ánh. Thus, even when conceding the limitations of the Tây Sơn regime, most notably its failure to move beyond a monarchic governmental system and its inability firmly to unite the country, these historians argued that Nguyễn Ánh was even worse, both because of his betrayal of the country to foreign powers, and specifically the French, and because of his post-1802 policies, which they claimed only further eroded national unity. Linh's argument in this vein clearly followed that of Văn Tân in the "who unified Việt Nam" debate, for each man eliminated Nguyễn Ánh from consideration as much for his

[112] ibid., 40.
[113] ibid., 42.

alleged selling out of the country as for his specific actions with regard to unification.

The Vũ Đức Phúc - Lê Sỹ Thắng Debates

The same year that saw publication of Hải Linh's resumed attack on the south and southern historians also saw the onset of a brief and lively debate within the northern scholarly community itself over the interpretations of some of the major figures of the Tây Sơn movement. The article reassessed numerous figures including Ngô Thì Nhậm, Nguyễn Thiếp and Trần Văn Kỷ, while also offering one of the first critical reflections on the sources being used to interpret the movement.[114] In his "Từ Ngô Thì Nhậm Đến Trào Lưu Văn Học Tây Sơn" (From Ngô Thì Nhậm to the Tây Sơn Literary Stream) Vũ Đức Phúc challenged the conventional interpretations of several very prominent Tây Sơn figures, including the hallowed Quang Trung himself. In doing so he was questioning not merely the tendency among communist historians to apotheosize certain figures, but more fundamentally their research methods. Phúc's article focused primarily on Nhậm, a key scholar official and advisor to Quang Trung, and while acknowledging his contributions to the Tây Sơn, criticized him for not having joined the movement sooner. Phúc also argued, contrary to conventional interpretations, that Nhậm was not the chief architect of the all-important strategic retreat by the Tây Sơn in the face of the 1788 Chinese invasion, crediting another official, Ngô Văn Sở, instead. He also argued that credit for Quang Trung's policy of tolerance toward officials of the old regime should go to Trần Văn Kỷ, rather than to the Tây Sơn Emperor himself. And finally, Phúc defied the usual assessments of Nguyễn Thiếp, arguing that the reclusive Nghệ An scholar was not a visionary and

[114] The three articles in the order they appeared are: Vũ Đức Phúc, "Từ Ngô Thì Nhậm Đến Trào Lưu Văn Học Tây Sơn" (From Ngô Thì Nhậm to the Tây Sơn Literary Stream) *Tạp Chí Văn Học* No. 4, (1973): 2-18; Lê Sỹ Thắng, "Vài ý Kiến Góp Về Vấn Đề Đánh Giá Một Số Nhân Vật Thời Tây Sơn" (Some Opinions Contributed to the Matter of Assessing Some Individuals in the Tây Sơn Era) *Tạp Chí Triết Học* No. 5 (1974): 193-200; Vũ Đức Phúc, "Hoàng Lê Nhất Thống Chí và Sự Thực Lịch Sử Chung Quang Việc Quang Trung Phá Thanh" (The *Hoàng Lê Nhất Thống Chí* and the Truth Around the History Concerning Quang Trung's Destruction of the Qing) *Tạp Chí Văn Học* No. 3 (1974): 105-123, 129.

political advisor of unparalleled stature, but merely a local political talent whose family happened to preserve their Tây Sơn correspondence rather than destroy it in the face of the Nguyễn advance as many others did.

Whether or not one agreed with Phúc's assessments, he did raise some important evidentiary problems that have (or should have) haunted historians of the Tây Sơn. In many cases, one does not even have two independent sources of information, let alone more, to assess the significance of particular figures, and consequently Tây Sơn historians have needed to read the sources with considerable care. Phúc's argument demonstrated that alternative interpretations existed and could not readily be dismissed. In particular his point about Nguyễn Thiếp was a good one. Historians had traditionally relied heavily on the trove of documents preserved by Thiếp's family to assess his importance. Unfortunately, since no other correspondence with other contemporary officials have been found, one cannot compare the intimacy or significance of this correspondence against that Quang Trung may have exchanged with other northern scholars. Phuc also questioned the degree to which historians were using the *Hoàng Lê Nhất Thống Chí* as a source, suggesting that they needed more carefully to consider its potential biases rather than simply accepting its contents at face value.

A few months after Phúc's article appeared, Lê Sỹ Thắng, writing in the journal *Triết Học* (Philosophy), published a rebuttal in large measure defending the traditionally accepted views on these men. In particular, Thắng rebutted Phúc's assertion that Ngô Thì Nhậm was not the military mastermind behind the 1788 retreat. Thắng argued that if Phúc wanted to challenge the account of Nhậm's actions contained in the *HLNTC*, then he would have to provide an alternative source. Moreover, Thắng argued that Nhậm's official career had already included several military successes, and so just because he was primarily a civilian official and scholar, did not mean that his military strategic skills should be dismissed. He agreed that Trần Văn Kỷ should be praised for introducing key northern scholars to Quang Trung, but not given credit for Quang Trung's policy of tolerance, though he offered

no evidence for Quang Trung's role other than the Emperor's outstanding personality. Finally, Thắng defended Nguyễn Thiếp's reputation as an outstanding scholar, brushing aside Phúc's argument that if Thiếp were such a good scholar he would have advanced farther in the imperial examination system. Moreover, he argued that Thiếp was a uniquely placed confidant of Quang Trung, not merely one among many. Again, however, Thắng's argument rested on no foundation, and he offered no evidence that did not rely on the same materials that Phúc had already challenged.

Phúc's rejoinder appeared soon thereafter, and while he conceded a few minor errors, he argued that they did not undermine or change his fundamental points. Regarding Nhậm he agreed with Phúc that Nhậm might have been a good tactician, but that he was specifically questioning Nhậm's skills as a field general. Moreover, he suggested that Thắng had a very poor understanding of military and civilian official positions under the Lê, and that Nhậm had held largely civilian posts in his career under the Lê/Trịnh. In addition, Phúc argued that he was not suggesting that the *HLNTC* be rejected as a source, merely that it be read and used critically, keeping in mind that it was written by members of the Ngô clan who would naturally exaggerate the role that Nhậm played in this period. Regarding Kỷ, Phúc reiterated his claim that Kỷ was instrumental to Quang Trung's policy regarding scholars, not merely serving to introduce individual figures.

Finally, Phúc reserved his most blistering reply for the section regarding Thiếp. He argued among other things that:

1) Thiếp's so-called advice to Quang Trung regarding the 10 days needed to defeat the Chinese was a complete guess, not a military strategy.
2) If Thiếp was such a noted scholar, Phúc asked, why had he not passed the *tiến sĩ*, and why did he admit to being versed only in a small number of books?
3) Thiếp remained loyal to the Lê and did not fulfill the role of a patriot
4) Quang Trung never trusted him completely, but merely used him.
5) Thiếp wrote bad poetry

6) Hoàng Xuân Hãn, who discovered the Thiếp-Quang Trung correspondence greatly exaggerated Thiếp's importance through these documents.

With this salvo, the debate came to an end, at least in any public forum. This exchange was important because it marked a relatively rare schism within the community of northern scholars interpreting the Tây Sơn era and its important political and military figures. While the debate did not address any of the central issues of the Tây Sơn movement as a whole, it did indicate that possibilities for reinterpreting some of the major figures of this period existed. It also brought out the important question of the critical use of sources. Many of the studies of the Tây Sơn, by northern and southern scholars alike, have made use of source material in a very uncritical fashion, particularly if it reinforced their preconceived ideas about the nature of the Tây Sơn. In challenging the typical uncritical use of the *HLNTC*, Phúc was threatening one of the central pillars of northern scholarship on the Tây Sơn. It is unfortunate that his call for critical reexamination of some of the much-used sources does not appear to have had much of an impact on subsequent scholarship on the Tây Sơn.

Finally, the year 1973 also marked the appearance in the south of one of the most comprehensive surveys of the Tây Sơn period, in the form of Tạ Chí Đại Trường's, *Lịch Sử Nội Chiến Ở Việt Nam Từ 1771-1802* (A History of the Civil War in Việt Nam from 1771 to 1802). As the title suggests, Trường viewed these years as ones of turmoil and conflict, not gloriously emancipated peasants. Trường's account was noteworthy for his very extensive use of the French materials, and in particular the published missionary letters. In a sense he did with the French language sources what Hoa Bằng's 1943 study of Quang Trung had done with the Chinese language sources on the same period – namely exploit them to an extent not seen before or since. Given his use of these French missionary sources, with their lengthy descriptions of the difficulties and divisions of the Tây Sơn years, it is hardly

surprising that Trường's account was a far more depressing one regarding this period of Vietnamese history. He revealed the peasants' lives to have been greatly disturbed and often made worse by the military and forced labor demands of the Tây Sơn military and political officials.

A few years after its publication, Trường's work provoked what essentially constituted the final word in the north-south war-time debate about the Tây Sơn era in a two-part 1976 review of that work in the northern historical journal *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử*. Perceived as an attack on the glorious Tây Sơn uprising, Trường's work could hardly go unchallenged by the communist historians. Once again, the central issues in the debate were brought forth by the northern authors, Nguyễn Phan Quang and Nguyễn Đức Nghinh, as they laid out the criteria they would use to evaluate the book: were the Tây Sơn depicted as heroes or rebels? Was Nguyễn Ánh a traitor or the father of the nation? Was the Tây Sơn era a period of noble peasant struggle, or a military free for all?

Not surprisingly, Quang and Nghinh were extremely critical of Trường's work on a variety of fronts, most fundamentally arguing that Trường could not be considered an historian, and that his so-called research was extremely limited and brought to light no new sources. Most interestingly, they took him to task for not making more use of popular sources and oral traditions, which, they argued should have been readily available to him in the Saigon regime-controlled Qui Nhơn region. It is quite likely, though they do not make this point, that they were reacting to a work and bibliography that contained almost as many French sources as it did Vietnamese ones, perhaps seen as further evidence of Trường's sympathies toward outsiders and colonizers. In reality, more so than any account of the Tây Sơn before or since, and as was noted above, Trường made very effective use of French sources, and particularly of missionary letters. Thus, Quang and Nghinh's argument that he introduced no new sources was clearly without merit.

The two northerners were also very critical of Trường's choosing to call this

period one of "Civil War" as he did in his title.[115] This implied a period of political chaos and military confusion, rather than one marked by a determined and organized peasant movement seeking to install a new political order or national unity. Moreover, the notion of "civil war" appeared to imply that there were military sides with no clear moral superiority, rather than the conventional Marxist view that the Tây Sơn represented a force for national integrity and popular interests, while the Nguyễn represented a despotic, feudal regime. For Trường, the thirty years of the Tây Sơn period constituted an extension of the political chaos that had already marked much of the eighteenth century. Thus, he referred to the eighteenth-century peasant uprisings as "disorderly killings" rather than "righteous uprisings." Moreover, he emphasized the destructive and cruel aspects of the Tây Sơn military machine, seeing the rebels as barbarians, rather than as the noble peasants depicted in communist accounts. In Trường's interpretation, it was not until the ascent of Nguyễn Ánh that order was finally brought to Việt Nam. This of course was anathema to the northern historians, for it suggested that Ánh, and not the Tây Sơn, had "unified Việt Nam." Ultimately, Quang and Nghinh openly questioned whether Trường had written a piece of serious scholarly intent, or whether he had merely produced an oblique defense of the actions of the Saigon regime.

Recent Tây Sơn Scholarship: The 1980s and 1990s

The 1980s saw a revival of interest in the Tây Sơn as scholars, invoking the 200th anniversaries of various events related to the Tây Sơn period, organized a series of symposia exploring different aspects of this era. In addition, in the late 1980s a number of northern scholars compiled a three-volume series exploring various phases of the Tây Sơn years through anthologizing eighteenth and nineteenth-century texts, as well as offering new writings.[116] Despite this flurry of activity and meetings, there

[115] The term had already been used as early as Ký's 1875 *Cours D'Histoire Annamite*, 252.

[116] See Phan Huy Lê, et al. *Tư Liệu Về Tây Sơn-Nguyễn Huệ* (Documents Concerning Tây Sơn-Nguyễn Huệ) (3 vols) (Qui Nhơn: Sở Văn Hóa và Thông Tin Nghĩa Bình Xuất Bản, 1988).

has been no serious full-length reassessment of the Tây Sơn dealing with the broad scope of this period. The last significant study of the movement to make any real contributions to scholarly understanding thereof remained that of Trường in 1973.

There were some comprehensive studies of the Tây Sơn period, but none that contributed to any new understanding of the movement or its leaders. Among these is a 1989 study of Quang Trung, *Quang Trung-Nguyễn Huệ*, by Nguyễn Lương Bích, commemorating the 200th anniversary of the Tây Sơn victory over the Chinese at the battle of Đông Đa. This account, like a study co-authored by the same historian twenty years earlier, focused largely on military matters.[117] Moreover, it was no more nuanced than many earlier northern Marxist accounts. The brothers were shown rising up to rescue the oppressed peoples and were then depicted as being joined by "patriotic" (*yêu nước*) supporters. Once again the end result of the Tây Sơn actions was treated as the initial impetus. Moreover, Bích's is a particularly anachronistic reading of the events of the period: the central part of the country, and later Gia Định and Thuận Hóa were being "liberated" (*giải phóng* – as Sài Gòn had been just 14 years earlier), and Pigneau de Behaine was not merely the agent of French mercenary support for the feudal Nguyễn, but already scheming for a means by which to turn Việt Nam into a French colony.[118] When Bích's account turns to an assessment of the events of 1786, it makes no mention of the critical role that Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh played in pushing Nguyễn Huệ to cross the Gianh River and to attack Thăng Long, nor was the decision depicted in terms of Nguyễn Huệ's personal ambition. Rather, it was portrayed as one pushed by his officers, seeking to 1) overthrow the Trịnh, 2) do away with the dividing line between north and south, and 3) reunited the two halves of the country.[119] Thus, the Tây Sơn officers were painted as having been guided by a

[117] See Nguyễn Lương Bích and Phạm Ngọc Phụng, *Tìm Hiểu Thiên Tài Quân Sự Của Nguyễn Huệ* (Seeking to Understand the Military Talents of Nguyễn Huệ) (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Quân Đội Nhân Dân, 1966), since republished five times.

[118] On the "liberation" of these three sites, see 19ff, 29ff, and 72ff; on Behaine's role as an agent of French colonialism see Nguyễn Lương Bích, *Quang Trung-Nguyễn Huệ* (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Quân Đội Nhân Dân, 1989), 39.

[119] ibid., 90

broad political vision, fulfilling a mission seemingly guided by the interests of mid-twentieth-century Vietnamese Marxist historians.

Finally, while Bích made extensive and commendable use of the French sources for this period, he at times appears deliberately to have misread them. For instance, in an effort to argue that the Tây Sơn received popular support for their 1786 campaign to cross the Gianh River, he suggested that men "enlisted" in the army, and that women and the elderly "enthusiastically joined" efforts to rebuild roads and bridges.[120] The French original suggests that this participation was forced and not voluntary: "on oblige tout le mond d'aller à la guerre depuis 15 ans et au-dessus," and "les vieillards et les femmes veuves et les filles sont même obligés de réparer les ponts et les grands chemins . . ."[121] Thus, while it is encouraging to see Vietnamese historians making use of the very important French missionary source material, it is disturbing to see this material shaded to suggest an enthusiastic peasant support that was clearly not suggested by the French original.

Another relatively full-length study of the Tây Sơn, *Nhà Tây Sơn* (The House of Tây Sơn) was, like Bích's, published in 1989 to coincide with the 200th anniversary of the defeat of the Chinese at the battle of Đống Đa. Written by the father-son team of Quách Tấn and Quách Giao, it is difficult to decide how seriously to take this study, which while citing 27 sources in its bibliography, offers virtually no annotated referencing anywhere in the text. As the younger Quách notes, the account draws on both written documentation and oral traditions preserved in the Tây Sơn homeland, which is also the home region of the authors. The account include a considerable amount of detail concerning the very earliest period of the Tây Sơn movement, prior to the 1773 attack on Qui Nhơn. Unfortunately, it offers no sources for the information presented, making its very interesting claims virtually impossible to substantiate. Unlike other accounts, this one is less interested in glorifying Nguyễn Huệ at the expense of his elder brother, probably because the authors' intent

[120] ibid., 90. The Vietnamese is "nhập ngũ" and "nhiệt liệt tham gia."

[121] Here I quote from the same source to which Bích refers, namely L. Cadière, "Documents Relatifs a L'Époque de Gia-Long," *BEFEO*, 1912, 17.

is to glorify the movement as a whole, without worrying as much about needing to exalt a single individual.

Despite its remarkable level of detail, this work suffers from its own blinders. The incorporation of the Tây Sơn into the ranks of the Trịnh is portrayed as a decision made by the Trịnh, rather than a response to a request made by the Tây Sơn leaders themselves.[122] In addition, there is no discussion of the fact that the Tây Sơn initially portrayed themselves as defenders of the Nguyễn court, and only passing reference to the Tây Sơn holding a young Nguyễn prince hostage in an effort to justify this approach. Also interesting is the fact that the work makes no mention of the Tây Sơn massacre of ethnic Chinese in Gia Định in 1782. While this is hardly the first account that attempts to downplay or ignore this significant event, its absence is particularly noteworthy in a work that seeks to emphasize the problems the Tây Sơn had in gaining the support of southern residents. Surely the massacre, whether designed to intimidate southerners or cheer the ethnic Vietnamese at seeing the Chinese commercial monopoly destroyed, had to have played an important role in affecting attitudes toward the Tây Sơn attitudes in the south.

Another instance in which the work falls short is its attempt to address the falling out between the two Tây Sơn brothers in the aftermath of the 1786 attack on Thăng Long. The authors posit that it was merely the result of competing personal ambitions, and that the differences were very soon set aside, with the brothers then continuing to live in harmony. The authors mention three stories purported to explain the source of the conflict: 1) Nhạc allegedly molesting one of Huệ's wives, 2) Nhạc having taken an unfair share of the loot from the northern campaign, and 3) a fight over a European woman allegedly sent to Huệ by Nguyễn Ánh to sow discontent. The authors reject each of these tales as having been invented by Nguyễn historiographers, contending that there was no Chinese language text with evidence for any of these stories. Moreover, the authors, who cite none of their own sources, criticize the Nguyễn historians for not offering evidence for the sources for these tales themselves.

[122] Tấn (1989), 82.

The authors' rejection of these tales is at odds with contemporary missionary letters, several of which cite the first two tales as reasons for the Tây Sơn falling out. While the French letters may merely have been repeating contemporary rumors, the evidence in these letters makes clear that these stories were not merely nineteenth-century fabrications by historians with an anti-Tây Sơn agenda.

Not all 1989 writings about the Tây Sơn were adulatory, and indeed included some of the first critical accounts of the Tây Sơn by northern historians. Notable among these was the article "Tìm Hiểu về Tổ Chức Nhà Nước Thời Tây Sơn" (An examination of the establishment of the state in the Tây Sơn period), by Trần Thị Vinh. As the title suggested, this article focused not on the early years of the Tây Sơn, rising up in support of the peasantry, nor on its great victories over foreign aggressors, but rather on the nature and composition of the Tây Sơn state. The author elaborated the elements of the Tây Sơn government, its policies and the types of individuals who participated in it. More forcefully than previous studies, Vinh suggested that the Tây Sơn government was no different than any of its predecessors in terms of its feudal nature and its oppression of the peasantry: "With respect to the people, the Tây Sơn brothers were no longer their leaders, but had now entered the ranks of feudal officialdom and turned around to oppress the people."[123] The author concluded that the Tây Sơn did little to improve the lot of the peasantry, particularly in terms of land ownership, nor did they do anything to eliminate the oppressive nature of the structure of officials who made the people's lives difficult. This relatively harsh criticism of the Tây Sơn was something new in the scholarship. Previous scholars had to acknowledge that the Tây Sơn had become a monarchy and in some ways retraced the steps of previous feudal regimes, but somehow had suggested that the Tây Sơn had taken steps to ameliorate the hardships and had been intrinsically more representative of peasant aspirations. Vinh's ability to differentiate between the peasantry and the Tây Sơn leadership is very important, and is an argument that I will elaborate in chapter Three. It raises, as I will, questions about

[123] Trần Thị Vinh, "Tìm Hiểu về Tổ Chức Nhà Nước Thời Tây Sơn," *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử*, No. 1, 1989, 46.

whether classifying the Tây Sơn movement as a "peasant movement" is accurate or even useful.

Despite this more critical approach, most scholarship continued to hew to the conventional line, suggesting that there was still little room for open criticism of the Tây Sơn in public intellectual discourse. Consider, for example, Nguyễn Duy Hinh's 1989 article "Reflections on the House of Tây Sơn."[124] While much of his analysis discussed economic factors, he then devoted a section to "The Historical Mission of the Tây Sơn Insurrection," in which he once again put forth the 1960s arguments on national defense and unification:

> The Tây Sơn insurrection broke out against a background in which several forces jockeyed for power and stood ready to betray the country to foreigners. In Dang Trong the House of Nguyễn Phuc welcomed Siamese and French troops into the country. In Dang Ngoai the House of Le called for help from the Chinese Ching (Qing) court. For these reasons the Tay Son insurrectionists switched from an anti-monarchical stand to one of resistance to foreign aggression, and their class war became one of national independence.[125]

and he concluded that:

> The Tay Son insurrection was the most powerful spearhead of peasant war in our country and was credited with its first successes. It had the rare feature of turning itself into a patriotic war for national defense. It put an end to partition and initiated reunification, at the same time successfully defending national independence against foreign forces invading the country in both the north and south and foiling all acts of treason by the feudal cliques in Dang Trong and Dang Ngoai.[126]

Nguyễn Duy Hinh thus reiterated the argument that the Tây Sơn should be chiefly remembered for their dual accomplishment of uniting the country (or reuniting it as he claimed) and defending it against outside aggression. In addition, he argued that the Tây Sơn had initiated a "class war," but that class matters had then been set aside

[124] Nguyễn Duy Hinh, "Reflections on the House of Tây Sơn," *Social Sciences* (2/89), 29-35. This is a translation of his "Suy Nghĩ về Nhà Tây Sơn," which appeared in *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sự* 1, (1989): 20-27.
[125] Nguyễn Duy Hinh, "Reflections on the House of Tây Sơn," *Social Sciences* (2/89), 33-34.
[126] ibid., 35.

in the interests of national defense. Moreover, the fact that the Tây Sơn had reestablished the monarchy was not an indication of the failure of their political vision, but "a historical necessity," driven by the greater need to defend the nation. This account, like so many others before it, viewed the Tây Sơn as a coordinated movement, with clear objectives driving towards fundamental reforms, but then forced by historical circumstances to change course to defend the nation.

The truth was far more messy as I will make clear in subsequent chapters. The Tây Sơn cannot be considered to have been a tightly-knit "movement" but a highly fractious force whose objectives were far from clear or constant, and whose leaders were not driven by circumstances towards reestablishing the monarchy, but had already embarked on that path a mere three years after their movement was under way. It was in 1775 that Nguyễn Nhạc first declared himself a "king" and one must date Tây Sơn monarchical tendencies accordingly, and not to 1788 when Quang Trung took the throne prior to spearheading the ouster of the Chinese. Moreover, the ready tendency to blame the Nguyễn or the Lê for inviting in foreign aggressors overlooks the complex makeup of the Tây Sơn armies and their own readiness to employ foreigners and their technologies. Finally, seeing the Tây Sơn movement as a "class war" also, I believe, does grave injustice to what was in reality a far more complex socioeconomic dynamic.

Thus, despite a few more critical writings, recent Tây Sơn scholarship has either continued to reiterate the conventional interpretations of the movement and its significance, or increasingly focused on very minor issues based on the fragmentary new information being brought to light. Not since the early 1970s has there been a discovery of previously unknown Tây Sơn documents, and the scholarship reflects this lack of dynamism. In a sense, contemporary assessments of the Tây Sơn have not advanced much beyond those of the 1960s. When I met one of the more senior Vietnamese historians, Trần Quốc Vượng in Hà Nội in the summer of 1999, we talked about the Tây Sơn. Relishing his role as an iconoclast, he described the Tây Sơn in terms of their destruction of ethnic Chinese communities in the south, and

their unpopularity in the south, and he argued, in the north. He spoke of the popular sayings about the northern populations awaiting the Nguyễn forces with each change in the monsoon winds. Vương's very critical assessment stands in marked contrast to other northern historians, who while becoming more pragmatic in acknowledging the Tây Sơn's shortcomings, are still unwilling to criticize them for their brutality or admit how unpopular they were in many regions.[127]

Conclusion: The Main Debates

There is no question that two hundred years of writing about the Tây Sơn has done little to resolve the complexities of that era. Moreover, as the writings of the twentieth century demonstrated, the Tây Sơn era was one subject to startlingly different interpretations, interpretations that have consistently reflected geographical and political affinities. The antipathies of the nineteenth-century Nguyễn historians were readily transmitted to southern scholars of the period from 1954 to 1975, as the South Vietnamese regime became viewed in some respects as the successor state to the last Vietnamese dynasty. At the same time, the tradition of more sympathetic writings about the Tây Sơn movement and regime from the northern perspective, and dating back to the eighteenth-century *Hoàng Lê Nhất Thống Chí*, was continued among northern writers both in the 1940s, and more aggressively in the subsequent years during the war with the south.

The seemingly abstract issues of interpreting the Tây Sơn, became a battleground for scholars in north and south. "Who unified Việt Nam?" and "Were the Tây Sơn popular heroes or rioting thieves?" became topics for deadly serious disagreement. The remarkably convenient parallels between the events of the late eighteenth century and the second half of the twentieth century fueled a debate

[127] He has made this argument in print as well. See Trần Quốc Vương, "Tây Sơn Quang Trung và Công Cuộc Đổi Mới Đất Việt Nam ở Thế Kỷ XVIII" (Tây Sơn Quang Trung and the Labor of Renovating the land of Việt Nam in the Eighteenth Century), in Bộ Quốc Phòng Viện Lịch Sử Quân Sử Việt Nam, *Quang Trung Nguyễn Huệ với Chiến Thắng Ngọc Hồi-Đống Đà* (Hà Nội: ?, 1992), 222-235.

between scholars and political regimes. The questions being debated were not always the most important ones, and there remains considerable room for further examination of the Tây Sơn. In particular, as I will show in subsequent chapters, too little attention was still paid to the social dynamics of this era: the shifting sentiments of the peasantry and the relationships that the Tây Sơn developed not only with the peasantry but with other social groups. The tendency to focus on military heroes and the shifting tides of war obscured equally important social dynamics.

In what follows I take up elements of the debates contained in the historiography of the second half of the twentieth-century through an exploration of the dynamics of Vietnamese society during the Tây Sơn period. I challenge in particular, aspects of the scholarly tradition that developed in the north in the 1940s, a tradition that continues to the present and has become the dominant interpretation of the Tây Sơn. The general arguments from this tradition that I take up are the following:

1) The Tây Sơn leadership, and Nguyễn Huệ in particular, rose up with the multiple objectives of overthrowing feudal oppression, reuniting the country, and defending the nation against foreign aggression;

2) The Tây Sơn uprising was a peasant movement, enthusiastically and loyally served by Vietnamese commoners whose lives were improved by the destruction of the oppressive regimes of the Nguyễn and the Trịnh;

3) The Tây Sơn movement was a powerful and indigenous nationalist force, composed of a broad coalition of different classes and ethnic groups, while the Tây Sơn's Nguyễn rivals betrayed the nation to foreigners such as the Siamese and the French;

4) The movement's leaders and component parts were morally upstanding, guided by their twin emphases on their righteousness and virtue;

5) The Tây Sơn leader Nguyễn Huệ (Quang Trung) received the loyal support of many northern intellectuals through a policy of benevolence, and he shaped the policies of his regime in accord with his own nationalistic vision.

In the next chapter I begin this reexamination by looking at the Tây Sơn leadership and its emergence as a political force. I attempt to describe the ways in which the Nguyễn brothers laid claim to power, demonstrating that their approach was not a systematic or calculated effort to rescue the nation, destroy feudalism or improve the lot of the peasantry. Rather, I show that the Tây Sơn approach to power was opportunistic and ad hoc. Moreover, it was not, as some historians suggested, revolutionary. The existing institutions of power were not overthrown, but used to legitimize the new Tây Sơn regime.

Chapter Two

Laying Claim to Power: Justifying Rebellion in the Tây Sơn Era

To make sense of the Tây Sơn movement, one needs to begin with an exploration of the ways in which the Tây Sơn leadership thought about their movement and its relationship to existing political structures. This movement did not occur spontaneously, even if it did not initially emerge with a fully formed vision of its ultimate direction. It was led from the outset by three brothers from the village of Tây Sơn, and so we must look at their leadership of the rebellion if we are to comprehend the course of the movement. That is, how did they explain their decision to rise up? How did they justify their actions in the context of then current ideas about how power was held? How did they vary their appeal to different groups in Vietnamese society and at different times? Does one see changes in the ways that political claims were made or articulated? And, how did they make use of existing political structures to further their own objectives?

As the last chapter made clear, some twentieth-century Vietnamese historians looked at the political events of this period and saw a revolution – *cách mạng*. Moreover, many also characterized the Tây Sơn movement as a focused effort to overthrow corrupt political forces, to reunify the country, and to defend the nation against external threats from China and Siam. These scholars conveniently viewed the Tây Sơn years in hindsight and imputed objectives to the leaders based on their accomplishments, rather than considering the ways in which the movement evolved. In this chapter I argue against these convenient interpretations of the politics of the Tây Sơn movement, suggesting that although there was indeed a change in administration, the Tây Sơn upheaval did not constitute a revolution, for there was no fundamental change in political, economic or social structures. Moreover, I will argue that the Tây Sơn movement and the actions of its leaders were not guided by long-term visions, but by short-term expedience, responding to changing circumstances. Finally, I show that the patterns found in the political events of this era were ones

with clear precedents in Vietnamese history, and that the regimes that the Tây Sơn established looked not unlike those they replaced.

Although the Tây Sơn approach to power was not original, or their movement guided by any real political or social vision, it is nonetheless important to examine how the political transitions of the Tây Sơn period took place. By considering the political changes of this era we learn a great deal about how the Tây Sơn leaders understood their time and the ways in which political contestation took place within it. More generally, such an examination provides a detailed look at many of the central elements of contests for power in premodern Vietnamese society. Finally, by exploring the manner in which the Tây Sơn leaders made their claims to power, we can better understand the reactions of various groups in Vietnamese society to the movement, the subject of the rest of this study.

I will show that the Tây Sơn made their claims to power in a variety of interconnected ways. At an abstract level, they made repeated claims to having been called by "heaven" to their task of defending the people and establishing a new regime. They furthermore used language to bolster their claims, repeatedly emphasizing their manifestation of two central Confucian qualities – virtue and righteousness. By lacing their discourse with these terms, they sought to make appeals at both elite and popular levels. They also claimed that an array of supernatural indicators and prophecies served as signs of their divine appointment. At a more concrete level, the Tây Sơn brothers sought to increase their following by specific and calculated economic acts. They seized goods from the wealthy and redistributed them to the impoverished in particular and their followers more generally. They abolished certain unpopular taxes and burned administrative records. They also minted new copper coins, replacing recently introduced and highly unpopular zinc coinage. Finally, even with all of these actions calculated to enhance their prestige and bolster their claims, the Tây Sơn tried directly to connect themselves to existing political structures. Thus, over time they made political or marriage connections first to the Nguyễn rulers, then the Trịnh, then the Lê and finally the Chinese. These political and personal

connections were arguably one of the most important elements of the Tây Sơn leaders' rise to political authority.

This chapter will examine each of these strategies in turn and while I have grouped them in this artificial manner, I do not wish to suggest that the Tây Sơn leaders viewed them in such a compartmentalized way. Rather, these men acted as circumstances dictated in an effort to strengthen their personal prestige and overall authority. Moreover, although these strategies are presented sequentially, I am not arguing that they were developed chronologically. Some of these approaches to legitimacy were used only briefly, while others were maintained throughout the entire Tây Sơn era. Finally, it should be made clear that the perspective being depicted in this chapter is that of the leaders of this movement, and not necessarily that of its followers. That is, the efforts at legitimation are those calculated to be effective by the Tây Sơn brothers and their elite supporters. The impact of these claims and the responses of various elements of society will be addressed in subsequent chapters.

Introduction

In an eighteenth century of enormous economic and social upheaval it is hardly surprising to see the appearance of numerous populist anti-government movements. Of these, the Tây Sơn movement was merely the most dramatic and arguably the most successful. What is perhaps most striking about the Tây Sơn uprising, and most Vietnamese popular movements of this period, is that for all their intensity, none appears to have been driven by a distinct ideological vision.[1] Nor, despite traces of iconoclasm in their actions, can one consider the Tây Sơn to have been a millenarian movement. The Tây Sơn movement was not guided by any sort of religious zeal, nor do its troops appear to have drawn sustenance or bravery from talismanic incantations or religious imagery. Instead, the Tây Sơn movement seems to

[1] I use ideology here in the sense of "belief systems which can be used to mobilize people for actions." Alan Bullock and Stephen Trombley, eds., *The New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*, Third Edition (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1999), 414.

fit with the general trend among central and northern Vietnamese peasant movements, particularly of the eighteenth century, which appear to have been little influenced by religious, much less millennial, fervor. As Hue-Tam Ho Tai has pointed out in her important study of millenarian traditions in Vietnam, "Millenarian sectarianism in Vietnam was largely confined to the South."[2] Tai does not argue that such activity was not possible in the north, but rather that the conditions in the south, and particularly in the far south, were peculiarly well-suited to millenarian activity. Even in the south millennial activity did not appear until the latter half of the nineteenth century. Indeed, while millennial movements both in Việt Nam and China were typically inspired by Buddhist ideologies of various types, the Tây Sơn were, if anything, disdainful of Buddhism, or at least its temporal manifestations.

The Tây Sơn uprising has, consequently, attracted attention from Vietnamese scholars not only for what it was, but for what it was not – namely a religious war. Nguyễn Khắc Đạm, in his 1965 article "Tại Sao Các Cuộc Khởi Nghĩa Nông Dân ở Việt-Nam Ít Có Màu Sắc Tôn Giáo?" (Why do Righteous Peasant Uprisings in Việt Nam Seldom Have Religious Elements?) argued that while there had been some popular movements led by religious figures, generally speaking Vietnamese peasant movements were neither guided by religious men nor directed against religious structures. At times, as in the Tây Sơn period, efforts were made to curtail the power of religious institutions, particularly Buddhism, but unlike European peasants challenging the Catholic Church, Vietnamese peasants saw no need to attack their religious structures to gain economic relief.[3] Although Đặm glosses over what appear to have been more complicated tensions between Buddhist institutions and various popular uprisings of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it does appear that anti-Buddhist attacks, of the Tây Sơn period for example, were incidental to, rather than central components of, the rebel outlook.

[2] Hue-tam Ho Tai, *Millenarianism and Peasant Politics in Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 5.

[3] Nguyễn Khắc Đạm, "Tại Sao Các Cuộc Khởi Nghĩa Nông Dân ởViệt-Nam Ít Có Màu Sắc Tôn Giáo?" (Why do Righteous Peasant Uprisings in Việt Nam Seldom Have Religious Elements?) *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử* 81 (12/65): 8-10.

Before going any further, I should note that my references to "religion" here are to institutionalized religion rather than to folk religion. Peasant thoughtworlds are of course suffused with elements of what is considered folk religion – beliefs difficult to separate from everyday ritual and social practices. Thus I do not deny the presence of such a dimension in the Tây Sơn period, and will make clear that popular beliefs in the supernatural were an important element, particularly during the early period of the Tây Sơn movement. At the same time, however, I make the point that elements of more institutionalized religious structures (however reinterpreted), which were strong elements in many other popular uprisings in East and Southeast Asia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, were almost entirely absent in the Tây Sơn movement. Indeed, in terms of its lack of religious emphasis the Tây Sơn movement stands in strong contrast to numerous popular uprisings in Southeast Asia, both on the mainland and in the islands, as some illustrations from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries will make clear.

In Thailand most of the notable peasant uprisings during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries appear to have been of a religious nature, most frequently involving heterodox strains of Buddhism that focused on millenarianism.[4] In other instances in Thailand, popular risings from the late seventeenth to the late nineteenth centuries were centered on and led by holy men said to possess extraordinary powers.[5] In Burma too, one can point to a tradition of religiously guided popular uprisings. The uprising of Smin Dhaw who seized Pegu in the 1740s apparently drew on a millennial tradition and prophecies that "foretold the imminent appearance of a righteous king who would restore the religion and radically improve the fortunes of the long-suffering people of the south."[6] Similar patterns can also be found in the island region. The uprising of Raden Trunajaya in East Java in the second half of the seventeenth century, although based on concrete political aspirations, also had a very

[4] Shigeharu Tanabe, "Ideological Practice in Peasant Rebellion: Siam at the Turn of the Twentieth Century," in *History and Peasant Consciousness in Southeast Asia*, ed. Andrew Turton and Shigeharu Tanabe (Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 1984), 75-110.

[5] Chatthip Nartsupha, "The Ideology of Holy Men Revolts in North East Thailand," in ibid., 111-134.

[6] Victor Lieberman, *Burmese Administrative Cycles* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 218.

prominent Muslim and anti-Christian dimension.[7] Later, the revolt of Dipanagara in the 1820s was led by a Muslim religious who had made claims to mystical powers and revelations.[8] In the Philippines one also finds numerous anti-colonial movements inspired by religion. In 1841 there was the uprising of Apolinario de la Cruz, a charismatic Catholic priest, who gathered a following based on religious appeals.[9] Later, in the 1890s Andres Bonifacio's Katipunan Movement drew heavily on popular religious beliefs and Christian imagery.

Looking to the north, one finds that the Tây Sơn also differed from the numerous Chinese peasant uprisings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which were, almost without exception, strongly infused with religious elements. The most prominent of these uprisings, the White Lotus, the Taiping, and the Boxers, all had important religious dimensions. The White Lotus movement, reaching its zenith in the mid-1790s and early 1800s, and thus contemporary to the Tây Sơn, represented a salvationist Buddhist sect.[10] In the middle of the nineteenth century, the Taiping movement, which provoked one of the bloodiest civil wars ever fought, was guided by a particular and localized reinterpretation of Christian doctrines including elements of utopianism. And finally, in the last year of the nineteenth century, the Boxer uprising, with its quasi-religious mysticism, attacked Christian missionaries and foreigners generally. Each of these movements had at its core a particular religious element that drove the logic of its leaders and inspired the enthusiasm of its followers.

The only major Chinese popular uprising of this period that was manifestly not religious in character was the Nian rebellion that lasted for nearly half a century into the 1860s. This rebellion, the origins of which date to the 1790s, may be the best

[7] M.C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia Since c. 1300* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 73-80.

[8] See P.B.R. Carey, "The Origins of the Java War," *The English Historical Review*, vol. 91, no. 358 (Jan. 1976), 52-87.

[9] David Steinberg, *The Philippines: A Singular and Plural Place*, 3rd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), 82.

[10] On the White Lotus see Susan Naquin, *Millenarian Rebellion in China: The Eight Trigrams Uprising of 1813* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

Chinese analog to the Tây Sơn, for as Jonathan Spence has described them, "the Nian had no clear-cut religious affiliation, political ideology, strategic goals or unified leadership."[11] In a more detailed study, Elizabeth Perry demonstrated that the movement was driven by a self-aware pragmatism centered on defense against economic and ecological threats to local society.[12] Thus Perry noted, "The origins of the uprising lie not in anti-Manchu millenarianism, but rather in a highly pragmatic effort by vast numbers of Huai-pei residents to seize and sustain a livelihood."[13] As will become clear later, these descriptions of the Nian echo, to some extent, the origins and methods of the Tây Sơn movement.

Researchers who have made explicit comparisons between the Tây Sơn and their northern counterparts, have typically compared the Tây Sơn to the Taiping Rebellion, its most obvious Chinese parallel in terms of scope. Alexander Woodside, for instance, has observed that unlike the Taiping rebellion, which was guided by a form of religious utopianism, "the Tay-sons may have been populists, but they certainly were not utopians; they lacked a religious ideology, and their government, with its famous 'identity cards' system, rested essentially on principles of draconian but pragmatic military control." Yet, despite these differences, Woodside noted that the Tây Sơn had some things in common with their later Chinese counterparts:

> . . . both the Tay-sons in Vietnam and the Taipings in China provided examples of organized communities which had begun to break down the customary barriers prevailing in their two societies which separated the elite from the peasantry. There was a remarkable parallel between the two movements, for example in their work of struggling to popularize the remote upper class language of politics. The Taiping "heavenly king" issued an edict in 1861 warning against employment in documents of "frivolous literature and artful language," which the masses could not understand; and the ambitious Taiping alteration of Chinese written characters, which constituted a dramatic change in the Chinese written script, sometimes (but not always) was occasioned by a desire to use colloquialisms familiar to

[11] Jonathan Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: W. W. Norton), 184.
[12] Elizabeth J. Perry, *Rebels and Revolutionaries in North China, 1845-1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1980), 96-151.
[13] ibid., 97.

> peasants. The Tay-son Quang-trung Emperor, for his part, ordered his followers to translate all the Chinese Classics into Nom, the idiomatic and colloquial Vietnamese writing script, and established special facilities for this purpose.[14]

From this it is clear that although the Tây Sơn might not have shared the Taiping religious orientation, they shared a common approach to making linkages between the political elites and their subject populations. One Vietnamese historian has cited both movements' peasant bases and their emergence in response to oppressive feudal political regimes and the introduction of aspects of foreign capitalism as shared traits.[15]

These commonalities aside, the lack of a strong religious or other ideological basis for the Tây Sơn movement makes it more difficult to understand fully the logic that drove the movement's leaders and motivated its followers. We have no collection of political treatises and religious tracts as one finds with the Taiping. There were no swirling end of the world predictions as were associated with such movements as the White Lotus. There were apparently no mystical incantations or secret oaths such as were prominent elements of the Boxer Uprising. Indeed, if anything the Tây Sơn were highly critical of even popular Buddhism. According to one folk account the movement's most gifted leader, Nguyễn Huệ is said to have passed through Nghệ An in 1786 where a local mountain peak was named for the Guanyin Đại Tuệ. Informed of the name and a nearby shrine to the deity, Huệ responded: "This land is the land of the people, and no Buddhist spirit can make the people successful in battle. From now on this mountain should not bear the name Đại Tuệ, because our victory over the rebels was not through reliance on the Buddha, but on the strength of the people of

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[14] Alexander Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1976), 244.

[15] Trần Huy Liệu, "Đánh Gia Cuộc Cách Mạng Tây-Sơn và Vai Trò Lịch Sử cuả Nguyễn Huệ" (Evaluating the Tây Sơn Revolution and the Historical Role of Nguyễn Huệ). *Văn Sử Địa*, No. 14, (2/56): 41. The chief difference the author noted was that while the leadership of the Taiping emerged from a semi-educated class of society, the Tây Sơn movement was more fundamentally organized by peasants. No mention was made of religious elements in either movement.

the one hundred surnames."[16] This and similar anecdotes suggest that the Tây Sơn rejected Buddhism as a source of power for their movement or its supporters.

Since the Tây Sơn did not attempt to unite the peasantry through a distinct and clearly articulated ideology or through promises of a unifying spiritual endeavor, its leaders had to establish their credibility on different grounds. If it was not religious ideology that drove the Tây Sơn, what was it that animated the movement? At a very basic level, the movement drew energy from its dynamic leaders, their early successes against a divided state with little in the way of an effective military, and a remarkable ability to mobilize armies. Rather than an ideologically guided uprising, the Tây Sơn appears to have been a movement driven both by the personal objectives of its leadership (or their advisors), and the circumstances in which they found themselves. Consequently, the Tây Sơn leaders can best be described as opportunists rather than as visionaries. This is not to argue that the Tây Sơn did not undertake certain projects with specific objectives, but rather that their movement's goals were in constant flux and without a single, defining element. On the whole, the manner in which the Tây Sơn made their political challenge mimics that which Albert Feuerwerker has described for those nineteenth century Chinese peasant movements that were chiefly directed against exploitation and economic deprivation:

> [The peasant ideological response] seems rather to have been a combination of 1) an attack by the rebel leadership – not usually simple peasants – on official and landlord deviations from the traditional Confucian norms of benevolence toward the peasantry and their protection from exploitation by the elite; 2) opposition to heavy state exactions on the commercial (including smuggling) or real estate interests of alienated members of the lower elite; and 3) effective propaganda by rebel chieftains seeking to augment the size of their forces. Rather than being revolutionary attacks on the protective integuments, these populist slogans and programs were often the products of shared social values.[17]

Feurwerker's formula appears to fit the Tây Sơn case quite neatly. The Tây Sơn

[16] *Những Mẩu Chuyện về Tây Sơn* (Some Tales about the Tây Sơn) (Qui Nhơn: Ty Văn Hóa Và Thông Tin Nghĩa Bình, 1979), 37-39.

[17] Albert Feuerwerker, *Rebellion in Nineteenth Century China* (Ann Arbor: Center for China Studies, 1975) Michigan Papers in Chinese Studies, No. 21, 58-59

leaders were more than simple peasants, their concerns did include state pressures on commercial enterprises, and they did make extensive and effective use of propaganda that centered on populist slogans and programs. And, since the Tây Sơn did not articulate a millennial vision to drive their movement, we must understand their rise to power and, more concretely, their claims to power, in more mundane terms as suggested by Feurwerker's general description. To comprehend the manner of the Tây Sơn claim to power, we must first consider the concept of political legitimacy in traditional Việt Nam, and then place this into the context of political developments of the eighteenth century, one of the most complex periods in Việt Nam's long history.

Political Legitimacy in Traditional Việt Nam

Among the central questions in the Tây Sơn rise to power was that of political legitimacy. Despite Việt Nam's long history of dynastic succession, the question of political legitimacy has never been without its ambiguities. Although there had been periods of tranquil and orderly succession with power being passed on to a predesignated heir, at numerous other times there had been challenges to such a succession, either through subterfuge or open violence. There had also been instances of heirs being changed or political structures emerging that effectively (if unofficially) divided power between a sitting Emperor and noble individuals or clans. Keith Taylor, in an important study of political legitimacy in the eleventh century, observed that authority and legitimacy in this early post-independence period were closely linked to the particular attributes of "virtuous kings." He also pointed out that the legitimacy of the Lý dynasty in this period was very much a function of what he calls "Lý dynasty religion" suggesting an important connection between claims to authority and ruler's connections to the many spirits of the land.[18] Moreover, as O.W. Wolters has pointed out, as late as the twelfth century, the Vietnamese did not have a fixed system of primogeniture, or indeed any strict practices with regard to royal

[18] Keith Taylor, "Authority and Legitimacy in 11th Century Vietnam," in *Southeast Asia in the 9th to 14th Centuries*, ed. David G. Marr and A.C. Milner (Singapore: ISEAS, 1986), 139-176.

succession at all. Akin to other Southeast Asian states, Vietnamese rulers of this period were heroic leaders who forged alliances through marriage and loyalty oaths.[19] Although the Trần dynasty in the thirteenth century introduced a system of formal succession in an effort to fend off other challengers, this did not end the complex competitions for power.

Ralph Smith has suggested that Việt Nam had historically seen cycles in which Confucian-inspired regimes alternated with ones that drew their political strength, and indeed legitimacy, from other sources.[20] In the late fourteenth century, Hồ Qúy Lý married into the ruling Trần family, and was then able to seize the throne from that vantage point. Overthrown by a Chinese army, the Hồ family was supplanted by the Lê clan, which rallied a successful resistance in the first decades of the fifteenth century. The high point of Confucian legitimacy was then seen during the Hồng Đức reign of the fifth Lê Emperor, Lê Thánh Tông, from 1470-1499. In the early sixteenth century, the Mạc family seized the throne in Thăng Long, which they held for much of that century, while the Lê struggled to survive with the assistance of members of the Trịnh and Nguyễn clans. Although the Mạc, under their found Mạc Đăng Dung, briefly attempted a return to the Hồng Đức standards, this did not endure, and there soon followed an extended period in which military prowess, connections and families were the dominant political forces, while Confucianism and attempts at legitimation in terms of that doctrine had receded.

Both in the north and south, one saw regimes that looked to other sources of legitimacy, including sponsorship of Buddhism. The south continued in this distinctly un-Confucian direction, emphasizing military connections and Buddhist affiliations directly until the Tây Sơn period.[21] In the north, there were periods in

[19] O.W. Wolters, "Le Van Huu's Treatment of Ly Thanh Ton's Reign (1127-1137)," in *Southeast Asian History and Historiography*, ed. C.D. Cowan and O.W. Wolters (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1976), 203-226.

[20] Ralph Smith, "Cycles of Confucianization in Vietnam," in *Aspects of Vietnamese History*, ed. Walter F. Vella (Honolulu, Hawaii: University Press of Hawaii, 1973), 19..

[21] For more on this see for example Nola Cooke, "Regionalism and the Nature of Nguyễn Rule in Seventeenth-Century Dang Trong (Cochinchina), *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 29, 1. (March 1998): 122-161.

which Confucianism was again allowed to flourish, and thus to serve as a legitimizing force, particularly during the reign of Trịnh Trạc (1657-1682). By the eighteenth century, however, Confucianism was once again in decline, and during the reign of Trịnh Giang (1729-1740) it was forbidden to import Confucian texts from China, while Buddhist texts were being actively imported, and passing grades in the Confucian examinations were available for purchase. Moreover, throughout the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Nguyễn and Trịnh families exercised ultimate political authority in separate regions of the country, both pledging loyalty to an Emperor whose authority existed in theory alone. Việt Nam had clearly, by the advent of the Tây Sơn, seen numerous challenges to the notions of fixed political legitimacy and orderly succession and had, moreover, encountered constantly shifting ideas about where political legitimacy stemmed from.[22] Thus, the eighteenth-century political landscape had a great deal to do with competing claims for power. With a long and well-known history of challenges to orthodox notions of political legitimacy and orderly imperial succession, the Vietnamese landscape remained open for new claimants to political authority, particularly in times of turmoil.

Those who wanted to challenge for political supremacy at such moments had to articulate their claims to power in a variety of ways. In the first place, of course, political power can most readily be claimed by those with the strongest armies. And indeed, this approach to claiming power had a good deal of credibility in Việt Nam in the premodern era, reflecting not least the turbulence of past dynastic transitions. The idea that political realities might not reflect idealized political structures was exemplified in the popular saying that "those who have power become kings, and those who do not become rebels." More specifically, during the Tây Sơn period this sentiment was articulated by the movement's talented general, Ngô Văn Sở. In a discussion with the Tây Sơn leader, Nguyễn Huệ, in 1788, Sở observed that "From

[22] For an important study of the ways in which orthodoxy of succession was addressed in the context of Vietnamese historiography, see John K. Whitmore, "Chung-hsing and Cheng-t'ung in Texts of and on Sixteenth-Century Việt Nam," in *Essays into Vietnamese Pasts*, ed. K.W. Taylor and John K. Whitmore (Ithaca: Cornell University SEAP, 1995), 116-136.

ancient times until the present, that under heaven [ie. the kingdom] has not been the private possession of a particular family; if one could take it then they went ahead and did so."[23]

The idea that physical power justified political control worked at some elemental level, but it was clearly not satisfying either to claimants to that power or to those whom they would rule. Ideally, those who seized power by force would seek to find a way to justify their actions and to legitimize their authority in a more substantive and enduring way. In an important study of the issue of legitimacy and legitimation in the Chinese context, Hok-lam Chan (drawing on a model set forth by Jeremy Adams) described five elements of the typical legitimation process. These are: procedural legitimation – the process by which legitimacy is substantiated politically; coercive legitimation – the use of physical pressure to force cooperation with a new regime; semantic legitimation – the use of ritual, language and portents to claim power; scholastic legitimation – an ideological approach, relying on religious, intellectual and political traditions to support a new ruler; and finally, popular legitimation – seeking practical means by which to produce popular support, or at least acquiescence to a new ruler.[24] The idea of "coercive legitimation" reflected in the notion that the party with the strongest force could simply seize power, is tempered by, as Chan notes, the fact that "it cannot be applied on a large scale nor can it endure without justification." Thus, he observed, "many rulers have often resorted to other dimensions of legitimation to clothe their coercive devices and substantiate their claims to legitimate authority."[25] As a contemporary European observer noted of the Tây Sơn leaders:

> [The Tây Sơn] on their part, left no measures untried, nor suffered any occasion to pass by, which might be the means of acquiring them popularity. The merchant gave sumptuous entertainments, fetes and fire-works; the general cajoled the army; and the priest prevailed on the clergy to announce

[23] *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện*, vol. 2, 512.
[24] Hok-lam Chan, *Legitimation in Imperial China: Discussions Under the Jurchen-Chin Dynasty (1115-1234)* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1984), 16-17.
[25] ibid., 17.

> to the careless multitude the decree of *Tien*, which had ordained these three worthies to be their future rulers.[26]

As the rest of this chapter will make clear, the Tây Sơn combined many elements of the legitimation process, responding to circumstances, their audience and their political needs. This examination will reveal much about how and why they were so successful. The manner in which the Tây Sơn leadership lay claim to power can be categorized broadly into three areas: abstract claims, concrete social and economic claims, and finally political claims. This is not to suggest that the participants in any way conceptualized their actions in this artificially divided way. They responded to their own needs for legitimization as they saw them and as these changed over time. Examining the course of the Tây Sơn movement through these different categories is, however, a useful means by which to gain a better understanding of how the movement emerged and evolved, and of the nature of Vietnamese society at this time. This discussion will also make clear some of the chief legitimating devices available to claimants to political authority in traditional Viet Nam. Before undertaking this examination, I will first turn to a more detailed discussion of the circumstances that defined the political landscape as the Tây Sơn rose up.

Political Disorder and Division

The Tây Sơn rose up in a region then known as Đăng Trong (the Inner Region), comprising what is today the southern half of Việt Nam. They rose up not against an imperial house, but against a seignorial family, the Nguyễn, who were masters of that part of Đại Việt, while maintaining at least a claimed allegiance to the sitting Lê Emperor in Thăng Long. To the north of Nguyễn territory lay the region frequently referred to as Đăng Ngoài (the Outer Region), centered on the Red River Delta and running from the Chinese border south to the Linh Giang River. This territory was dominated by another ruling family, the Trịnh, which exercised direct

[26] John Barrow, *A Voyage to Cochinchina in the years 1792 and 1793* (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1806; reprint, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1975), 251.

political control over the Lê Emperor in the traditional capitol. Thus the Tây Sơn uprising broke out during a period in which there already existed an underlying political tension between competing rulers in the country. The Tây Sơn uprising, whatever else it did, contributed to a renewal of the ongoing and unresolved contest for political supremacy between these two noble families.

The rift that developed between the Trịnh and Nguyễn families dates to the mid-sixteenth century when both families were involved in defending the Lê court against an attempt by the Mặc family to seize the throne. Political disputes drove the two families apart, and a son of the Nguyễn, Nguyễn Hòang, relocated to the south, commencing a long process by which the Nguyễn family came to control the southern regions.[27] Eventually, the feud with the Trịnh family erupted into a lengthy but inconclusive war lasting from 1627 to 1672. In the latter year a *de facto* agreement emerged to divide the territories at the Linh Giang River (which runs through the north of present-day Quảng Trị Province) and this brought with it an end to the fighting and an uneasy truce.

Over time, the Nguyễn began to assume the trappings of a more autonomous political entity. In 1702, the Nguyễn Chúa sent a letter to the Chinese, via Siamese middlemen, requesting separate recognition from the Qing court as a Chinese vassal. The Chinese, reasoning that there was still an Emperor on the throne in Thăng Long, refused to accept the letter. Despite the Chinese rejection, the diplomatic overture by the Nguyễn suggests a polity attempting to redefine itself. And indeed, over the course of the eighteenth century, the Nguyễn lords continued slowly to edge toward greater autonomy, most notably through changes in nomenclature referring to their own political positions, the designation for their capital city, and the titles used for their officials.[28]

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[27] A very interesting analysis of the events leading to this split and the subsequent development of the southern polity can be found in Keith Taylor, "Nguyễn Hoàng and the Beginnings of Vietnam's Southward Expansion," in *Southeast Asia in the Early Modern Era*, ed Anthony Reid (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 42-65.

[28] A thorough discussion of this sequence of events is found in Maurice Durand, *Tây Sơn*, unpublished typescript, 11-24, Manuscripts Division, Yale University Library, New Haven, CT.

Yet throughout this period as both the Trịnh and Nguyễn established their own political power, neither attempted formally to supplant the sitting Lê Emperor. The Trịnh had initially chosen to retain the weakened Lê Emperor, rather than establish themselves as new dynasts, largely because of continuing popular sentiment for the Lê. The Lê were still widely respected and remembered for their heroic resistance to, and eventual defeat of, a Chinese attempt to recolonize Việt Nam in the early fifteenth century and for the period of prosperity that followed. This was a convenient arrangement for the Trịnh who were able to wield political and economic power without the risks inherent in displacing the Lê. The power of the Trịnh helped to stabilize the Lê throne, and the two developed a symbiotic relationship that scholars of this period recognized. As a popular saying at the time noted, "The Lê will survive as long as the Trịnh survive. The Lê will be lost if the Trịnh disappear."[29] With the Lê still in place, but the Trịnh holding the strings of power, there was not a single or fixed point of political reference in the north, and in turn, political loyalties among northern scholar-elites were also divided to some degree. Some devotedly served at the Lê court, while most others more pragmatically offered their loyalty to the Trịnh family. Although there was clearly a division here, it should be emphasized that most scholars who served the Trịnh would not have supported their supplanting the Lê as Imperial rulers. Indeed, even those who served the Trịnh would probably have declared a formal loyalty to the Lê regime as the Trịnh rulers themselves did.

Even as the Trịnh claimed to be serving the Lê, no one was deceived by this charade and latent loyalty to the Lê dynasty lingered well into the eighteenth century, ready to be drawn upon by various challengers to the seignorial family. The numerous rebellions that sprang up in the north during the eighteenth century played on the division between Trịnh and Lê and drew on popular sentiment toward the Lê in their propaganda. In particular, the popular memory of the golden age of the early Lê served as a powerful contrast to the economic hardship affecting much of the population,

[29] *Liệt Truyện Dã Sử*, ms. VHb. 263, 106b. Viện Hán Nôm, Hà Nội.

blame for which was placed on the Trịnh.[30] Two of the major uprisings of this period, including one by a renegade Lê prince, Lê Duy Mật, used the slogan, "Restore the Lê, destroy the Trịnh." Some of these rebellions were able to attract the support of scholar-officials, including most notably, Phạm Công Thế, a *tiến sĩ* of the 1727 examinations and high-ranking official who joined Lê Duy Mật. When Thế was captured in 1738 his interrogators noted: "You are a person in the ranks of the examination laureates, why have you gone to follow this traitorous group?" To this he replied: "High positions have not been clearly expressed for a long time now, so how are we any longer to distinguish between consent and rebellion?"[31] Later in that century, this sentiment was echoed by the noted literatus Phạm Đình Hổ, who in his *Vũ Trung Tùy Bút* wrote:

> The generation is slipping into bad habits, the way of power is every day sliding lower. [The notion of] fame is in disorder and one no longer knows what is right and what is wrong.[32]

And yet, despite the chaos and disorder that began to emerge in the beginning of the eighteenth century one cannot argue that this century was one of inexorable political decline and disintegration marking the inevitable end of a dynastic cycle. In fact, one saw in both north and south, in the middle and even part of the second half of the eighteenth century, periods of strong, centralized rule. At the beginning of the eighteenth century peace continued to hold between the Trịnh and Nguyễn, even as each regime experienced often dramatic internal disorder during much of the ensuing century. The north in particular became the site of widespread and long-lasting

[30] See for example, the Nôm proclamation by Lê Duy Mật recalling the contributions of the Lê and detailing the sins of the Trịnh, "Tài Liệu Tham Khảo: Hịch của Lê Duy Mật kể tội họ Trịnh," 1968. (Research Documents: The Edict of Lê Duy Mật Telling of the Crimes of the Trịnh) *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử* 108 (1968): 58-59.

[31] Quốc Sử Quán Triều Nguyễn, *Khâm Định Việt Sử Thông Giám Cương Mục* (The Imperially Ordered Mirror and Commentary on the History of the Việt) (2 volumes), trans. Hoa Bằng, Phạm Trọng Điềm, and Trần Văn Giáp. (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Giáo Dục, 1998), vol. 2, 501. (Hereafter *Cương Mục*)

[32] Cited in Nguyễn Văn Hoàn, "Phong Trào Khởi Nghĩa Nông Dân và Văn Học Việt Nam Thế Kỷ XVIII và Nửa Đầu Thế Kỷ XIX" (Righteous uprising peasant movements and Vietnamese literature of the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries), *Tạp Chí Văn Học* No. 4 (1973): 26.

peasant unrest in response to natural disasters, indifferent or harsh leadership, and a number of profound economic problems. While it might be convenient to place blame for these crises and the dramatic Tây Sơn uprising on ruling houses in a state of gradual and irreversible decline, that was not the case.

In the south, the middle of the eighteenth century was one of geographic expansion and an increasingly assertive and independence-minded court headed by the strong, ably-assisted Chúa, Nguyễn Phúc Khoat (r. 1738-1765).[33] His reign marked a period of territorial growth and extensive diplomatic contacts with the Siamese and Khmers.[34] Similarly in the north, while there had been an enormous amount of popular unrest in the early decades of the eighteenth century in response to the harsh rule of Trịnh Giang (r. 1729-1740), the situation improved slowly under the rule of his successors. Both Trịnh Doanh (r. 1740-1767)[35] and Trịnh Sâm (r. 1767-1782)[36] made considerable efforts to restore order. They succeeded in putting down most of the uprisings and began to address some of the underlying issues of peasant discontent, which were primarily economic ones related to the price of rice, taxation and landholdings. Indeed, as the noted French historian of Việt Nam, Charles Maybon wrote:

> [The southern Chúas] Ming Vương [r. 1725-1738] and Võ Vương [r. 1738-1765] had been excellent administrators, and energetic and able kings, if not in the ranks of grand sovereigns; at the northern court, further removed from European influences, Trịnh Cương, his two sons and his youngest son Trịnh Sâm, had governed the country with intelligence . . . .[37]

[33] Also known as Ming Vương.

[34] For details on Khóat's rule see Lê Quý Đôn. *Lê Quý Đôn Toàn Tập* (The Collected Works of Lê Quý Đôn). ed. Mai Ngọc Mai. Vol. 1, *Phủ Biên Tạp Lục* (The Frontier Chronicles). (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1977), 66-70; Nguyễn Q. Thắng and Nguyễn Bà Thế, *Từ Điện Nhân Vật Lịch Sử Việt Nam* (Dictionary of Vietnamese Historical Figures) (TP Hồ Chí Minh: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Hóa, 1993), 598.

[35] For a good description of the rule of Trịnh Doanh see Lê Thành Khôi, *Histoire du Viet Nam, des origines à 1858* (Paris: Sudestasie, 1992), 307-309.

[36] For a brief survey of Trịnh Sâm's accomplishments, see Phan Huy Chú. *Lịch Triều Hiến Chương Loại Chí* 歷朝憲章類誌 (Monographs of the Institutions of the Dynasties) (Sài Gòn: Bộ Văn Hóa Giáo Dục và Thanh Niên Xuất Bản, 1973) (Tập II (Thượng)), 64.

[37] Charles Maybon, *Histoire Modern du Pays D'Annam, 1592-1802* (Paris: Plon-Nourrit et Cie, 1919), 181.

There is little question that these men were capable and relatively strong rulers, prepared to address the troubles of their respective states. The problems in each region began to emerge when these capable rulers each died, precipitating political crises in both north and south.

On the death of Nguyễn Phúc Khoát in 1765, court intrigues instigated by an ambitious official and royal confidant, Trương Phúc Loan, led to the enthronement of a minor son, Nguyễn Phúc Thuần, in the place of the older presumptive heir.[38] Court factions grew up in support of either the sitting Chúa or the excluded brother, creating divisions that the Tây Sơn readily exploited in the early 1770s. In the north the political crisis began in 1780, as Trịnh Sâm's declining health led the ambitious crown prince, Trịnh Khải (sometimes referred to as Trịnh Tông) to plot a coup. The plan was discovered and a new heir – Trịnh Cán, the younger son of a beloved concubine, was named in his place. On the death of Trịnh Sâm in 1782, the newly named heir was overthrown in a palace coup by his deposed elder brother backed by rebellious military forces, and northern society was plunged into chaos. In 1786, relying on the assistance of a vengeful exile from these political intrigues and a number of other important intellectuals who had been forced to flee the capitol in the political turmoil, the Tây Sơn extended their political authority to the north.

Clearly there was a marked shift from the middle of the eighteenth century, when strong leaders controlled the seats of power, to the mid-1760s (in the south) and the early 1780s (in the north) when political authority was suddenly far less clearly defined. The succession crises, first in the south in the mid-1760s, and then in the north in the early 1780s, each created opportunities that the Tây Sơn were quick to seize. In both regions those who claimed political power did so on grounds of questionable (and openly questioned) legitimacy. Thus, the Tây Sơn made their own bid for power during a period in which political leaders in neither north nor south

[38] *Phủ Biên Tạp Lục* (1977), 70, claims that Trương Phúc Loan altered the deceased ruler's will to engineer the change in succession. For a useful discussion of Loan based on European sources and considerably more sympathetic to the regent than the Vietnamese sources see L. Cadière, "Quelques Figures de la Cour De Vo-Vuong," *Bulletin des Amis de Vieux Huế* 5 (1918): 253-271.

enjoyed undivided support or loyalty. As Susan Naquin has observed of a similar situation in early nineteenth-century China:

> Any disruption of normal life in and of itself encouraged people to reassess their habits and values; when combined with the presence of an openly advocated alternative to the status quo, such dislocations multiplied and further unraveled the fabric of normal life.[39]

In this volatile setting claims to authority were derived in many different ways and from various sources, which made it comparatively easier for the Tây Sơn to advance their own political claims and for people to justify setting aside existing allegiances to support the Tây Sơn. Moreover, as the Tây Sơn wars heated up, the already fluid situation became even more so, particularly in the south where numerous challengers for political and military authority were emerging. A Spanish missionary eyewitness to the events of the mid-1770s, noted the constant ebb and flow of battles between various armies moving across the far southern landscape: the Tây Sơn, the Đông Sơn, the ethnic Chinese generals (whom the writer calls "Sangleyes"), the Cochinchinese (armies of the Nguyễn) and the Cambodians.[40]

This had not changed appreciably by the 1780s, for as Li Tana has written of the fluidity of this situation:

> At no time was this more apparent than in the 1780s, when the collapse of Nguyễn power and the failure of the Tây Sơn to replace it threw the area wide open to the play of forces and interests that had been restrained, at least in part by the previous regime. The 1786 assessment of the local situation by Nguyễn Nhạc, one of the principle Tây Sơn leaders, summarized it succinctly: 'There are six [political] forces competing with each other in Đồng Nai [Mekong Delta]: the Khmer, Siam, Hà Tiên, the female [Cham] leader [Thị Hỏa], and the Chinese Li [Tài].'[41]

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[39] Susan Naquin, *Millenarian Rebellion in China: The Eight Trigrams Uprising of 1813* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 199.

[40] Pérez, P. Lorenzo, "La Révolte et la guerre des Tayson d'après les Franciscains Espagnols de Cochinchine." Translated by M. Villa. *Bulletin de la Société des Etudes Indochinoises*, XII, no.3-4 (1940): 85-86.

[41] Li Tana. *Nguyễn Cochinchina: Southern Vietnam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 1998), 144. She notes that the sixth force was probably that of Nhạc himself. She cites Lê Đản, *Nam Hà Tiệp Lục* for the Nhạc quote.

The dating of this quote by Nhạc to 1786 is somewhat problematic as Li Tài was already dead by 1777 and indications are that the Cham princess was herself dead by this time.[42] Nonetheless, the general picture is quite accurate, reflecting a very high degree of political uncertainty and military volatility. The confusion and competition in this southern region reflected not only the conflict stirred up by the Tây Sơn, but also the overlapping and preexisting political interests active in this region. When the Nguyễn court had arrived in the far south as political refugees, they entered a territory still not fully within their political sphere. The fluid and somewhat amorphous border between Khmer and Nguyễn territory contributed to this, as did the fact that Hà Tiên in the far south functioned essentially as a separate princedom controlled by the Mặc family. The Tây Sơn were merely one among many competing for power in this area.

All this should make clear that political allegiances were highly contingent in this period, in the north and particularly in the south. Individuals threw their lot in with different sides based on many different calculations. Two brief examples will demonstrate this, though a more detailed study of shifting political loyalties will appear in Chapter Five. The first example is the case of Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh (? – 1787) a prominent northern military official who had participated in the Trịnh campaigns to the south in the 1770s as a protege of the commanding general, Hoàng Ngũ Phúc (1713-1776). In the aftermath of the 1782 palace coup in Thăng Long, Chỉnh elected to flee to the south to throw his lot in with the Tây Sơn. Chỉnh's case demonstrates that those who joined the Tây Sơn did not always do so because they supported the idea of a new political or social order. Chỉnh almost certainly joined the Tây Sơn chiefly as a means to avenge himself against political factions that had made his situation in the north untenable. Thus, for Chỉnh the Tây Sơn merely represented a vehicle for his own political objectives including his later attempt to establish

[42] re. Li Tài, see Tạ Chí Đại Trường. *Lịch Sử Nội Chiến ở Việt Nam Từ 1771 đến 1802* (History of the Civil War in Việt Nam from 1771 to 1802) (Sài Gòn: Văn Sử Học, 1973), 95. On the death of Thị Hỏa see Quốc Sử Quán Triều Nguyễn, *Đại Nam Chính Biên Liệt Truyện* (The Principle Record of the Ranked Tales of Đại Nam) (4 volumes), trans. Đỗ Mộng Khương and others. (Huế: Nhà Xuất Bản Thuận Hóa, 1993), vol. 2, 492. The text notes that she was killed by Tống Phúc Hợp, who himself apparently died in 1776, meaning that the princess must have been killed prior to that date.

himself as a powerbroker in the north. As a result, he came under widespread criticism from twentieth-century Vietnamese historians for having betrayed the Tây Sơn cause. Yet, all indications are that his commitment to this cause was never more than a highly pragmatic and personal one.

A second example is that of Trần Xuân Trạch, from the district of Giao Thủy, in the northern province of Nam Định. According to the *Đại Nam Nhất Thống Chí*, "he was strong and had talents in fighting and calculating battle strategies." In the year *kỷ hợi* (1779), he traveled with his brothers, Xuân Hiệp and Xuân Cách, by sea to Gia Định to join the Nguyễn forces. Trạch was appointed as a *chưởng cơ* [captain], and "he oversaw matters relating to troops and peoples in Phiên Trấn . . ."[43] Trạch's case is particularly significant because it constituted a defection to the Nguyễn even while the Trịnh-Lê regime remained in effective, unchallenged control of the north.

The Trần brothers may well be classified as mere mercenaries, but nonetheless their decision to join the Nguyễn suggests the various political possibilities that lay open to the disillusioned – be they Đàng Ngoài military elites or Đàng Trong tillers of the soil. Moreover, it should be noted that this range of political possibilities was relatively new after 1774 with the Trịnh invasion of the south, for the previous one hundred years had seen a situation of limited (to virtually nonexistent) contact between the two halves of the country. It was in the context of this political fluidity that the Tây Sơn emerged to make their own claims to political authority. Indeed, the situation was not unlike that described by Susan Naquin during the Eight Trigrams rebellion in early nineteenth-century China:

> The appearance of the armed and determined Eight Trigrams rebels accompanied and created disorder, and it was in the rebels' interest to shatter the status quo and so make possible a realignment of loyalties. The fact of this ongoing rebellion, an alternative to and in open defiance of the government, created a tension that forced

[43] Quốc Sử Quán Triều Nguyễn. *Đại Nam Nhất Thống Chí* (The Unification Records of Đại Nam). ed. Đào Duy Anh, trans. Phạm Trọng Điềm (Huế: Nhà Xuất Bản Thuận Hóa, 1996), vol. 3, 365

> each person to reappraise his interests. In such a referendum, the Ch'ing system might collapse or it might be further strengthened by a strong show of approval. In either case, there was no hope of success for the rebels without loosening and then redirecting traditional loyalties.[44]

The Tây Sơn clearly represented a similar case in which a realignment of loyalties was possible and indeed essential if the rebel government was to succeed. How the Tây Sơn attempted to realign these loyalties is the topic to which I now turn.

Supernatural Connections and Other Abstract Claims to Authority

Early in the course of their movement, the Tây Sơn leadership attracted followers and laid claim to legitimacy through a variety of abstract notions. These included frequent references to "heaven," suggesting that their movement had been divinely inspired and ordained. The rebel leaders also made frequent appeals based on supernatural claims and other types of linkages to folk beliefs and prophecies. They furthermore drew on both popular and elite understandings of certain elements of Confucian doctrine as ways to legitimize themselves in more formal political and philosophical terms. Finally, the brothers drew on their own considerable charisma and general force of personality to draw supporters into their camp. Each of these approaches was employed at various times in the movement, though arguably these abstract claims to authority were most commonly seen during the early years of the movement, particularly the references to the supernatural which would have resonated most strongly with rural followers.

The Tây Sơn and the Favor of Heaven

The Tây Sơn brothers no doubt realized that one of their most significant potential sources of power lay in popular beliefs concerning the supernatural and the

[44] Naquin, 200.

importance of signs, prophecies and demonstrations of otherworldly personal powers. Their movement and its political aspirations thus drew strongly on a logic that transcended existing temporal political arrangements, for this was an important way for these "rebels" to sidestep questions about their lack of political connections. The brothers encouraged the circulation of tales about their communion with the supernatural and their personal attributes, both calculated to attract followers. The Tây Sơn movement's very origins are widely traced to the brothers' teacher encouraging the eldest, Nguyễn Nhạc, to view himself as fulfilling a longstanding local prophecy: "A righteous uprising in the West (Tây Sơn) achieves merit in the North." [西起義北收功][45] The brothers almost certainly sought to ensure the wide circulation of this prophecy and their interpretation of its import, as well as of other revelations reflecting their claims to power.

In addition to encouraging the circulation of useful prophecies, one of the central ideas that the Tây Sơn sought to popularize, was that their movement was responding to a divine destiny reflecting "heaven's will." Throughout their campaigns, the Tây Sơn repeatedly emphasized that theirs was not merely an undertaking by a group of disaffected peasants. It was rather a divinely ordained mission connected to what is sometimes called the "mandate of heaven" (in Vietnamese *mệnh trời*) It is very easy to overstate the significance of this term, which has often been used either to suggest a certain fatalism about the course of future events, or merely as a cynical way to speak of changing fortunes. There is no doubt, however, that it or variants thereof were an important part of the thoughtworlds and discourse of this era.[46] Ultimately, it may not have mattered whether or not the Tây Sơn actually believed that they were fulfilling some divinely prescribed course of action. Far more important was the fact that they could use this claim to swell their ranks and perhaps at least give officials pause in a period of considerable political turmoil.

[45] *ĐNLT* (vol. 2), 491; The original Chinese text of this prophecy can be found in Tạ Quang Phát, *Nhà Tây Sơn* (The House of Tây Sơn) (Sài Gòn: Phủ Quốc-Vụ-Khanh Đặc-Trách Văn-Hóa Xuất Bản, 1970), 1b.

[46] See for example the useful discussion by Ngô Vĩnh Long, *Before the Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), ix-xi.

Michael Adas has written elsewhere about what he called "prophets of rebellion," that "these revelations and the prophet's claims to be divine or divinely-appointed redeemers gave supernatural sanction to their decisions and transmitted a sense of legitimacy to their followers."[47] The Tây Sơn clearly made use of this approach, as did many other popular movements of this period, including ones that frequently had more specific religious dimensions. Many Chinese popular movements, for instance, that were infused with strong religious elements, of whatever type, frequently made reference to the notion of "heaven" in its less specifically religious sense. One scholar of Chinese uprisings, for example, has observed that:

> The theocratic and ancient idea of the 'Mandate of Heaven' also dominated all of the rebellions, [even] those which had important contributions from Buddhism and Taoism. For the people Heaven was always the supreme and divine Master of the world. In battling against the established order, they always referred to Heaven as that which gave and could then take the mandate away from the dynasties and which, according to Mencius, spoke for them, the people.[48]

The notion of "heaven" [*thiên* in Sino-Vietnamese, or *trời* in Vietnamese] is a very important one in the Vietnamese worldview, and combines elements of elite, Confucian ideology with populist notions of divine forces. It is important to note, that this is not "heaven" in a strictly religious sense, but rather a more abstract reference to an unseen divine force, dictating and shaping the course of earthly events. *Trời* more generally refers to that which is above – ie. the sky, with attendant connections to the seasons, the weather and all manner of other natural phenomena. Consequently, the Vietnamese understanding of "heaven" makes reference to a broad range of ideas relating to the mundane and the divine. "Heaven" then is not a specific place or an identifiable force. It is instead, at least in its understanding as a force determining the outcome of human affairs, an inherently uncategorizable thing. Not

[47] Michael Adas, *Prophets of Rebellion: Millenarian Movements against the European Colonial Order* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1979), 112.

[48] G. H. Dunstheimer, "Quelques aspects religieux des sociétés secrèts"in *Mouvements populaires et sociétés secrèts en Chine aux XIX^e^ et XX^e^ siècles*, ed. Jean Chesneaux, Feiling Davis and Nguyen Nguyet Ho (Paris: Francois Maspero, 1970), 67,

surprisingly, perhaps, the ambiguous nature of "heaven" makes it ripe for interpretation to meet specific needs or to explain particular happenings.

It is also important to note the existence of two terms for "heaven" that coexisted in Việt Nam at this time – *trời* and *thiên*. The former was the vernacular term, and was written using a demotic character that combined the Chinese words for "heaven" and "above." The latter was the directly borrowed Chinese term, that brought with it elements of the Chinese Confucian notions of "heaven" and indeed was commonly used in Việt Nam as a referent to China itself.[49] There appears to have been something of a bifurcation in the Vietnamese understanding of the role and significance of "heaven" as reflected in these two terms. In the more formally Confucian sense of the word, one finds such ideas as the "mandate of heaven" [*thiên mệnh*] and the idea of the Emperor as the "son of heaven" [*thiên tử*], or occasionally "heavenly emperor" [*hoàng thiên*].[50] This conception, while abstract, was understood to have clear political implications and its invocation by the Tây Sơn would have constituted a way to sway the political affiliations of Confucian scholars or other political elites. But "heaven" also existed at a very popularized level as a more general conception of the unknowable, and of an all-controlling force – this was *trời*. This more mystical "heaven" manifested itself in a wide range of supernatural phenomena, and constituted an appeal that might have been more readily appreciated by the ordinary person.

In many respects, the differentiation between the notions of "heaven" contained in the terms *trời* and *thiên*, parallels a similar division reflected in what Alexander Woodside has identified as a dualistic theory of monarchy in the Vietnamese world:

> [T]he Vietnamese traditional monarchy's position was affected by two streams of thought, each concerned with social integration and each with its

[49] Terms like *thiên triều* – the Heavenly Court, referred to the Chinese; a *thiên sứ* or "Heavenly Envoy," was an ambassador from the Chinese court.

[50] For an extended examination of the conception of "heaven" in the Chinese understanding in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Joseph R. Levenson, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate: A Trilogy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1965), vol. 2, 90-104.

> own symbolic form. One stream of thought was socio-political in nature. It was derived wholly from China. It stressed that the integration of Vietnamese society could only come from the vertical accommodation of social differences, through application of Confucian principles of hierarchy . . . The second stream of thought that affected the monarchy, and patterns of authority in Vietnam, was mythopoeic and religious in nature. It was stronger than any equivalent tradition in China.[51]

Woodside observed that this duality was reflected in the existence of two names for rulers. The first, *hoàng đế*, or Emperor, was borrowed directly from the Chinese, and implied a close connection to the divine and transcendent powers of heaven. The second term was the very Vietnamese word *vua* (usually translated as "king") which, like the term *trời*, had to be written in Nôm. In this manifestation, the Vietnamese ruler's relationship was much more closely established with his subjects, to whom, as *vua*, he was something of a protector figure with a certain degree of responsibility for the lives of his subjects in a fairly concrete way.[52]

This distinction between the abstract and the concrete manifestations of a ruler's responsibilities can be seen as parallel to the abstract and concrete claims to power that the Tây Sơn were making. The Tây Sơn combined Confucian claims to authority with more mythical, quasi-religious ones, as they appealed to different elements of Vietnamese society. This Tây Sơn merging of these two strains of thought is best exemplified by the title that Nguyễn Nhạc claimed as he traveled north in 1786 – "*vua trời.*"[53] This title combined the two Vietnamese vernacular terms for "king" and "heaven," rather than the more typical, and Sinicized "Thiên Tử" [天子 – Son of Heaven]. The appearance of this term in the letter of a European missionary suggests that the title had entered popular discourse at this time, and reflected a particular Tây Sơn localization of these two ideas. As Woodside also observed, "Nôm, in brief, had the capacity to become the literary medium of a universe of discourse that was only weakly related to that of the official social order. It could

[51] Alexander Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 11-12.
[52] ibid., 10.
[53] LeRoy to Claude-François L'Etondal, 6 December, 1786. MEP 700, 1308.

become the instrument of social subsystems where cultural change occurred at a different rate than it did in the classical Sino-Vietnamese world."[54] Indeed, the later Tây Sơn interest in promoting Nôm, including translating the Confucian canon into that vernacular, may well have been a reflection of their constant awareness that Nôm served to connect them to a powerful cultural current that existed below the formalized level of the Confucian elite.

Despite what appears then to be some differentiation in the nature of these terms, the distinction between them is not always precise, and I am aware that my argument along these lines can be pushed only so far. For example, the very common term "*mệnh trời*" can also be translated as "mandate of heaven," suggesting that *trời* can also be used in combination with more orthodox, sinic ideas about guiding forces. Furthermore, the different uses of *trời* and *thiên* can be difficult to trace through the sources, where transcription changes appear to be common. Nonetheless, the difference between the two words does appear to reflect an important distinction, even as the more important idea as used by the Tây Sơn was the general invocation of "heaven," whatever particular term might be employed at any given moment. In any event, the sources, with repeated references to the Tây Sơn invocation of "heaven," clearly indicate the significance that this concept played in the Vietnamese comprehension of the order of things.[55] The Tây Sơn conception clearly played on both of these understandings, as they described two aspects of the intervention of heaven in promoting their movement.

How, specifically, did the Tây Sơn invoke "heaven" in the course of their uprising? In the first place, and perhaps in the more populist vein, the Tây Sơn leaders spoke of "heaven" as having selected them to deliver the people from their misery and oppression and to punish those viewed as being responsible for this

[54] Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model*, 58.

[55] For a detailed examination of Vietnamese understandings of cosmology, and an extended discussion of Vietnamese conceptions of "heaven," see Léopold Cadière, "Philosophie Populaire Viêtnamienne," 41-98, in Léopold Cadière, *Croyances et Pratiques Religieuses des Viêtnamiens, vol. 3* (Paris, École Française D'Extrême-Orient, 1992).

condition. Thus, for instance, at some point early in their movement, the Tây Sơn cast a military seal for their officers containing the phrase "Phụng Thiên phạ bạo Nguyễn Phúc" [奉天伐暴阮福] – "It is by the order of Heaven that the tyrant Nguyễn Phúc is being chastised."[56] The reference was to the last Nguyễn Chúa, Duệ Tông Nguyễn Phúc Thuần, who had been installed on the throne by the regent, Trương Phúc Loan. Here we have the most concrete evidence from the Tây Sơn leadership itself, that they were invoking the concept of a heavenly mission on behalf of the people to guide their actions. At this early stage, while the Tây Sơn leaders were portraying themselves as restorationist forces (see below), their use of the term *thiên* may have suggested that they were appealing more to the official and Confucianized conception of the idea of "heaven" rather than to the more populist tradition of *trời*.

In addition to the evidence in this military seal, there are also numerous reports by European eyewitnesses that further underscore the importance the Tây Sơn placed on their links to "heaven." In February 1774, a Spanish missionary, Diego de Jumilla reported of the Tây Sơn that "they announced to the villages that they were not bandits, but that they were carrying out a war to obey the will of heaven."[57] A few years later, in 1778, Charles Chapman, a visiting Englishman, reported that he had been informed by Nhạc, that "it has pleased God to make him the instrument of [the people's] deliverance and to raise him to the Throne . . ."[58] A later account by a French missionary, wrote of the early days of the movement: "They then spread a thousand tales of dreams and revelations of signs from heaven, which they said proved their mission."[59] It is clear from these descriptions, that the idea of the Tây Sơn fighting as an agent of heaven to rescue the people and to defeat those who were

[56] Ngô Đức Thọ, *Nghiên Cứu Chữ Huý Việt Nam Qua Các Triều Đại* (Research into tabooed characters in Việt Nam throughout the dynasties) (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Hóa, 1997), 108.
[57] Perez, 74.
[58] Charles Chapman, [Charles Chapman's narrative of his mission to Vietnam] in Alistair Lamb, *Mandarin Road to Old Hue* (London: Archon Books, 1970), 94-95. The reference to "God" here is almost certainly Chapman's interpretation (in line with long-standing western missionary parlance) of "heaven" in the more traditional Vietnamese understanding of the word.
[59] Pierre-Marie LeLabousse (?), 20 June, 1793. MEP 746, 404-411.

making their lives miserable, was one that had entered the popular consciousness during this early period.

Later, the Tây Sơn sought to portray their subsequent seizure of power (as distinct from their initial decision to rise up) as also ordained by "heaven." A 1784 letter by a Spanish missionary, Father Ginestar, cited a Tây Sơn general who told him that "heaven had confided this kingdom in them," suggesting that "heaven" was now sanctioning their actual rule.[60] Another European visitor, John Barrow, who visited the region in the summer of 1792, reported of Nguyễn Lữ that "the priest prevailed on the clergy to announce to the careless multitude the decree of *Tien*, which had ordained these three worthies to be their future rulers."[61] These reports suggest the second dimension of the Tây Sơn claims pertaining to "heaven" – that this divine force had not merely called on them to rescue the people, but has also sanctioned their important second step of becoming the nation's new rulers. It is in this second formulation that the Tây Sơn were appealing to the Confucian idea of the "mandate of heaven."

Not surprisingly, the Tây Sơn continued to emphasize the divinely ordained nature of their mission even as their movement matured and eventually spread into the north. Thus, when Nguyễn Huệ held an audience in Thăng Long with the aging Lê Emperor in 1786 and described his efforts on the monarch's behalf he noted: "I have come here because this was heaven's will."[62] He also added that "heaven has borrowed the hand of your servant to attack and destroy the disrespectful Trịnh clan, in order to

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[60] Perez, 93.

[61] Barrow, 251. Italics in original. Although plausible, this statement should be approached with caution. Barrow did visit Việt Nam during the Tây Sơn era, and provides some very useful information. On the other hand, Barrow's account is remarkable for its confident statement of dates, events and connections that are patently untrue. He cites the 1789 Tây Sơn victory over the Chinese as having taken place in 1779. He claims the Chinese troops never even reached the Tonkinese border, much less seized the capitol. He claims that Nhạc was a wealthy merchant who "carried on extensive commerce with China and Japan."

[62] *Đại Việt Sử Ký Tục Biên* (A Continuation of the Historical Records of Đại Việt). trans. Ngô Thế Long and Nguyễn Kim Hưng, ed. Nguyễn Đổng Chi (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1991), 467. Here the text uses the term "trời" for heaven. However, the *HLNTC* (1986) (81), uses the character for *thiên*.

broaden the powerful authority of your majesty."[63] And more elaborately:

> My coming here at this time is entirely due to the intentions of Heaven (天意). And as for the boats that carried my troops here, were it not for the lessening of the flood waters and the powerfully blowing southern winds, how would your servant's strength have been sufficient to accomplish this?[64]

Here, significantly, the Tây Sơn leader argued that he was not merely claiming to be the agent of heaven's will, but could point to the influence of nature to support his claim. Were heaven not on his side, he suggested, the natural forces, which heaven controlled, would not have so perfectly aided his plan, and allowed him to accomplish what he had.[65] Moreover, it is clear from the context – the Tây Sơn military leader's restoring the Lê throne – that the claim here was that "heaven" had recruited the Tây Sơn to restore order and to destroy the oppressive Trịnh, not to take power for themselves.

Two years later, however, the situation had changed. In his 1788 edict on ascending the throne, Nguyễn Huệ stated that:

> . . . the oppression of the people the world over was uniformly all around me, [and my taking the throne] was what the will of heaven had intended, and was not something that the people had put forth. I then relied on the intentions of heaven (天意), and went along with the hearts of the people.[66]

Here again, the Tây Sơn leader emphasized the idea of "heaven" having called on him in response to the "oppression of the people." More significantly, this edict contained a carefully crafted formulation produced by Nguyễn Huệ's close advisor, Ngô Thì Nhậm. The phrase "this was what the will of heaven had intended, and was not something the people had put forth," constituted the Confucian rationalization for the Tây Sơn actions. The important distinction being made here was between something

[63] Ngo Cao Lãng, *Lịch Triều Tạp Kỷ* (Miscellaneous Records of Past Dynasties). trans. Hoa Bằng and Hoàng Văn Lâu. (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1995), 573. The *Đại Việt Sử Ký Tục Biên* (467) uses almost identical language here.

[64] *ĐNLT* (vol. 2), 507.

[65] It was almost certainly known to Nguyễn Huệ, either through Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh or others, that the monsoonal winds favored a sea-borne expedition at this time of the year.

[66] Nguyễn Lộc, *Văn Học Tây Sơn* (Tây Sơn Literature) (Qui Nhơn: Sở Văn Hóa Và Thông Tin Nghĩa Bình. 1986), 92.

initiated by divine forces and something sparked by populist pressure. For a proper Confucian scholar to sanction, much less participate in, such a movement, it had to be described as emanating from "heaven's will" not from the desires of the people, for the former was ordained by the transcendent power of the divine, while the latter constituted a direct affront to the Confucian relationships that should obtain between the ruled and their ruler.

And yet, despite the essential conservatism of the Confucianized elite, they were not blind to the problems of their times or the plight of the common person. Perceiving a shift in the will of heaven, Confucian scholars might find themselves on the side of rebellion. Rey Ileto has observed that the system of legitimacy, despite its inherently conservative underpinnings, contained within it the potential for instability:

> The legitimacy of the Vietnamese state rested on the Emperor's possessing the mandate of heaven and ruling through purity of example. The Confucian-educated élite composed of mandarins and scholars generally looked up to the emperor as the exemplar of moral behaviour, and transmitted to the populace at large the values of obedience to superiors and veneration of the ruler. However, as in other parts of Southeast Asia, this élite could function as an ambiguous sign. In troubled times, such as after serious floods or famines, the mandate of heaven could be perceived to be lost by the emperor, leading to popular unrest. In such situations local scholars, in particular, because of their close ties with villagers in their roles as teachers, scribes and physicians, could lead rebellions against the reigning monarchy.[67]

If convinced, then, that there had indeed been a shift in the "will of heaven," Confucian elites could justify (to themselves and their colleagues) a change in political loyalties.

Although the Tây Sơn clearly took pains in cultivating relations with Confucian elites, as Nhậm's careful formulation above revealed, and to emphasize that their movement was a response to the "will of heaven," at other times they more

[67] Rey Ileto, "Religion and Anti-Colonial Movements," in Nicholas Tarling, ed., *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia: Volume 2, Part 1, From c. 1800 to the 1930s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 199.

explicitly depicted their movement as a response to the concrete sufferings and corresponding appeals of the people. It was in this latter sense that the movement was an attempt to restore justice and right. In their 1786 edict to the peoples of the north (an edict probably written for them by the Trịnh defector, Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh), the Tây Sơn combined the ideas of heaven's will and the longings of the people and described their action as "consenting to the will of heaven, and responding to the hearts of the people."[68] The same edict reiterated the earlier claim that the Tây Sơn had initially acted as a restorationist force: "The evil Country Assistant (*quốc phó*) set out to disturb the political order – and it was because of this that the Tây Sơn came down to aid the king."[69] And then describing what was seen as the condition of the populace at that juncture: "the miserable and scattered peoples await the returning banner of righteousness."[70] In the initial attacks in their home region, and now their attack on the north, the Tây Sơn described their purpose in similar terms: to aid a people made miserable by the tyranny of false claimants to political power. Moreover, even in the 1788 edict on ascending the throne, which apparently sought to credit heaven with the impetus for his movement, Nguyễn Huệ said of his actions:

> Originally I did not have the will to serve as king. It was only because the hearts of the people were sick and tired of lives of chaos, that I impatiently desired to be a virtuous king in order to rescue the peaceful life for the people . . .[71]

It is clear from this formulation that a tension existed within the Tây Sơn justifications for their actions. On the one hand, they argued that a divine force had compelled them to act, while on the other they acknowledged that their chief motivation was the distress and desires of the people. It should be apparent, however, that the two ideas were not mutually exclusive, for there was an obvious link between the two. Indeed, Vietnamese philosophers of this period often wrestled, seemingly

[68] Nguyễn Cẩm Thúy and Nguyễn Phạm Hùng, *Văn Thơ Nôm Thời Tây Sơn* (Nôm Literature of the Tây Sơn Period) (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1997), 265. "Hội thuận ứng thế dừng dược chớ. . ."

[69] ibid, 265. "Giận Quốc Phó ra long bội thượng - Nên Tây Sơn xướng lũ cần vương."

[70] ibid., 268. "Chúng điều tàn mong cờ nghĩa về đầu."

[71] Lộc (1986), 91.

without success, with the issue of the balance between the will of heaven and the desires of the people. Ngô Thì Sĩ wrote "The good fortune and bad fortune of heaven, stem from the actions of the people, and the politics of the state thus penetrate to heaven."[72] And his son, Ngô Thì Nhậm observed that, "heaven sees and heaven hears the people. When the hearts of the people are settled then the will of heaven will also turn."[73] Clearly these scholars, contemporary to the Tây Sơn movement, saw important, and not easily resolved linkages between the people and heaven.

Whatever the original impetus for the Tây Sơn uprising, its rebel leaders clearly made much of the role played by the forces of heaven. Toward the end of the Tây Sơn period, when there was a widespread sense that the tides had shifted against them, and toward the Nguyễn, one observer noted "All of the peasants, and the tyrants as well, recognize and state loudly that it is Heaven [Ciel] which has given the [Nguyễn] prince a victory that is so rapid and complete."[74] This statement reinforces yet again, the popular idea about the role of heaven in determining the rulership of the kingdom, and at the same time makes clear the fickle nature of the favor of heaven, and the inherent political uncertainty that it decreed. Claims to have the support of heaven might be believed only as long as a ruler or rebel could show signs of this support. If one could no longer do so, then the tide of popular sentiment might quickly shift to another. Indeed, claims to have the support of "heaven" had always to be reinforced by demonstrations of this support, for without them "heaven's" intentions might be read very differently by one's intended audience.

Using the Confucian Traditions of Nghĩa [義] and Đức [德] (Virtue and Justice)

In addition to the idea of having received heaven's sanction, or somehow fulfilling the "will of heaven," the Tây Sơn also put forth other philosophical justifications for their movement, justifications whose origins lay in formal

[72] *Lịch Sử Tư Tưởng Việt Nam, Tập I* (A History of Vietnamese Thought, Volume 1), ed. Nguyễn Tài Thư (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1993), 419.
[73] ibid., 418.
[74] Anonymous, 31, August 1802. MEP, 701, 485.

Confucianism, but which were popularized in ways perhaps not intended by the Confucian tradition.[75] Without making unsustainable claims that Việt Nam was an entirely Confucianized country by the late eighteenth century, one can still stress the significance of the Confucian worldview at all levels of Vietnamese society. As Alexander Woodside has argued, the Confucian tradition was well established in rural Vietnam in this period: "The hold of the Sino-Vietnamese classical tradition on the Vietnamese peasants of the 1700's and the 1800's was . . . indisputable, especially those parts of it which traced change to the deposition of bad monarchs by good ones."[76] And it is hardly surprising that in a system where scholars maintained direct contact with rural society, either through personal ties to relatives or through residence in villages where they might establish schools, peasants would be in a position to imbibe elements of Confucian ideology.

This is not to suggest that Confucian precepts were always accepted or practiced, or that other belief structures did not simultaneously have a substantial impact on the manner in which people viewed their world. Indeed, it is clear that Confucian doctrine readily coexisted, both at the elite and popular levels, with other belief systems such as Buddhism and Daoism. In this regard Confucianism did not constitute an exclusivist belief system. The existence of the doctrine of "three gems" – Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism – which was particularly strong in the north in the eighteenth century, reinforces this idea.[77] In the Nguyễn territories there was considerably more state attention to and involvement in Buddhism, but despite this, "even at its height of influence, at no stage did Buddhism challenge the Chinese

[75] For more on these and other elements of the Vietnamese worldview see Neil Jamieson, "How the Vietnamese See the World," in *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 1-41; Pierre Huard and Maurice Durand, "Structure mentale des Viêtnamiens traditionnels," in *Connaissance du Việt Nam* (Paris: École Française D'Extrême-Orient, 1954), 83-90.

[76] Alexander Woodside, "Conceptions of Change and of Human Responsibility for Change in Late Traditional Vietnam," 113, in *Moral Order and the Question of Change: Essays on Southeast Asian Thought*, ed. David A. Wyatt and Alexander Woodside (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Series, 1982).

[77] Nguyễn Tài Thư and Phan Đại Doãn, "Tình hình xã hội, văn hóa, tư tưởng," (The Situation of Society, Culture and Thought) in Nguyễn Tài Thư, ed., *Lịch Sử Tư Tưởng Việt Nam*, vol. 1 (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1993), 415-418.

political precepts and official ideology that formed the 'vital principle of the state.'"[78]

Two elements of Confucian doctrine were particularly evident in the rhetoric of the Tây Sơn movement, the idea of righteousness and that of virtue. Of these it was the concept of righteousness that was particularly emphasized, beginning with the Tây Sơn insistence that theirs was a righteous uprising, a *khởi nghĩa* (起 義). The emphasis on "righteousness" allowed the Tây Sơn to stake a different sort of claim to legitimacy. The failures of the government, which itself had certain basic obligations, did not merely suggest that heaven's will had been removed, but at a somewhat more concrete level opened the way to acceptable criticism along lines recognized in a landscape partially shaped by Confucian philosophy. The Vietnamese term for righteousness – "nghĩa" – encompasses notions of justice and right action that are perhaps most often connected to the manner in which the ideal Confucian scholar acted. It derived from a Confucian ethos that emphasized among its prime tenets righteousness, filiality, virtue, and humaneness.

This notion of "righteousness" was a long-standing one in both Vietnamese and Chinese history by this time. Writing of the traditional Chinese understanding of "righteousness," Benjamin Schwartz cited the writings of Mo-zi:

> The man of righteousness is the man who clearly *understands* that his own interests and the interests of all can be served *only* when "the greatest happiness of the greatest number is achieved." He understands that one's "object" of benefiting must, in the first instance be the whole (human) world . . . The essence of the matter is that the Mohist truly "righteous man's" attention is totally and undeviatingly fixed on the world "out there." He is totally oriented toward "doing good" and not preoccupied with "being good."[79]

The emphasis clearly was on acting in ways that ensured the greater good. Failure to act in this fashion was seen as producing injustice and a host of other social ills.

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[78] Li, 107.

[79] Benjamin Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 148. [italics in original]. As Kent Guy pointed out to me, it is anachronistic to cite Mo-zi regarding 18th century understandings when his works were not published until the 19th century. Nonetheless, I believe that the general notions of righteousness expressed in this passage would have been recognizable to Vietnamese scholars of this earlier period.

Indeed throughout Confucian-influenced parts of Asia the relationship between peasants and their political or economic superiors, whether landlords or government officials, was one based at least in part on some idea of reciprocity with roots in "righteousness" and "justice."[80] Thus, when popular movements raised banners speaking of "righteousness," they denoted not merely the "rightness" or "justice" of a movement's cause, but also by implication criticisms of the government, or at least its local representatives, for failing to meet their own obligations towards the people. In Việt Nam, various popular uprisings, including most notably that of Lê Lợi, had drawn on the idea of an uprising of righteousness, which would restore order and proper relationships.[81] More recently, the Lê prince, Lê Duy Mật, who rose up against the cruel Chúa Trịnh Giang in 1738, issued an edict in Nôm, in which he recalled the heroic "Lam Sơn Khởi Nghĩa" – the uprising of Lê Lợi against the Ming and depicted his own movement as a similarly righteous one.[82]

The concept of a "righteous rebellion" was not confined to Việt Nam, but was part of a long-standing tradition throughout East Asia. While the specific forms of the relationship between a regime and its populations, or the avenues through which protest took place, might have differed, Japan, China, Korea and Việt Nam all saw peasant movements that took place under a banner of "righteousness." Most well known among these, perhaps, is the Boxer Rebellion, whose standards bore the slogan "Boxers United In Righteousness."[83] But even earlier notions of righteous peasant uprisings, or what Eric Hobsbawm has called "social banditry," can readily be found in both historical and literary texts. Among literary texts, the best East Asian example

[80] For the Japanese case, see Stephen Vlastos, *Peasant Protests and Uprisings in Tokugawa Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

[81] It is extremely difficult to determine whether Lê Lợi's forces actually fought under banners proclaiming it a "righteous uprising." The earliest documented use of those words to describe that movement are found in a 1676 introduction to a printed edition of the *Lam Sơn Thực Lục* (The Veritable Records of Lam Sơn).

[82] "Hịch Của Lê Duy Mật kể tội họ Trịnh," [Lê Duy Mật's edict denouncing the crimes of the Trịnh family] in *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử* 108, (3/1968): 58-59.

[83] On the Boxers see Joseph Esherick, *The Origins of the Boxer Uprising* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1987), and Paul Cohen, *History in Three Keys: The Boxers as Event, Experience and Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

is the classic Chinese novel, *The Water Margin* [Shuihu Zhuan]. The novel, almost certainly derived from popular lore and drawing loosely on actual events, tells the story of a group of 108 righteous bandits who rose up against the economic and social injustices of their era – the late Sung period in China. They fought the mighty political forces of their time, becoming folk heroes in the process. This tale spread in the oral tradition to many parts of China and to Việt Nam as well and, if nothing else, reinforced the idea of the heroic rebel/bandit who defied authority on behalf of the oppressed masses. We know that Vietnamese were aware of this tale during the Tây Sơn period, for in an edict appealing for an alliance with a group of coastal Chinese pirates, the Tây Sơn supporter, Ngô Thì Nhậm made explicit references to the tale and characters in it.[84] The best known Vietnamese tale in this tradition would be the famous early nineteenth century *Truyện Kiều* (The Tale of Kiều), which glorifies a rebel hero, Từ Hải, and his struggles against the ruling powers. Từ Hải was almost certainly modeled on the Tây Sơn leader, Nguyễn Huệ, further testimony to his particular imprint on the popular imagination, and more generally to the appeal that such figures could have.[85]

Given such a tradition, it is not surprising that Confucian referents such as "righteousness" would be taken up by Vietnamese peasants. Indeed, this could be seen as peasants demonstrating their willingness to go along with orthodox thought to the extent that they believed in the conception of a "righteous order." Peasant reference to this concept, however, was often at odds with the interpretations of most Confucian scholars, reflecting what Alexander Woodside called "a kind of combative adaptiveness" on the part of the peasants in response to Confucian doctrines. While scholars might recognize that righteousness was lacking, they would not necessarily acknowledge that peasants should be permitted to become the agents of the restoration of that righteousness. Thus, for instance, Ngô Thì Nhậm wrote: "The rise and fall, the

[84] See "Edict Summoning Pirates," *quốc ngữ* translation found in *Ngô Thì Nhậm: Hàn Các Anh Hoa*, translated by Trần Lê Hữu, VT.17, ms. held at the History Faculty, Hà Nội National University, Hà Nội.
[85] See Huỳnh Sanh Thông, "Introduction" to Nguyễn Du, *The Tale of Kiều: A Bilingual Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), xxxvii.

long and the short of fate are due to heaven, they are not produced by the strength of people."[86] More recently, Ralph Smith has observed that "It might have been possible to interpret the Confucian philosophy in a spirit of rebellion, for if the personal life of the emperor or his officials was lacking in virtue and sincerity, then surely their fitness to rule was called into question. But in practice, Confucianism was essentially conservative. It was true that a ruler might lose the 'mandate of heaven', but if he was then deposed it was less a matter of human choice than of an impersonal decree of fate."[87] For the Vietnamese rebel who might want to depose the ruler, it was essential to emphasize that his successes were both an indication of the changing fates and of the "righteousness" of his actions.

The Tây Sơn leaders, like those of peasant movements before them, consciously chose to emphasize the moral dimension of their crusade in decidedly Confucian terms. They made repeated use of the term "nghĩa," beginning with the earliest prophecy regarding the movement, which spoke of a "righteous uprising." The idea of "righteousness" that was invoked in the phrase "righteous uprising" appears to stand in contrast to the divine nature of the Tây Sơn brothers' other claims. For while the notion of "heaven's will" reflected a divine ordering of things, the idea of "righteousness" contained within it the more mundane idea of a terrestrial ordering of things – a setting to right of a political order that has been put out of balance. This is not to argue that there was no connection between "righteousness" and "heaven," for the link is explicit in Confucian ideology. Rather, I want to emphasize that righteousness, or its absence, was manifested in visible actions by individuals and thus had an important, and recognizable, earthly component..

An examination of the documentary evidence from the Tây Sơn period shows the degree to which "righteousness" was being emphasized. The Tây Sơn armies were comprised of "nghĩa quân" – "righteous troops," and "nghĩa sĩ" – righteous officers. Nguyễn Lương Bích has observed that "all of the Tây Sơn generals and the masses of the ordinary people (quần chúng nhân dân) at the time, all called those who joined the

[86] Cited in Nguyễn Tài Thư, ed., *Lịch Sử Tư Tưởng Việt Nam*, vol. 1, 420.
[87] Ralph Smith, *Viet-Nam and the West* (London: Heinemann, 1968), 14.

movement the 'nghĩa sĩ' and when referring to these people never failed to include the word nghĩa . . . ."[88] It is also interesting to note that the Tây Sơn never discarded their emphasis on "righteousness" even when they had already established themselves in power in the early 1790s. Thus, for instance, we find documents from the early Cảnh Thịnh era (1793-1802) that continue to refer Tây Sơn troops not merely as soldiers, but as "righteous soldiers" – *nghĩa binh*, and "righteous officers" – *nghĩa sĩ*. Moreover, those who volunteered for service were described as "righteous men " – *Ông nghĩa*.[89] There are also numerous instances in which the Tây Sơn leadership made reference to righteousness in their edicts and proclamations. A common example is found in their 1786 proclamation to the northern populations, in which the Tây Sơn (via the hand of Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh) spoke of the "the miserable and scattered peoples [awaiting] the returning banner of righteousness."[90] Other Tây Sơn proclamations also made reference to the term "banner of righteousness" (cờ nghĩa). Phan Huy Ích, in an edict written in 1800 on behalf of the young Tây Sơn Emperor, observed: "The signs of the *righteous* flag are already bright with public labors to assist the king . . ."[91] Indeed, it could be argued that the term "banner of righteousness" was used euphemistically for the movement or the regime itself during this period.

Although the Tây Sơn thus placed a strong emphasis on their claims to being "righteous," they did not have a monopoly on this term, which was part of the larger political discourse of the period. The *Hoàng Lê Nhất Thống Chí*, for example, repeatedly described supporters of the Lê Emperor in the north in the late 1780 as "righteous troops," and spoke of the Emperor being urged to recruit "righteous

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[88] Nguyễn Lương Bích, *Quang Trung-Nguyễn Huệ* (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Quân Đội Nhân Dân, 1989), 20.

[89] Trần Văn Quý, "Một Số Tư Liệu Thời Tây Sơn mới Phát Hiện" (Some Newly Discovered Documents from the Tây Sơn Period) *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử*, No. 2, (1981): 84-86, 93.

[90] Nguyễn Cẩm Thúy and Nguyễn Phạm Hùng (268), "Chúng diều tàn mong cờ nghĩa về đầu."

[91] See, eg. Phan Huy Ích's "Canh Thân Xuân Nghĩ Diệu Quận Quân Thứ Quốc Âm Hiếu Văn" (An Official Edict to the Troops and People on behalf of (Trần Quang) Diệu in the Spring of the Year Canh Thân (1800)), found in Nguyễn Cẩm Thúy and Nguyễn Phạm Hùng, 170-174. [emphasis added]

soldiers."[92] Nôm edicts written by the Lê supporter Lê Duy Hao between 1787 and 1801, also made numerous references to righteousness in describing those who would struggle against the Tây Sơn.[93] Bùi Dương Lịch's *Lê Quý Dật Sử* spoke of anti-Tây Sơn movements in 1786 as being "righteous uprisings," that is in defense of the king.[94] This suggests, that the Tây Sơn emphasis on their own righteousness was very much an effort to lay claim to a particular and already existing idea about what constituted ideal actions vis-à-vis a particular ruler.

In addition to an emphasis on righteousness, the Tây Sơn also stressed the the idea of "virtue" (*đức*), another of the cardinal Confucian precepts.[95] There is, perhaps not surprisingly, an implicit link between individual virtue and the sanction of "heaven." Lê Lợi observed in the fifteenth century that "heaven helps those with virtue."[96] Also, as O.W. Wolters has noted, "[Virtue], in the Chinese sense of the word, meant that its possessor could exert influence over others, and its magnet-like force is illustrated in the biographies of famous local spirits . . ."[97] Thus, for example, the *Zhou Zhuan*, an early commentary on the *Spring and Autumn Classic* noted, "I have heard that the Spirits do not accept the persons of men, but that it is virtue [*te*] to which they cleave . . . Thus if a ruler have not virtue, the people will not be attached to him, and the Spirits will not accept his offerings. What the spirits will adhere to is a man's virtue."[98] In the writings and philosophy of Lao-zi, virtue (*te*) was a direct product of the Way (*dao*), and indeed, second in importance only to the *Dao*. Other

[92] Ngô Gia Văn Phái, *Hoàng Lê Nhất Thống Chí* (The Unification Records of the Imperial Lê). trans. Nguyễn Đức Vân and Kiều Thu Hoạch (Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Học, 1998), vol. 2, 100, 115. Hereafter *HLNTC* (1998).

[93] See his various edicts, in Nguyễn Cẩm Thúy and Nguyễn Phạm Hùng, 306-327.

[94] Bui Dương Lịch, *Lê Quý Dật Sử* (Unusual Tales of the Precious Lê), trans. Phạm Văn Thắm (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1987), 72.

[95] For more on virtue, and a better definition, see Fung Yu-Lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* (New York: The Free Press, 1966), 100-101.

[96] cited in O. W. Wolters, *Two Essays on Đại-Việt in the fourteenth century* (New Haven: Yale CSEAS, 1988), 53, note 136.

[97] ibid., 9.

[98] Quoted in Donald Munro, *The Concept of Man in Early China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969), 106.

personal attributes were of diminished significance.[99] Clearly possession of virtue was considered an important element when making claims to political authority, and as Lucian Pye has argued "[the] Vietnamese concept of virtue that is basic to legitimacy has Confucian overtones in that it stresses the values of propriety and filial piety, but it also has a logic that goes beyond social ethics and incorporates divine forces. In fact, the idea of *duc* as a part of legitimacy is a blending of divine and status-based concepts of authority."[100]

Recognizing that men perceived to have virtue would be able to make claims about not only their political aspirations, but also their connections to the supernatural, the Tây Sơn leaders sought to emphasize their own claims to "virtue." A Spanish missionary letter, written during the early days of the movement, noted that the rebels were popularly described as "virtuous" thieves. While the missionary was obviously translating here, it makes sense to think of his translating the word "đức" since that very Vietnamese word was later being used in the letters of French missionaries. Somewhat later, it is surely no accident that when Nguyễn Nhạc gave himself his first political title in 1775, he chose the name *Minh Đức Chúa Công* [明德主公] – "the Shining Virtue Lord." Three years later, when he took the step of naming himself Emperor, he selected as his reign name *Thái Đức* [泰德] – "Exalted Virtue." While his use of the term "Đức" as part of a reign title is not unique to Nhạc – the word was used six times by various Lê Emperors (though never before the Lê period) – it is nonetheless suggestive of the particular quality that Nhạc sought to emphasize in his rule.

Beyond Nhạc's use of such titles, the Tây Sơn brothers sought to find other ways to underscore their claims to virtuousness. One way they did this was to popularize the use of appellations for themselves that incorporated the word "đức." Thus, we find numerous references to the brothers that include this word: "virtuous

[99] See, eg. *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, vol. 1, ed. Wm Theodore de Bary, Wing-tsit Chan, and Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), 60.
[100] Lucian Pye, *Asian Power and Politics: The Cultural Dimensions of Authority* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1985), 239.

elder brother"(*đức anh*) for Nhạc, "virtuous younger brother" (*đức êm*) for Huệ and "virtuous sir" (*đức ông*) more generally to refer to either of them. Their attempt to popularize these appellations was apparently successful, for the letters by contemporary European observers are replete with references to the Tây Sơn brothers using these terms.[101] Thus, for instance, when the two Tây Sơn leaders arrived in Thăng Long in 1786, missionaries in the north were already referring to them collectively as "les deux đức ông" and to Nguyễn Huệ as the "premier đức ông."[102] These terms are also found in a Cambodian chronicle written in the 1930s, where the words "duc ong an" and "duc ong em" are used to refer to the Tây Sơn brothers.[103] Their use of these terms reinforces the idea that the Tây Sơn sought to engage various elements of Confucian ideology in ways that resonated both at the popular and elite levels of interpretation. While Confucian scholars and day laborers might think about notions of "virtue" or "righteousness" in very different ways, each would hear in the Tây Sơn claims and appeals, something that might be convincing.

Supernatural Indications

While appeals to Confucian and popular ideas of "heaven" and Confucian notions of righteousness and virtue were clearly important to the Tây Sơn leaders, these men also attempted to connect themselves to more mystical and supernatural beliefs in Vietnamese society. It was useful to make statements about the "will" of heaven, but it was far more practical to be able to demonstrate particular attributes, or even physical objects of supposed magical power. Such demonstrations or items would resonate profoundly among the Vietnamese populace, as had been the case over the country's long history. Consequently, in addition to the well-documented evidence concerning the Tây Sơn claims to be fulfilling the wishes of "heaven," there are many

[101] See, eg. Langenois to Jean-Jacques Descouvrieres, 30 June, 1784. MEP 800 (vol. 2), 1776.
[102] Jean-François Le Roy to Claude-François L'Etondal, 6 December, 1786. MEP 700, 1308.
[103] Veang Thiounn, *Preah Réach Pongsavadar Krong Kampuchéa thipadei* (The Royal Chronicle of the Country of Grand Kampuchea), cited in Khin Sok, *Le Cambodge Entre Le Siam et Le Viêtnam (de 1775 à 1860)* (Paris: École Française D'Extrême-Orient, 1991), 39.

other tales about the rebel leaders that suggest that the brothers were men of destiny.[104] The major problem with these tales is that most were transmitted orally rather than in written form, making it difficult to trace them to their origins, much less determine when they were first circulated. Some tales were written down and can now be found in texts in Chinese, but most of these texts are anonymous and not formally dated, rendering them equally problematic.[105] Nonetheless, although these tales cannot readily be substantiated or dated, they form an important part of the collective popular understanding of the Tây Sơn. Moreover, although the specifics may have been invented, whether 200 years ago or 10 years ago, the general outlines of these tales are highly plausible. In addition, some of these tales, or at least parts of them are occasionally reinforced in datable nineteenth-century writings.

Of the surviving texts and oral traditions pertaining to this more mystical aspect of the Tây Sơn movement, a great number concern magical weapons discovered by or presented to the brothers. Magical weapons have a long history in Vietnamese popular consciousness. Vietnamese legends dating back as far as the second century B.C. speak of supernatural weapons. At that time, the weapon was a magical cross-bow, about which its maker said: "He who is able to hold this crossbow rules the realm; he who is not able to hold this crossbow will perish."[106] Later, in the fifteenth century, the great Vietnamese hero of the resistance against the Ming, Lê Lợi, was given a magical sword, to be wielded in his campaign against the Chinese occupation force. When his mission was completed, the sword had to be

[104] Quách Tấn, "Di-tích và truyền-thuyết về Nhà Tây-Sơn" (Vestiges and Traditions Concerning the Tay Son) *Sử Địa*, No. 9, (September-October, 1968):17-32, 170-176.

[105] Indeed the use of Chinese characters and Nôm well into the twentieth century means that texts that appear as though they might be of eighteenth- or nineteenth-century origin may well be of much more recent vintage. Moreover, texts that first appeared in the popular southern journal *Nam Phong*, a bilingual *chữ hán/quốc ngữ* journal, were sometimes recopied by hand and then entered circulation, sometimes with the author's name removed, creating the impression of a potentially older work. For example, I found in the Durand Collection an intriguing manuscript in Hán, entitled *Tây Sơn Ngoại Sử*. [An Unofficial History of the Tây Sơn] It was only considerably later that I learned, purely by chance, that this had been written for *Nam Phong* in the second half of the 1920s. Moreover, texts of this type have been recopied and now can be found in the Hán Nôm Institute in Hà Nội.

[106] *Chiao Chou Wai Yu Chi*, as cited in the *Shui Ching Chu*, 37, 7a. Quoted in Keith Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983), 25.

returned to the lake from which it had emerged. In the context of a Vietnamese historical tradition that emphasized magical weapons as well as the prowess of their possessors, it is hardly surprisingly to find that such weapons play a prominent role in lore about the Tây Sơn. This is particularly true in the local context from which the Tây Sơn emerged, for as Li Tana has demonstrated, the highland and lowland ethnic minority groups had a variety of legends relating to swords and the power that they allegedly imparted to those who wielded them.[107]

The most common Tây Sơn-era tales of magical weapons pertain to swords, which are not magically granted as was the case with Lê Lợi, but rather discovered. One such tale, metaphorically describing the unifying power of the Tây Sơn, tells of Nguyễn Nhạc's finding the blade of a precious sword in the coastal plains and then finding its matching handle in the highland area. A variant of this tale states that Nhạc discovered the blade embedded in a stone, and that he alone had the strength to withdraw it. Then, on visiting a Bahnar highland village, he was presented with an enormous fowl, which when opened revealed the matching handle. Once the two pieces were joined they could no longer be separated.[108] A similar account describes his finding a sword in the plains, and a golden seal in the highlands.[109] Yet another tale relates that in the very early days of the movement, villagers were startled to see bright lights in the middle of the night emanating from a dark forest and illuminating the hills and trees. The light appeared to have no source and not to have been produced by anyone. It happened on a second night, and this time the villagers discovered an enormous bow and arrow, which they viewed as very strange. Word of this spread, and the next time the midnight lights appeared many villagers went out to

[107] Li, 150.

[108] *Những Mẩu Chuyện về Tây Sơn*, 9-10; also Lê Xuân Lít, "Lòng Dân Đối Với Cuộc Khởi Nghĩa Tây Sơn," (The Hearts of the People with Respect to the Tây Sơn Righteous Uprising) in *Gop Phần Tìm Hiểu Phong Trào Nông Dân Tây Sơn Nguyễn Huệ* (Contributions to Understanding the Tây Sơn Peasant Movement and Nguyễn Huệ) (Qui Nhơn: Sở Văn Hóa Thông Tin Nghĩa Bình, 1983), 289-290.Yet another variant features Nguyễn Huệ instead of his brother, and this time he finds in the chicken not a sword handle, but a golden seal.

[109] Viet Chung, "Recent Findings on the Tay Son Insurgency," in *Vietnamese Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 11, (1985): 38. The golden seal is a sign of political legitimacy, and all public officials carried such devices as signs of their office. To hold one was to be a legitimate official.

find their source. They found Nguyễn Nhạc, garbed in a battle outfit and standing in front of a large stone. In a thundering voice, he denounced to the people the cruelties of the Nguyễn regent, Trương Phúc Loan, and ascribed all of their hardships to this man and his officials. Overwhelmed by his stature and the signs, the people rose up with him and his brothers to bring down Loan and to alleviate their own poverty.[110]

There are also numerous extant magical weapon tales about the younger Tây Sơn brother, Nguyễn Huệ. One such account tells of a pair of giant snakes blocking a road along which Nguyễn Huệ was leading his soldiers. His troops were terrified, but Nguyễn Huệ dismounted from his horse, and prayed to the Snake spirit saying: "If my brothers and I are able to undertake this great task then I request the Snake spirit to move off of the road to allow my soldiers to pass. If it is my fate that this cannot be permitted, then please just bite me to death but allow my troops to live and to return to their children and wives." Thereupon, the snakes cleared the path and escorted the troops to their destination. They further aided the Tây Sơn by bringing to Nguyễn Huệ in their mouths "a dragon knife, its handle black as ebony, its blade sharp as water."[111] Another tale about Nguyễn Huệ describes his alleged super-human strength, which enabled him to lift and wield a particular silver lance, which ordinary men could not budge. Like the sword in the stone, which only Nhạc could remove, this tale too distinguishes a Tây Sơn leader as being something other than an ordinary man. The mark of their uniqueness was found in these weapons, which they alone could possess. One account even links these magical weapons to heaven, for on receiving several such items Huệ is said to have told a group of villagers:

Heaven has already chosen to bestow the golden seal and the silver sword

[110] Lít, 290-291.

[111] Tấn, 175. The dragon knife is symbolic of a king and the knife carried to the brothers is reminiscent of the sword brought to Lê Lợi by the tortoise in the Lake of the Restored Sword for him to use in defeating the Ming in the fifteenth century. Once again Nguyễn Huệ is clearly being viewed as part of a long lineage of Vietnamese heroes who have come to the aid of their country. The figure of the snake is echoed in another tale about the future Gia Long Emperor, according to which he had a snake as a protector, a situation that so impressed Lê Văn Duyệt, that he agreed to join the Nguyễn cause against the Tây Sơn. [see Léopold Cadière, "La Merveilleuse Capitale," pp. 316-317, in *Croyances et Pratiques Religieuses Des Viêtnamiens, Tome III*, [EFEO, 1992, reprint of 1944 Hanoi edition]

> upon me, and I will strive to bring the rivers and mountains back together in order to restore the hopes of the one hundred surnames, and the great magnanimity of heaven and earth.[112]

Significantly, these numerous tales of magical weapons are reinforced in the Nguyễn court's own official biographies, the *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện*. This text records that "on the road through the mountains of An Dương, Nhạc found a sword that he claimed was a spirit sword. He used this to delude the people and many believed him."[113] That such a description occurs in a court history researched and produced in the first half of the nineteenth century suggests, at least, that this tale might credibly be dated to the Tây Sơn period itself. Moreover, given the power and prestige that would come with claimed possession of a magical weapon, it is highly plausible that the Tây Sơn brothers would have sought to popularize such tales during the early years of their movement.

The Tây Sơn brothers were, moreover, quite ready to exploit popular belief in the mysterious and magical to further their ends, and they took actions or spread tales to reinforce these ideas. Trương Bưu Lâm, for example, reports a tradition stating that, "before launching their drive, [the Tây Sơn brothers] had withdrawn into the mountains for three full days and nights during which time the sacred mission of restoring order to the realm had been revealed to them."[114] Another, more elaborated tale, recounted in numerous manuscripts, concerns Nguyễn Nhạc's taking advantage of superstitions surrounding a local mountain peak. He smuggled some drums and gongs up the hill and on the night of a local festival arranged for them to be secretly sounded and accompanied by flashing lights. To the amazement of his guests, he gathered a group of adventurous locals and climbed the hill. At the top they encountered a wizened old man who summoned Nguyễn Nhạc by name and then read from a bronze plaque in which were inscribed the words "the Jade Emperor orders

[112] *Những Mẩu Chuyện về Tây Sơn*, 18.
[113] *ĐNLT* (vol 2), 491.
[114] Trương Bưu Lâm, *Resistance, Rebellion, Revolution: Popular Movements in Vietnamese History* (Singapore: ISEAS, 1985), 10.

Nguyễn Nhạc to serve as the country's Emperor." After reading it, he handed the plaque to Nguyễn Nhạc and vanished into the night.[115] The old man was in fact Nguyễn Nhạc's teacher, Trương Văn Hiến, who had advised him in arranging this stunt.[116] Thereafter, the local villagers were eager to follow this apparently divinely appointed leader.

The idea of the apparently magical appearance of words of divine instruction is not unique to the Tây Sơn. It is interesting to note, for instance, that this tale bears some resemblance to one told about the earlier Lê Lợi rebellion against the Ming in the early fifteenth century. According to this tale, Nguyễn Trãi wrote the phrase: "Lê Lợi will become king and Nguyễn Trãi his minister" in grease on a tree. When the insects and animals had come to eat away the grease, this phrase seemed to have magically appeared on the bark of the tree.[117] While the particulars are not entirely the same, the notion of a prophetic phrase appearing as if by magic certainly ties the two tales together. Similar tales can be found in other areas as well, such as the founding myth of the Chinese Triad societies in nineteenth century south China. In that instance, a white stone incense burner was said to have magically risen up from the sea. On the bottom of the incense burner were inscribed four characters with the meaning "Restore the Ming, Extirpate the Qing"[118]

There are other stories that also suggest that the Tây Sơn were ready to manipulate the fates in order to bolster their followings. Nguyễn Huệ is said to have performed a ritual at his newly erected Nam Giao altar, seeking to discover the destiny of his planned expedition against the Chinese.[119] The story notes that he

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[115] Tấn, 172.

[116] This tale, with small variations, is found in a variety of sources, though many are undated, making it difficult to establish its origins. See, for example, the *Lê Kỷ Chronicle*, cited in Nguyễn Phương, *Việt Nam Thời Bành Trướng: Tây Sơn* (Việt Nam in a Time of Expansion: Tây Sơn) (Saigon: Khai Trí, 1967), 32; *Bản Quốc Kỷ Sự* (A.989), 103a.; *Dã Sử*, VHb. 263, 106b.

[117] Lê Thành Khôi, 207.

[118] Barend J. ter Haar "Messianism and the Heaven and Earth Society: Approaches to Heaven and Earth Society Texts," 157, in *"Secret Societies" Reconsidered: Perspectives on the Social History of Modern South China and Southeast Asia*, ed. David Ownby and Mary Somers Heidhues (Armonk, NY: ME Sharp, 1993).

[119] The Nam Giao altar was the central site for dynastic ritual ceremonies

ascended the altar and proclaimed:

> My fellow troops and officers! This time I bring the troops to Bắc Hà to ask about the crimes of the Qing invaders and to restore peace and happiness to the hundred surnames. If there is to be a signal from heaven that our great army can be victorious in battle, heaven will cause these 200 coins to turn over onto their backs. The backs of these coins have raised copper. This is the great undertaking of our troops that still has many obstacles. Now our troops look for a sign of that victory or defeat.[120]

Then, according to this account, Huệ and his officers performed prayers at the altar, after which Nguyễn Huệ tossed all the coins into the air and onto the grass. At that, the troops rushed forward, saw that indeed the coins had all landed on their backs, and were convinced that their victory was inevitable. According to the account, Huệ had minted special double-backed coins for this demonstration, so while the ritual may have been designed to play to popular notions of religious practice, it may also be seen as yet another case of the Tây Sơn manipulating the signs of the gods.

Although the manufacture of evidence of divine sanction often convinced peoples to follow the Tây Sơn, local populations were not always swayed by such trickery. Another story records that while many tribal groups in the Tây Sơn area were willing to support the brothers, a certain group of Xa Dang villagers was reluctant to go along. The Xa Dang people were not convinced that the Tay Son had the will of heaven on their side. Nguyễn Nhạc tried to convince them by making a show of carrying water from a local stream in a pair of loosely woven straw baskets. He hoped to show his divine calling through the apparent miracle of water not leaking out of the baskets, which he had cleverly coated with a transparent oil. The village leader was not impressed, stating that this was the result of a magical spell (ie. of terrestrial origin) rather than any indication of heaven's preference. The Xa Dang people suggested that if Nguyễn Nhạc had truly been chosen by heaven, then he could perform a feat of their own devising. It happened that the mountain region contained a herd of wild horses that were impossible to approach because they were known to flee at the mere sight of a human shadow. The Xa Dang told Nguyễn Nhạc that if he

[120] This tale is found (unsourced) in *Những Mẩu Chuyện về Tây Sơn*, 31-32.

were able to call the horses to come to him then they would consider this a divine indication. Nguyễn Nhạc accepted the challenge and promptly went out to purchase a young and attractive mare which he trained to come whenever he called to it. Once it had been well-trained, he released it to run with the wild horses. At first suspicious of the newcomer, the wild horses were soon won over by the seductive mare. Nguyễn Nhạc then called to his horse and she came running with the wild herd close behind. This indication of Nhạc's "control" over nature convinced the Xa Đang, and many of them agreed to join his movement.[121]

These tales describing the Tây Sơn manipulation of popular beliefs in the divine and supernatural, are seemingly contradictory, since folklore is supposed to describe the "magical," not explain it. The reason for these tales, which reveal the duplicity of the Tây Sơn and perhaps the gullibility of the victims of their tricks, probably stems from a considerable Vietnamese respect for the clever trickster. This admiration for those who can deceive through a clever ruse exists alongside a belief in the magical. One of the great eighteenth-century heroes of popular lore was a man, Trang Quynh (Doctor Quynh) who constantly played tricks on others, and in particular on pompous officials. Another was Trang Lon (Doctor Pig), who similarly tricked, and occasionally attacked, those in power.[122] It is within such a tradition concerning the manipulation of popular beliefs, that respect for the Tây Sơn and their cleverness emerged.

The Tây Sơn Brothers as Men of Prowess

Vietnamese villagers . . . never ceased to be attracted to individuals who

[121] Quach Tan, *Sử Địa*, 24-25; there is another horse story from an earlier episode of rebellion that mirrors this one. The tale, concerning the earlier eighteenth-century rebel, Nguyễn Hữu Cầu says that at a temple outside the làng of Lôi động there was a spirit horse [*ngựa thần*], and each day around noon it would emerge from the river and enter the temple. So Cầu went there to hide himself to try to approach the horse. At first it fled, but gradually, holding out rice and grasses, it became used to him, and eventually allowed him to mount, and they became inseperable. [see Nguyễn Lệ Thi, "Tìm Thêm dấu vết của Nguyễn Hữu Cầu," *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử* 151, (7/8, 1973): 35.]

[122] See Nguyễn Khắc Viện and Hữu Ngọc, eds., *Vietnamese Literature* (Hà Nội: Red River, nd), 81.

could tap the power of spirits and gods.[123]

The last of the more abstract claims to power being made by the Tây Sơn brothers involved their physical stature and presence. That is, they appear to have been individuals of great charisma, able to win over followers as much through force of personality as through any other means.[124] Nguyễn Huệ in particular, was described by many contemporaries as heroic and larger than life. The Tây Sơn brothers seem, moreover, to have been examples of what O.W. Wolters has called "men of prowess," individuals able to draw followers into their expanding entourage through a combination of personality and actions. Writing about this conception in the case of Việt Nam, Wolters observed that "the possession of 'prowess,' known in Vietnam by the Chinese term for *virtus* (Vietnamese, *đức*), explains why, in Vietnamese tradition, territorial spirits and even the God of Heaven were attracted to and served rulers who possessed this quality."[125] Keith Taylor has also touched on the connection between powerful leaders and otherworldly powers, noting with regard to Nguyễn Hoàng, for example, that his successes were, "evidence that Hoang had sufficient spiritual virtue to gain the attention and assistance of supernatural forces."[126]

Of the Tây Sơn leaders, Nhạc in particular appears to have resembled the prophetic leaders Michael Adas described in his *Prophets of Rebellion*. Although Nhạc cannot be called a "prophet" in the religious or millennial sense that Adas was using, he nonetheless bore certain key characteristics of such figures as described by Adas: he was relatively well-educated; Nhạc was also well-traveled because of his trading

[123] Rey Ileto, "Religion and Anti-Colonial Movements," in Nicholas Tarling, ed., *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia: Volume 2, Part 1, From c. 1800 to the 1930s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 199.

[124] Adas, has discussed the problems inherent in use of the term "charismatic," preferring "prophetic." [pp. xx-xxi] I use it here advisedly, believing that the sources make sufficiently clear the power of personality exhibited by both Nhạc and Huệ.

[125] O. W. Wolters, "Again a Cultural Matrix," in *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives (Revised Edition)* (Ithaca: Cornell SEAP, 1999), 112.

[126] Keith Taylor, "Nguyen Hoang and the Beginning of Vietnam's Southward Expansion," 49, in Anthony Reid, ed. *Southeast Asia in the Early Modern Era: Trade, Power and Belief* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993).

and later tax collecting duties; he also purported to have had divine revelations and indications of his mission; and finally, Nhạc had begun his career (as a rebel) after a strong personal setback, or as Adas notes, "official persecution or police actions often contributed to the emergence of prophetic leaders."[127] These parallels suggest that like the charisma of prophetic leaders, Nhạc and his brothers displayed certain attributes that enabled them to expand their following and command the respect of those who joined them, and even the grudging admiration of some who did not.

There is a wealth of contemporary evidence concerning this charismatic aspect of the Tây Sơn leaders, and this attribute's apparent impact on their followers. Writing in 1775, a European missionary observed that, "the royal army is commanded by better generals, and the (armies) of the rebels have no one as their leader other than a man of the people, a villager, but they believe in this leader, respect and obey him . . ."[128] When Charles Chapman met Nhạc in 1778, he admitted, somewhat grudgingly, that "Ignaac himself is allowed to have abilities . . ."[129] And a missionary letter commenting on Nguyễn Huệ's entry into Phú Xuân in 1786 noted that "the Generalissimo brother of the rebel Biên Nhạc entered with the rest of the fleet with a magnificence and the appearance of a king."[130] The *Hoàng Lê Nhất Thống Chí* also records several people as referring to Nguyễn Huệ as a hero or *anh hùng* (英 雄)[131] Finally, a 1796 letter, reflecting on the Tây Sơn Emperor, Quang Trung, noted that: "This one was a hero, who could easily have become the master of China."[132] And although we do not have a great deal of evidence about popular views of the Tây Sơn leadership in this period, what there is also suggests that the elder two brothers were

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[127] Adas, 121

[128] Halbout, July 1775, in *Nouvelles Lettres Edifiantes*, vol. 6, 281.

[129] Chapman, 101. "Ignaac" was the European attempt to render "Nguyễn Nhạc."

[130] Philippe Sérard to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 31 July, 1786. MEP 691, 735.

[131] see Ngô Gia Văn Phái, *Hoàng Lê Nhất Thống Chí* (The Unification Records of the Imperial Lê) Collection Romans et Contes du Viet Nam écrits en Han, vol. 5 (Paris-Taipei: Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient and Student Book Company Ltd., 1986), 155.

[132] Pierre Gire to his family, 11 January, 1796. MEP 746, 542.

viewed as heroes in the popular sense.[133]

Particularly striking is the nineteenth-century Nguyễn dynastic historians' assessment of Nguyễn Huệ as having: "a voice that resounded like a bell, and eyes that gleamed like lightning." The same source went on to note that he was "a person of great intelligence and guile, good in battle, and [that] everyone was respectfully fearful of him."[134] Given the remarkable ferocity of anti-Tây Sơn sentiment expressed by the Nguyễn through both their words and actions in the late eighteenth century and well into the nineteenth, such words would appear to suggest that Huệ's personal magnetism was undeniable even to his fiercest enemies. There is even an anecdote suggesting that the first Nguyễn Emperor, Gia Long, personally praised Nguyễn Huệ during the early years of his reign saying of him, "That man, Nguyễn Huệ, was truly a heroic person."[135] Such descriptions, by his erstwhile enemy, are powerful evidence of the impact that Nguyễn Huệ had on the popular consciousness.

From the evidence it is clear that the Tây Sơn leaders were men of considerable charisma, which they used to great effect as they sought to expand their ranks. This force of personality was clearly instrumental in allowing the movement to grow in its early days, as the Tây Sơn brothers, like any other rebel figures, had to overcome the inertia of local populations. For Nguyễn Huệ, his personality continued to be of considerable significance in later years as well, particularly when he traveled north after 1786, where he sought to attract political and intellectual elites of the region to support his cause. Many of those who joined the Tây Sơn leader, and most notably the prominent Confucian literatus Ngô Thì Nhậm did so in large measure because of his powerful presence and imposing image. Secondly, among those who continued to resist the Tây Sơn, many did so in spite of an acknowledged awareness of Nguyễn Huệ (later Quang Trung)'s personality and in the face of Huệ's seeking to

[133] For a detailed discussion of eighteenth-century understandings of the notion of what constituted a hero, see Nguyễn Đổng Chi, "Thử Bàn Về Quan Niệm Chủ Nghĩa Anh Hùng Thời Đại Tây Sơn" (A Discussion of the Conception of Heroism in the Tây Sơn Period), *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử*, No. 134, (1974), 45-62.

[134] *ĐNLT*, vol. 2, 503-504.

[135] Chi, 46.

reinforce the notion that he was a hero, not least by implicitly adding his name to the ranks of previous national heroes. In a speech to his assembled troops prior to attacking the Chinese invasion army in late 1788, he observed:

> Under the Han, there were the Trung queens. Under the Sung there were Đinh Tiên Hoàng and Lê Đại Hành. Under the Yuan, there was Trần Hưng Đạo. Under the Ming there was Lê Thái Tổ, the founder of the present dynasty. These heroes could not sit silently and watch the enemy indulge in violence and cruelty toward the people. They had to comply with the aspirations of the people and raise the banner of justice.[136]

Although he did not explicitly state that he would follow in the ranks of these men, the implication was quite obvious. He hoped to convince his followers not only that he was on a level with these previous figures, who fought off Chinese forces, but also that he, like they, would be triumphant in his encounter with the Chinese.

For all his efforts, some scholars continued to react with caution to Nguyễn Huệ's claims to heroism, for claims had to be substantiated by actions. The most direct challenge came from the noted Nghệ An literatus, Nguyễn Thiếp, when the two men met for the first time in early 1788. During their brief conversation Huệ observed: "For a long time I have heard of your reputation. Three times I invited you to visit and each time you declined. Is it your intention to suggest that I am merely a minor outlaw, and that I do not have what it takes to act as a hero under heaven?" Thiếp replied: "The Trịnh family has been creating disturbances for more than 200 years now. You have brought your troops up and were successful in one try in restoring the Lê house. Who can say that this is not acting as a hero? But, if you have merely used this as a pretext for gaining a reputation, then this is merely being a scoundrel."[137] Another account of this meeting makes Thiếp's comments even more blunt. According to the *Lê Quý Dật Sử* [Huệ] said to [Thiếp]: "At present, that under heaven is still greatly divided, how long will it be until it is pacified?" [Nguyễn Thiếp] answered saying: "In the country there is great disorder, for it lacks a hero. If

[136] *HLNTC* (1998), vol. 2, 189-190.

[137] Cited in Hoàng Xuân Hãn, *La Sơn Yên Hồ Hoàng Xuân Hãn*, vol. 2 (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Giáo Dục, 1998), 1037.

the people can be pacified by a flying a military general, then who else is there?"[138] So the idea of Huệ as a hero was clearly somewhat tempered by the more pragmatic outlook of those who were able to observe the events with some degree of detachment.

Building Social Capitol: Pragmatic Means to Attract Followers

Having made a variety of abstract claims to enhance their stature and political claims through supernatural connections and appeals to elements of Confucian philosophy, the Tây Sơn also pursued more concrete methods of gathering followers, for deeds are often a far better demonstration of one's ability and potential for success. Consequently, the second area in which the Tây Sơn acted to bolster their credibility was that of economic and social change. Being from a rural area the brothers were certainly acutely aware of peasant grievances and equally aware of the ways in which they might (at least in a limited fashion) attempt to address these concerns. Nguyễn Nhạc in particular, through his travels both as a tax collector and a betel merchant, would have had a strong sense of the economic and other issues of concern to local populations. High tax burdens and inequities in land ownership, as was mentioned earlier, were the economic issues most affecting rural peoples. Although in their early days the Tây Sơn were not in a position to implement reforms in either of these areas, they were able to address economic injustices more generally.

Chief among these early initiatives was the redistribution of wealth. According to European accounts of their early days in open revolt, the Tây Sơn seized goods from the wealthy and distributed them to the poorer peasants. It was such actions that gained them the telling contemporary label of "virtuous and charitable thieves." The Vietnamese nineteenth century sources, despite using less generous language, described their actions in similar terms: "At this time the rebels rose up and stole from the rich distributing their goods among the poor, and

[138] *Lê Quý Dật Sử*, 72.

deceitfully carried out petty favors in order to buy the hearts of the people."[139] Thus the Tây Sơn appear to have focused on winning the support of rural populations through property redistribution, taking from the recalcitrant rich and giving to the poor. As one Spanish missionary eyewitness described it, "they entered the homes of the wealthy and if they were offered some things they would not cause any damage, but if they encountered any resistance, they would seize the most luxurious objects, which they would then distribute to the poor."[140] While these actions might be seen as a means (garnering popular support) rather than an end, the broader idea of promoting economic justice appears to have been central to the early movement.

This process of wealth redistribution might not necessarily have constituted a major transformation of local economic relationships, but it would have helped to clarify the relationship of the Tây Sơn to rural dwellers. Such actions clearly marked the Tây Sơn as champions of the economically disadvantaged, and perhaps just as importantly placed them into a long-standing tradition of the forced redistribution of goods by Vietnamese peasant uprisings. Most notably, Nguyễn Hữu Cầu's mid-1740s revolt in the north carried out a campaign involving seizing goods, and often food supplies, from the wealthy and distributing them to the starving peasants of the Red River Delta.[141] He was also known to have preyed on merchant vessels traveling near his coastal redoubt and redistributing their wares to the poor of the region.[142] According to some sources he had used the slogan, "take from the rich and give to the poor."[143] By the time he was captured and killed in 1751, Cầu had already become a folk hero, in large measure because of his redistributive actions.

The idea of the redistribution of goods, and particularly of food, was not merely a popularly held one, but also one supported by official sanction and historical precedents. In times of crisis governments might send officials to make requisitions

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[139] Tạ Quang Phát, 2a.
[140] Perez, 74.
[141] Lê Thành Khôi, 307.
[142] Nguyễn Lệ Thi, 33-40, 46
[143] Uy Ban Khoa Học Xã Hội, *Lịch Sử Việt Nam, Tập II* (History of Viet Nam, Vol. II) (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1976), 327.

of food from wealthy inhabitants of drought or flood stricken regions for redistribution.[144] Lê Quý Đôn, for example, was among those officials sent out in 1774 to induce the wealthy to make contributions during a bad famine in the north.[145] While the effectiveness of the requisitioning can be questioned, since the wealthy would often barricade themselves in their compounds or bribe the officials, the principle existed and was thus popularly known.[146] Trương Bưu Lâm has argued that in many instances the government could defuse local tensions and protests by making concessions or granting relief in some form. It was only when "the government did not grant relief, or because the relief came to late or too skimpily, [that] protest might linger on and develop into a force to be reckoned with nationally."[147] Tây Sơn actions to redistribute goods could be understood in this light as an entirely justifiable effort to carry out actions that the government was not undertaking for whatever reason.[148]

Indeed, the persistence and success of their movement was as much an indictment of the state for its failure to respond to popular discontent, as it was a tribute to the actions of the Tây Sơn themselves. Moreover, although most Tây Sơn redistributive actions appear to have taken place early in their movement, one later incident also speaks to the Tây Sơn attempts to use economic measures to encourage popular support. During their 1786 campaigns into the north, the Tây Sơn were entering a region that had been devastated by famines for several years. Thus, when the Tây Sơn troops were able to capture the Trịnh outpost at Vị Hoàng, with its important government granaries, they quickly acted to open the granaries to distribute food among the populations of that area.[149] Later, when the Tây Sơn troops entered Thăng Long, they also opened a government storehouse there, and distributed some of

[144] See, eg. John K. Whitmore, *Vietnam, Hồ Quý Lý, and the Ming (1371-1421)* (New Haven: Yale Center for International and Area Studies, 1985), 84.

[145] *Minh Đô Sử*, vol. 6, 3a, ms. Hv. 285, Viện Sử Học, Hà Nội,; see also ibid., vol. 7, 53a, describing the same procedure.

[146] "Journal de ce qui s'est passé de plus remarquable dans la mission du Tong-king, depuis le mois de mai 1785 jusqu'a mois de juin 1786," (MEP 691, 668), describes the wealthy barricading themselves in their homes during a time of famine to avoid food requests.

[147] Lâm (1984), 5.

[148] Philippe Sérard to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 31 July, 1786. MEP 691, 734.

[149] Philippe Sérard to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 31 July, 1786, in Cadière, "Documents Relatifs," 10.

the materials they found there among the local inhabitants.[150]

In addition to their redistribution campaigns, once the Tây Sơn brothers seized control of Qui Nhơn and effectively took control of a growing amount of coastal territory, they began to carry out potentially more substantial economic measures. They held public burnings of tax registers, an act no doubt calculated for its dramatic effect, but more practically symbolizing an apparent commitment to economic reform. More tangibly, the Tây Sơn apparently formally eliminated most of the many unpopular Nguyễn taxes. The only taxes apparently left in place were token payments ostensibly directed to the coffers of the Lê regime, though it is not clear how these payments (no doubt a relic of the early Nguyễn era) were actually being applied.[151] Finally, the Nguyễn Nhạc apparently also relentlessly chased down and killed two central government tax collectors who fled Qui Nhơn in the aftermath of the Tây Sơn attack on that provincial capital.[152]

They also began to mint new copper coinage, possibly as early as 1775. This apparently also had a positive and concrete impact on the popular image of the Tây Sơn, for these durable coins replaced the extremely unpopular zinc coinage that the Nguyễn had introduced in the middle of the century.[153] The zinc coinage had not only been poorly received by the general public, but appears to have contributed to the economic instability that developed in the late 1760s and early 1770s. Merchants were apparently hoarding goods and refusing to sell them for the new coinage, while those who had the older copper coinage were reluctant to part with it.[154] The zinc coinage was also apparently quite easily counterfeited, which brought with it another set of problems.[155] The Tây Sơn minting of new copper coins was thus widely welcomed,

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[150] *Lê Quý Dật Sử*, 69.
[151] Pérez, 74.
[152] *ĐNLT*, cited in Li, 147, note32.
[153] Nguyễn Duy, "Hình Suy Nghĩ Về Nhà Tây Sơn," (Some Thoughts about the House of the Tây Sơn) *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử* 1, (1989): 35.
[154] See Quốc Sử Quan Triều Nguyễn, *Đại Nam Thực Lục Tiền Biên*, tập 1. (The Preliminary Records of the Veritable Records of the Great South), trans. Nguyễn Ngọc Tỉnh (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Sử Học, 1962), 236, for the text of a 1770 memorial commenting on the problem with zinc coinage.
[155] Li, 96.

even if its production did entail considerable levels of destruction of cultural artifacts, not only of the Nguyễn court, but of temple bells and other such items. The Tây Sơn coinage proved so popular, in fact, that it remained in wide circulation well into the nineteenth century despite Nguyễn attempts to suppress and replace it.[156]

Building Political Connections

Supernatural manifestations, demonstrations of economic generosity and personal prowess all made contributions to Tây Sơn political credibility. Yet this was not sufficient fully to establish their political status, particularly for parvenus like the Tây Sơn. From the outset the Tây Sơn brothers sought to connect themselves to the ruling powers of their time. They did this both through formal political and military connections, and through designs to marry into ruling families. In this regard, the Tây Sơn approach to power was in the classic Southeast Asian mold of making connections to institutions, individuals and historical legacies that might enhance their claims and prestige. In many ways these strategies reflect the idea of patron-client relationships, in which one seeks to gain political protection and the potential of advancement, by making alliances with political superiors.

The Tây Sơn and the Nguyễn (1773-1775)

Already during the early years of their uprising, the rebels sought to portray themselves not as an entirely new political force, but as defenders of the existing, but corrupted, order. The initial impetus for the uprising appears to have been an attempt to defend the eldest brother, Nguyễn Nhạc, against state demands that he turn over missing tax monies. After capturing the prefectural capital of Qui Nhơn, however, the movement took a significantly new direction. Now the brothers declared their support for the "legitimate ruler" of the kingdom – the young son of the previous

[156] Đỗ Văn Ninh, "Tiền Cổ Thời Tây Sơn" (Ancient Money from the Tây Sơn Period) *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử*, No. 6, (Nov-Dec 1978): 107.

Chúa – displaced through the machinations of the widely despised regent, Trương Phúc Loan. The Tây Sơn leadership no doubt reasoned that slogans supporting a legitimate heir would resonate much more strongly with a conservative peasantry than an open threat to the Nguyễn government itself.

Moreover, by giving their backing to the prince, they were probably hoping to tap into the existing anti-Loan court factions, perhaps gaining some support within the Nguyễn capitol itself. Indeed, Trương Bưu Lâm has pointed out that: "Loan, as regent . . . proceeded to dismantle some of the institutions and power blocks that the Nguyen had built up for almost two hundred years in the south. His actions meant that a number of scholars suddenly found themselves ejected from political power. As a consequence, the people in the south, due no doubt to these now bitter scholars, came to identify Loan with much that was amiss in the physical, social, and moral order."[157] Among these embittered scholars was the Tây Sơn brothers' own teacher, Trương Văn Hiến, who was himself a refugee from the politics of the Nguyễn court. According to some accounts, Hiến's elder brother had been loyal to the late Chúa and had been killed by Trương Phúc Loan when he resisted Loan's efforts to manipulate the succession.[158] It is quite possible that Hiến suggested the strategy of supporting a legitimate heir to the throne, both as a useful political gambit and as a means of gaining some measure of personal revenge.

The idea that they were "rescuing the king" implied that the Tây Sơn were loyalists and not rebels, and as such could be supported without creating ethical dilemmas for those committed to the royal house.[159] By portraying themselves in this manner, they also connected themselves to a long tradition of popular support for legitimate rulers struggling against other claimants, including, most notably, the Trịnh and Nguyễn clans' defense of the Lê against the Mạc. While this might have been

[157] Lâm, 11.

[158] Quách Tấn and Quách Giao, *Nhà Tây Sơn* (The House of Tây Sơn) (Qui Nhơn: Sở Văn Hóa và Thông Tin Nghĩa Bình, 1988), 23.

[159] That the Tây Sơn sought to portray themselves as "rescuing the king" can be seen in the edict they issued as they advanced north in 1786. Written for them by Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh, it explicitly uses the term "rescue the king" [cần vương] to describe their efforts on behalf of Prince Dương. For the full text of that edict see Nguyễn Cẩm Thúy and Nguyễn Phạm Hùng, 265-274.

more important to Confucian scholars forced to choose between virtuous peasant rebels and corrupt, but "legitimate" dynastic kings or their attendant lords, it was also a concern for the peasants, for as Trương Bưu Lâm notes, the Vietnamese peasantry were an inherently conservative, or perhaps simply cautious group. They were reluctant to engage in anti-government activity unless circumstances suggested both that they had a reasonable chance for redress of their problems and that the leader they followed showed some signs of legitimacy.[160]

In this guise the Tây Sơn attempted to rally support for their movement by declaring themselves to be the champions of a more legitimate heir to the Nguyễn lordship.[161] The Tây Sơn announced their intention to oust both the sitting Chúa, and the corrupt regent, Trương Phúc Loan, who had maneuvered the underage Chúa onto the throne. The *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện* reported the Tây Sơn reasoning (as set forth by Nguyễn Nhạc) as follows:

> Now the evil official Trương Phúc Loan is greedily and publicly taking bribes, creating muddied disorder at the court, and reducing the number of soldiers. The crown prince Dương, the son of the Thái-Bảo is a person of deep intelligence and we have to establish him to serve as the king in order to calm the house of the (Nguyễn) Chúa.[162]

The Tây Sơn efforts to connect themselves with the crown prince were apparently successful, for a popular slogan emerged at the time drawing distinctions between the competing forces: *Soldiers of the court are the soldiers of the quốc phó, Hissing soldiers are the soldiers of the crown prince.*[163] The *quốc phó* (country assistant/regent) was Trương Phúc Loan, and the phrase about "hissing soldiers" was a reference to the Tây Sơn armies, which made loud hissing sounds as they moved about the countryside to intimidate their enemies. Another similar slogan is also said

[160] Lâm, 4.

[161] On Võ Vương's death it had been assumed that his second son, Chương Võ would succeed him. Instead, possibly because of Trương Phúc Loan's interference, the Chúa's sixteenth son, Định Vương succeeded him. This choice also left out another possible candidate, the Chúa's ninth son, Hiếu, whose claims were strengthened when Chương Võ died shortly after his father. When Nhạc rose up, he put his support behind prince Dương, who was prince Hiếu's son and designated heir. [Lamb, 88-89, note 2.]

[162] *ĐNLT*, vol. 2, 522.

[163] ibid., 522.

to have emerged at this time: "Attack and topple Trương Phúc Loan, aid and support the crown prince Nguyễn Phúc Dương."[164] It seems clear that the restorationist calls resounded with the populations of this time.

To further enhance their own legitimacy as champions of the rightful heir, the Tây Sơn brothers apparently now took on their mother's surname, Nguyễn.[165] Their paternal surname was Hồ, connecting them to the lineage of Hồ Quý Lý. When the rebellion broke out, however, the Tây Sơn brothers decided to adopt their mother's surname instead. Not only did their bearing the surname Nguyễn connect them in the popular consciousness with the then ruling house, but it could also more generally be seen as auspicious. Loyalists of the ruling family were periodically granted permission to change their surname to Nguyễn as a boon from the rulers. Thus, to bear the surname Nguyễn was either to be related to the royal family, or perhaps to have been recognized by them. In addition, there was apparently a contemporary prophecy that ran "Phù Nguyễn Trì Thống," which has been translated as "Support the Nguyễn and preserve the government." Based on this, Phan Trần Chúc suggested that the Tây Sơn brothers did not merely see the Nguyễn name as politically significant, but also auspicious in a more mystical sense.[166]

Such connections were, however, somewhat tenuous so, leaving nothing to chance, Nguyễn Nhạc sought to establish an even stronger tie to the Nguyễn by marrying a daughter of his to the crown prince.[167] To do this, he first had to capture the crown prince, and after having offered a reward for his capture, the prince was finally brought to the Tây Sơn leader at Hội An, by the two ethnic Chinese generals, Lý Tài and Tap Định in either May or June of 1775.[168] At this point, Nhạc "offered as

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[164] Cited in Văn Tân, *Nguyễn Huệ Con Người và sự Nghiệp* (Nguyễn Huệ: His Life and Accomplishments) (Hà Bắc: Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học, 1967), 62-63.

[165] There is some dispute on this point; some authors argue that the brothers had taken their maternal surname well before the uprising began; see for example Quách Tấn and Quách Giao, 21.

[166] Phan Trần Chúc. *Vua Quang Trung Nguyễn Huệ (Lịch Sử)* (A History of the King Quang Trung Nguyễn Huệ) (Sài Gòn: Chí Ký Xuất Bản, 1957 reprint), 10.

[167] Ironically this perfectly mirrored Trương Phúc Loan's own actions, for Loan had married *his* daughter to the young Chúa whom he had manipulated onto the throne.

[168] *ĐNLT*, vol. 1, 252.

a gift, his daughter Thọ Hượng, to the Crown Prince and many times requested the Crown Prince to ascend the throne as the Lord [but] the Crown prince did not agree to this."[169] Most reports suggest that the prince continued to reject these overtures until he was finally able to flee Tây Sơn captivity and make his way to the Gia Định area where Nguyễn resistance was centered. Other accounts, however, seem to consider the marriage as having taken place.[170] The Tây Sơn leadership appears to have considered it official if the *Hoàng Lê Nhất Thống Chí* is to be believed. In it Nhạc presents himself, by virtue of this connection, as being a member of the (formerly ruling) Nguyễn clan by marriage.[171] The significance of the attempts at a marriage connection cannot be overemphasized. In a region where kinship ties determined political status and legitimacy, the only way for people as unconnected as the Tây Sơn brothers to establish themselves was to marry into political prestige.[172] Moreover, their reliance on using marriage connections was very similar to the actions of their Nguyễn predecessors, who in the 17th century created marriage linkages both to prosperous merchants as well as to rulers of adjacent kingdoms – both Khmer and Cham.[173]

For all their efforts, however, the Nguyễn connection as a legitimating force proved to be of limited usefulness for the Tây Sơn. This was particularly true after the crown prince – resisting efforts to declare him the new Chúa – fled Tây Sơn captivity in the 10th month of the year *bính thân* (Nov. 11 - Dec. 10, 1776). His departure left behind no usable remnants of the Nguyễn court, survivors of which had by now regrouped in the Sài Gòn region. Consequently, the Tây Sơn abandoned any pretense of serving the Nguyễn cause, and there is some evidence that at times the

[169] Tạ Quang Phát, 7a. Presumably to either request.
[170] Perez, 85. "Duong did not wish to take as a wife the one who was proposed for him but being a prudent man, in order to avoid great boredom, he kept her for six months in his house, without making a communal life with her, not allowing her to his bed or table."
[171] *HLNTC* (1998), vol. 1, 148.
[172] For a detailed description of the importance of kinship ties in the Nguyễn polity, see Nola Cooke, "Regionalism and the Nature of Nguyễn Rule in Seventeenth-Century Dang Trong (Cochinchina)," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 29, 1, (March 1998): 122-161.
[173] Li, 120.

Tây Sơn now went out of their way to criticize the Nguyễn. According to Ngô Đức Thọ, the Tây Sơn began using the pejorative term "Cựu Nguyễn" [The Old Nguyễn] when referring to the former ruling family.[174] As was noted earlier, the Tây Sơn had cast military seals that criticized the young Nguyễn Chúa as a tyrant. To further extend their critique, the Tây Sơn leaders formally banned use of the character Phúc [福], which was both part of the name of that Chúa – Nguyễn Phúc Thuần – and of his despised regent – Trương Phúc Loan. This apparently marks the only time in Vietnamese history that a character was tabooed out of antipathy for an individual, rather than to protect the sanctity of royal names.[175] It was at this juncture, in the mid-1770s, that the Tây Sơn sought to establish other, and potentially more useful political connections. Chief among these was a new relationship with the other political force of the era, the Trịnh, who had suddenly become a very immediate presence in the southern region.

The Tây Sơn and the Trịnh (1775-1786)

Taking advantage of the turmoil in the south, the northern Chúa, Trịnh Sâm, had ordered an invasion into Nguyễn territory, his declared objective being to assist the Nguyễn against the Tây Sơn. Trịnh forces entered the Nguyễn territories of Thuận Hóa in late 1774, and soon advanced over the Hải Vân pass, pushing deep into Quảng Nam. While their early advance had met little resistance from the Nguyễn, and they initially scored some important victories over the Tây Sơn, the Trịnh soon ran into trouble. Their troops were ill-prepared for the geography and climate in the southern regions, and they found their supply lines stretched beyond sustainable limits. An epidemic swept through the Trịnh ranks, and although it initially felled rank and file troops, it soon came to decimate the Trịnh military leadership as well. In the short

[174] Thọ, 109.
[175] ibid., 108.

period between January and March, 1776, three of the key Trịnh generals died.[176]

This Trịnh advance in late 1774 and early 1775 had threatened the Tây Sơn position, already imperiled in 1775 by a Nguyễn counter-attack developing to the south. Caught between two military forces and without sufficient resources to fight on two fronts, the Tây Sơn leader, Nguyễn Nhạc, pragmatically offered to surrender to the Trịnh in late spring of 1775. Under these circumstances, the Trịnh leaders readily agreed to the Tây Sơn surrender offer, naming the Tây Sơn brothers as generals in the Trịnh army. Now the man the Trịnh had initially referred to as "that crazy Biện Nhạc"[177] was being called "general" with the grand title of "Tây Sơn hiệu trưởng tráng tiết tướng quân" – the Tây Sơn Firmly Regulating Strong and Temperate Troop General. Initially only Nhạc was given a title, but he pressed the Trịnh further and they then named Huệ as the "Tây Sơn hiệu tiền phong tướng quân" – the Tây Sơn Firm Vanguard Troop General. New titles in hand, the Tây Sơn brothers could now turn their attention to attacking the Nguyễn in the south, for they were now officers in the Trịnh army, ostensibly serving as the vanguard of Trịnh forces in this region.[178]

In exchange for political recognition or perhaps more accurately enrollment in the Trịnh armies, the Tây Sơn offered their northern patrons valuable items reflecting the wealth and natural resources of the south. These included horses, elephants, precious eaglewood, jade and gold.[179] Interestingly, this suggested a relationship viewed from both sides as that appropriate to representatives of distinct states. Nguyễn Nhạc also offered up the three prefectures of Quảng Ngãi, Qui Nhơn and Phú

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[176] *Bình Nam Thực Lục* (Veritable Records of the Pacification of the South), DC 79, 16-17. Bình Định Provincial Library, Qui Nhơn. Hereafter *Bình Nam Thực Lục* (qn).

[177] See for example the summary of the Trịnh general's decree to the Nguyễn populations recorded in *Đại Nam Thực Lục*, vol. 1, 247. The reference to Nhạc is found in a letter by the same Trịnh general to the Nguyễn, recorded in *Phủ Biên Tạp Lục* (1977), 312.

[178] *Tây Sơn Thủy Mạc Khảo* (A Sketch of Research into the Tây Sơn), DC 156, 4. Bình Định Provincial Library, Qui Nhơn; for a much more detailed discussion of the relationship and communications between the Tây Sơn and the Trịnh, see the *Bình Nam Thực Lục*, VHv. 185 of the Viện Hán Nôm. Interestingly, the *Đại Việt Sử Ký Tục Biên* (393) notes that the Trịnh accepted the Tây Sơn surrender and in exchange requested Nhạc to act to capture and kill the two ethnic Chinese generals serving on his side and known for their cruelty.

[179] *Đại Việt Sử Ký Tục Biên*, 393.

Yên, which would appear to have constituted a token submission not unlike that seen in inter-state relations of this period. Obviously the Trịnh would not formally occupy these areas, since they had already suffered enough in the areas south of Hải Vân, so the Tây Sơn leader was fairly safe in making the offer. The symbolism is important, however, for suggesting the nature of the relationship that emerged between the Tây Sơn and the Trịnh.

Importantly, the Trịnh, in addition to the titles they provided, also bestowed various material goods on the Tây Sơn. These objects, which were emblematic of both political and military power, included swords, military garb, banners, and official seals.[180] Such items held considerable political significance, and were of greater value than the titles alone, which were easily claimed, but less easily substantiated. With possession of these objects reflecting their new rank and affiliation, it would have been far easier for the Tây Sơn to make their claims to power. In fact, the records show that the Tây Sơn repeatedly sent gift-bearing envoys to the Trịnh requesting imperial orders and additional military garb.[181] This suggests that the Tây Sơn clearly understood the value of such items, and went out of their way to secure as many as they could.

Most potent among these objects provided by the Trịnh would have been the seal, the formal acknowledgement and indicator of political or military office. These were used to validate official documents, as well as serving more generally as symbols of power and position.[182] Possession of such a seal was the ultimate indication of one's authority, and the sources provide numerous references to the power and importance of holding such seals. The significance of seals can be seen, for example, in the reaction of a Nguyễn loyalist who journeyed to the Tây Sơn capitol in the company of the English mission led by Charles Chapman:

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[180] Described in ibid., 396.

[181] ibid., 395-396.

[182] For more on the discussion of seals and their Chinese origins, see Herbert A. Giles, *A Glossary Reference on Subjects Connected with the Far East* (London: Curzon Press, Ltd, 1974 reprint of 1900 3rd Edition), 247-248.

> Our poor unfortunate Mandarine, who was now on board incog., and the better to conceal himself dressed in an English dress, his beard shaved, his teeth cleaned and, what distressed him most of all, his nails reduced to three or four inches, desiring to see the paper (an imperial order from Nhạc to Chapman) told me with tears in his eyes that the seal affixed was the ancient seal of the Kings of Cochin China, which the villainous possessor had stolen . . . .[183]

Indeed, the importance of seals within the Vietnamese realm of political symbols is demonstrated by the fact that theft of a mandarin's seal was punishable by decapitation, as was the crime of forging a seal.[184]

Armed with titles and new symbols of authority and prestige, the Tây Sơn first turned their attention to their Nguyễn rivals, which they did with considerable success. By the later 1770s, however, as Nhạc's political power was growing and the threat from the Nguyễn had abated somewhat, the Tây Sơn leader decided to request increased authority from the Trịnh. The Trịnh, for their part, were in no position credibly to threaten the Tây Sơn militarily. Thus, when in early 1777, Nguyễn Nhạc requested that he be recognized by the Trịnh as having political authority over (as opposed to mere military responsibility for) the territories south of Phú Xuân, this was readily granted. On the 5th day of the 1st month of the year *đinh dậu* (February 12, 1777), the Trịnh appointed Nhạc as the Governor General (*trấn thủ*) of Quảng Nam, and also enfieffed him as a Commandary Duke (*Quận Công*), the third highest of the traditional ducal titles.[185] Consequently, Nhạc was now a Trịnh noble and political official.[186] Thereafter, Nhạc and the Tây Sơn more generally, appear to have had little further interaction with their northern patrons. The Vietnamese historical record is virtually silent on subsequent contact, and perhaps given the circumstances this is not surprising. The period after 1777 saw the Tây Sơn leadership involved in an intensifying struggle with their Nguyễn foes in the south, and they had little

[183] Chapman, 95.

[184] Joseph Buttinger, *The Smaller Dragon* (New York: Praeger, 1957), 182-3.

[185] The use of terms such as Duke, drawn from attempts at rendering European parallels is clearly problematic. However, the long-standing practice of using such translations, as well as a lack of good alternatives, suggest that the best translation, however imperfect, may be the conventional one.

[186] *Bình Nam Thực Lục*, 49b.

opportunity, and not much need, for further interactions with the Trịnh. Moreover, they had still other useful means of enhancing their political claims in the south.

The Cham Connection

In addition to their early efforts to connect themselves to the rather more distant (if more powerful) political centers at Thăng Long and Phú Xuân, the Tây Sơn also connected themselves to local political forces. One of the most significant aspects of the Tây Sơn uprising was its connection to various ethnic minority groups, including both highland-dwellers and residents of the coastal plains. Through his trading connections, Nguyễn Nhạc had already established valuable relationships with the highland ethnic groups, including most notably the Bahnar, a member of which group Nhạc allegedly took for one of his wives.[187] These groups offered soldiers, supplies and protection during the early years of the movement when it was most vulnerable to attack and extermination by Nguyễn forces.

While highland political and personal connections were clearly important, particularly in the movement's early stages, as the Tây Sơn spread into the coastal plains they came increasingly to rely on another ethnic minority group – the Chams. The region in which the Tây Sơn brothers rose up was the center of what remained of the mighty kingdom of Champa, and the landscape was dotted with reminders of the power of that entity. Forebears of the eighteenth-century Chams had once controlled most of the central region of what is today Việt Nam, with their power periodically extending north toward Thăng Long and south and west toward Angkor. Champa had been a formidable political and military force rivaling the early Vietnamese state, but had suffered territorial losses and political decline at the hands of the Vietnamese particularly beginning in the fifteenth century. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Cham political entities and populations had borne the brunt of the

[187] Vũ Minh Giang, "Tây Sơn Trượng Đạo, Căn Cứ Đầu Tiên Của Cuộc Khởi Nghĩa," (The Tây Sơn Upper Region, The First Foundation for the Righteous Uprising) in *Góp Phần Tìm Hiểu Phong Trào Nông Dân Tây Sơn Nguyễn Huệ* (Sở Văn Hòa Thông Tin Nghĩa Bình, 1983), 28.

Nguyễn southward expansion and by the Tây Sơn period, the Cham polity had been drastically reduced in size and influence. Despite this, it still retained a degree of autonomy, although this survived chiefly through the forbearance of the Nguyễn rulers.

Given what they had suffered at the hands of the Nguyễn, it is perhaps not surprising that the Chams would be ready to ally themselves with the Tây Sơn, and among the earliest supporters of the Tây Sơn movement was a Cham princess, Thị Hỏa, and her entourage. Beyond gaining the physical assistance of some Cham peoples, the Tây Sơn also looked to the Chams for less tangible, but equally important, political symbols. Thus, at some point early in the movement, according to nineteenth century Nguyễn court historians, "The Cham *Chưởng Cơ* at the Cham principality of Thuận Thành (a tributary of the Nguyễn court), joined the Tây Sơn and brought with him all of the court regalia to present it to them."[188] In effect, such an act would appear to have constituted a transfer of Cham political hopes to the Tây Sơn. Perhaps the Cham ruler reasoned that the Tây Sơn might assist them in preserving their remaining autonomy or at least permit them to exact a measure of revenge on the Nguyễn.

A very different, and perhaps more plausible account of the transfer of the regalia is found in a letter written by a French missionary. This account suggests that the Tây Sơn seized the Cham regalia, rather than having it gifted to them, and as such suggests less about Cham aspirations than it does about possible Tây Sơn motivations. Jean-Pierre-Joseph D'Arcet, the only French missionary living in Tây Sơn controlled territory from the mid-1770s until 1786 described the Cham-Tây Sơn encounter thus:

> The other day, having retreated from his war in Đồng Nài, [Nhạc] visited a small king who was along his route between the two kingdoms. He found no one at this court but a young man of ten to twelve, who had been placed on the throne. He [Nhạc] declared himself [to be] the young man's father and

[188] Quốc Sử Quan Triều Nguyễn, *Đại Nam Nhất Thống Chí* (The Unification Records of the Great South), trans. Phạm Trọng Điềm (Huế: Nhà Xuất Bản Thuận Hóa, 1996), vol. 3, 143. *Chưởng Cơ* here appears to be used as a generic political title; it is sometimes translated by the military term "captain."

> elder brother, and demanded to be shown the most precious objects in the court. Among the other things he was shown, was a golden scepter admirably crafted using 14 horns to mark all of the generations of the father and sons since the founding of the kingdom. He took this admirable work and said to his pupil: "I will return it to you." [The prince] had to accept the compliment and allow the pillaging of his court by this charitable and compassionate tutor. The poor pupil now finds himself well content to find himself still alive.[189]

Whether the Cham regalia was offered or seized, it ended up in the hands of the Tây Sơn leadership, which no doubt used it to great effect. Such items would have powerful mystical significance whose resonance would have lent considerable weight to Tây Sơn political and ritual claims.[190]

Perhaps the most symbolically significant Tây Sơn act connecting them to the Chams was Nguyễn Nhạc's selecting the ancient Cham capital of Vijaya, to serve as his Imperial Capitol. Known in Vietnamese as Chà Bàn (or Đồ Bàn), this citadel was located slightly inland from Qui Nhơn and had largely fallen into disrepair over the centuries. Nguyễn Nhạc made a considerable effort to restore it, reinforcing its walls and reconstructing some of the interior palaces.[191] It was this city that the Englishman Charles Chapman visited in 1778, and of which he provides a useful contemporary description (see below). Chà Bàn was to serve as Nhạc's capitol from 1776, when he first began his repairs, until his death in 1793, at which point his nephew continued to use the city as a political center. Again, one can only speculate about the Tây Sơn-Cham connection here. There is no explicit evidence that the Tây Sơn selected this site precisely because it was a former Cham capitol, though the *Nguyễn Thị Tây Sơn Ký*, did note that the site was selected for its good omens.[192] The site was almost certainly selected for reasons of proximity and the possibility that it

[189] Jean-Pierre-Joseph D'Arcet to Jean-Jacques Descourvieres, 20 September, 1785. MEP 801, 80-81. Written from Nha Trang.

[190] Li, 155.

[191] See for example, *Nguyễn Thị Tây Sơn Ký* (Records of the Nguyễn Tây Sơn Clan), ms. A.3138, Viện Hán Nôm, Hà Nội, 4b, also 60a; for a more detailed essay on this site see Phan Huy Lê, "Di tích thành Hoàng Đế," in *Tìm Về Cội Nguồn, Tập I* (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Thế Giới, 1998), 103-123. See also *Chiêm Thành Khảo* (Research on Champa), ms. A. 970, Viện Hán Nôm, Hà Nội.

[192] *Nguyễn Thị Tây Sơn Ký*, 4b-5a.

could be readily defended, as well as its important symbolic role.

The Tây Sơn-Cham connection had thus been established in the first few years of their uprising – and was no doubt a valuable one. The Cham state, whatever it had lost in terms of influence or autonomy, remained an alternative site of political power. From this site, the Tây Sơn could contest for authority with the Nguyễn, not as successors to the Nguyễn, but as successors to the Cham political tradition. It is perhaps not entirely an accident that when Nguyễn Huệ arrived in Thăng Long in 1786, some northerners referred to him by the name Chề Bống Nga, recalling the powerful fourteenth-century Cham ruler who had similarly sacked Thang Long.[193] And it is at least symbolically significant that like Chề Bống Nga, Nguyễn Huệ was given an imperial princess in marriage as a gesture designed both to appease the southern warrior and to connect the northern and southern political realms. This is significant, because it once again emphasized the idea that the Tây Sơn were outsiders, to the point of being viewed as coming from another country. While the Cham Empire, which may have reached its height under the rule of Chề Bống Nga, was by the late eighteenth century politically insignificant to the point of being virtually nonexistent, to northerners, far removed from that part of their country, the Cham might as well have remained a vital political and military force.

The Tây Sơn Claim Power

Clearly then, the Tây Sơn leaders made considerable efforts to legitimate their actions by connecting themselves to existing political forces in the form of the Nguyễn and Trịnh, as well as local powers like the Cham. Despite making these connections, the Tây Sơn were not without their own personal political ambitions, and they did not embrace either the Nguyễn or Trịnh causes unreservedly. In fact, the Tây Sơn actions certainly belied their statements about supporting the crown prince, and by extension the Nguyễn polity. While it is perhaps not surprising that the Tây

[193] Li, 153.

Sơn set aside some of the most onerous tax measures used by the Nguyễn, they also destroyed the sacred objects of the Nguyễn court, most notably setting ablaze the nine ancestral temples (of the Nguyễn lords beginning with Nguyễn Hoang) in the capital city of Quảng Nam province in mid-1774.[194] While it is unclear whether this was a calculated act of political retribution, or merely the uncontrolled destruction of a military campaign, it highlights the tension that existed in the Tây Sơn relationship to their erstwhile allies.

Furthermore, sometime prior to the end of 1775 (the date is not entirely clear) the Tây Sơn leader, Nhạc gave the first indication of his own (perhaps newly-developed) political ambitions. This took the form of his establishing a formal Tây Sơn government, which mimicked in titles, if perhaps not in functions, the major elements of an imperial administration. Nhạc named himself as the Minh Phương Chúa Công, and assigned titles to his brothers as well.[195] He then set up and assigned officials, at least nominally, to the six administrative "boards" – the ministries that handled the principle aspects of traditional Vietnamese governments: Public Works, Interior, Rites, Military, Justice, Finance.[196] The *Bình Nam Thực Lục* too notes that he "divided and set up positions according to the system of the Nguyễn family."[197] This act would seem a clear indication that the Tây Sơn were well on their way to dispensing with a Nguyễn figurehead, despite (at this time) their continuing to hold the recalcitrant Prince Dương as a political hostage.

In 1776, to the annoyance of their Trịnh patrons, the Tây Sơn pushed their political independence even further as Nhạc took the unusual imperial title of Heavenly King [天 王 – *thiên vương*][198] and it was at this time that he formally

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[194] Pérez, 81.

[195] *Nguyễn Thị Tây Sơn Ký*, 4b.

[196] ibid., 4b-5a.

[197] *Bình Nam Thực Lục* (qn), 18.

[198] The reference to Nhạc as the "Heavenly King" is found in *HLNTC* (1986), 62; also in *Nguyễn Thị Tây Sơn Ký*, 5a. This is clearly in contrast to the later term "vua trời" reported by the French missionaries during the 1786 campaign to the north.

established his royal capital at the ancient Cham citadel of Vijaya (Chà Bàn).[199] Li Tana has commented on Nhạc's choice of title in this instance:

> It is possible that the local word signified by the two Chinese characters used for this term was *potao*, the Cham word for 'lord,' or sometimes 'king.' But 'King of Heaven,' it should be recalled, was the same title the Nguyễn used when they were dealing with indigenous peoples to the south, as was specifically stipulated in Nguyễn Phúc Khoát's 1744 reforms. In other words, Nhạc had claimed for himself the local title attributed to the Nguyễn by non-Vietnamese but was using it to refer to his own subjects in the new kingdom he established for himself in central-south Vietnam.[200]

In addition to taking the title and naming a new capitol, Nhạc also cast a golden seal (as we have already seen a very powerful symbol of authority), created new political divisions in Qui Nhơn, and announced a conscription requiring one out of every five villagers to report for military service.[201]

Nhạc's political aspirations were not yet satisfied however, for in the following year (1778) he lay claim to the pinnacle of political authority, naming himself Emperor (*Hoàng Đế*), and inaugurating the first year of the Thái Đức reign.[202] This was symbolically an extremely important step, for in adopting a new reign year, Nhạc had made a break with the Lê, a step that even after nearly 200 years the Nguyễn had been unwilling to take. In the traditional Vietnamese political system reign years were used to date events, serving as a chronological touchstone. The Nguyễn use of the Lê Imperial reign eras in their calendars and other documents had constituted their ongoing acknowledgement of Lê legitimacy.[203] For Nhạc, lacking the vested interest that the Nguyễn had in perpetuating the idea of Lê authority over the southern region, this step was probably seen as a logical personal claim rather than as

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[199] The *ĐVSKTB*, 416-421, describes the Trịnh displeasure at the Tây Sơn actions, and yet also reports that the northern regime continued to grant decrees and titles to the Tây Sơn leader.

[200] Li, (1998), 150-151. (italics in original); see also ibid., 109.

[201] *Nguyễn Thị Tây Sơn Ký*, 5a. see also *ĐNTL*, 256. Both accounts ominously report that the golden seal was cracked in the first two castings, and only properly accomplished in the third.

[202] According to the *Cương Mục* (II), 810, he only named himself "vương" at this time; he did not actually take the title of Hoàng Đế (Emperor), until 1787, after his return from Thăng Long.

[203] On the continued Nguyễn use of Lê reign titles see, for instance, Nola Cooke (1998), note 201.

a profound political challenge to the Lê rulers. Through his creation of a new reign title, Nhạc was probably declaring the establishment of an independent southern state, rather than challenging the Lê Emperor's claims to authority over all of "Đại Việt." The documentary evidence on this point is sketchy, though it seems more logical to conclude that at this point Nhạc was making claims only to former Nguyễn domains. When detailing his plans for further territorial conquests to the British envoy Charles Chapman in the same year, he mentioned only the conquest of former Nguyễn territories at that time under Trịnh control, making no mention of challenging Lê authority north of the Gianh River.[204]

That Nguyễn Nhạc strove to mimic the finery of imperial courts is evidenced in Chapman's account of his visit, in July of 1778, to the Tây Sơn court at the former Cham citadel of Chà Bàn. As Chapman noted:

> Upon the whole, the appearance was a fine one, and, altho' the scene wanted some of the requisites which constitute grandeur and magnificence amongst other Eastern Princes, as a profusion of jewels, carpets, attendants &c, the regularity and decorum observed here presented one with some adequate ideas of a powerful sovereign surrounded by his Court.[205]

Chapman also noted of Nhạc's appearance:

> The King was clothed in a robe of silk of a deep yellow upon which dragons and other figures were wrought in gold; upon his head he wore a kind of close cap turned up behind, the front ornamented with some jewels and on the top of it was a large red stone through which passed a wire raising it a few inches. It shook and sparkled as he moved himself.[206]

It is distinctly possible that Chapman was visiting Nguyễn Nhạc shortly after Nhạc's enthronement as the Emperor Thái Đức. While the Vietnamese sources on this point are rather ambiguous, the *Nguyễn Thị Tây Sơn Ký* notes that: "In the spring, the first month of the year *Mậu Tuất* (1778), our (Nguyễn) troops advanced to attack Sai Gòn, and the group of the *Tổng đôc* Nhung lost and fled. *At that time*, Nhạc established

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[204] Chapman, 100.
[205] ibid., 98.
[206] ibid, 97-98.

himself as the Minh Đức Emperor."[207] The rest of the description, including the ritual prostrations performed by the mandarins to Nhạc suggest that his status by this time was already that of Emperor, rather than mere Vương. Moreover, the finery in which Nhạc was attired might well have been part of the regalia seized from the Cham ruler, although the sources are not precisely clear on when that seizure took place.

With Nhạc's naming himself Emperor, the Tây Sơn had effectively cut their pretended political and military alliances with the Nguyễn and the Trịnh as they staked out their own political territory. For the next eight years this political situation held in Tây Sơn-controlled territory, even as military conflicts with the Nguyễn continued to rage in the south. Thereafter, however, the situation changed dramatically, profoundly shaping the course of the movement and splitting its leaders.

The Limits of Cohesion: Tây Sơn Political Division

As late as 1785 the Tây Sơn leaders had continued to develop their political claims and made their claims to legitimacy within the context of the former Nguyễn-held territories to the south of the Hải Vân pass. In 1786 the situation changed dramatically, and that year can be said to mark a watershed for the Tây Sơn movement as underlying tensions within its leadership surfaced in dramatic fashion. The source of these changes was the expansion of Tây Sơn ambitions toward the north, first into former Nguyễn territories held by the Trịnh and then into the northern capital region itself. To this point northern involvement in the Tây Sơn movement – Trịnh enfiefment of the Tây Sơn brothers and their enrollment in the ranks of the Trịnh military and political hierarchy, and a heavily militarized Trịnh border position just south of Phú Xuân – had been quite limited. Both sides appeared to have been content with the status quo. The Trịnh had sought to exploit the mineral resources of their newly captured territories, and to harness their agricultural

[207] *Nguyễn Thị Tây Sơn Kí*, 阮氏西山記, 9. TMs DC 112 Bình Định Provincial Library, Qui Nhơn. [Emphasis added.] Hereafter *Nguyễn Thị Tây Sơn Ký* (qn).

fecundity. The Tây Sơn for their part had been busy attempting to put an end to Nguyễn resistance in the far south. The situation changed dramatically in 1786, when Tây Sơn forces led by Nguyễn Huệ seized first Phú Xuân and then the northern capitol of Thăng Long in a lightening campaign. In essence the movement divided in the summer of 1786, and the dividing line was drawn between the more cautious, and perhaps less ambitious elder brother, Nguyễn Nhạc, and his visionary, military genius younger brother, Nguyễn Huệ.

Prior to this point, the Tây Sơn brothers had fought together as part of a relatively cohesive leadership, under the ultimate control of Nguyễn Nhạc, who had declared himself Emperor in 1778. There is, unfortunately, little information on the inner dynamics of the Tây Sơn leadership during the period between 1775 and 1786, so it is difficult to determine whether there had been underlying tensions prior to 1786. There is one account in a missionary letter that describes the two brothers at odds over the treatment of Christians. In this episode, Huệ is described as forcefully attacking his brother's policy of cracking down on Christians, arguing that it was too divisive at a time when they needed all of their populations on their side. The letter describes considerable anger on the part of Huệ, and a reluctant acquiescence to his younger brother's arguments on the part of Nhạc.[208] Other than this, we can only speculate that whatever tension might have existed was lessened by the constant warfare, which kept the brothers frequently apart and very busy with military matters in the south. At the same time, it is logical to assume that as Huệ achieved repeated victories in the south, while his brother remained largely immobile at Chà Bàn, the younger brother may have begun to develop political ambitions of his own.

In any case, their relationship changed dramatically in 1786 with the campaign to recover Thuận Hóa from the Trịnh. The impetus for this move was the decisive Tây Sơn defeat of a Nguyễn-Siamese force in the Mekong Delta region in 1785 that forced Nguyễn Ánh and his supporters to flee into exile in Siam. With the Nguyễn out of the way, the Tây Sơn brothers could turn their attention to the north to

[208] "Journal de la Procure de Macao en 1784." MEP 306, 928-929.

capture the territory that the Trịnh had seized from the Nguyễn in their 1774-1775 campaign. This had been an objective of Nhạc's since at least 1778, when he had revealed his intentions to Charles Chapman. Two other factors made this a propitious time to attack the north. First, its populations were considerably weakened by a famine that had wreaked havoc in the region for several years and had become particularly intense in 1785 and early 1786. Secondly, Nhạc now had the advice and knowledge of a northern defector, Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh, whose detailed knowledge of the situation in the north gave the Tây Sơn information they needed to advance their attack. Nhạc thus dispatched Chỉnh and Huệ to attack and seize the Trịnh-occupied territories as far north as the Gianh River. Nguyễn Huệ, however, exceeded his brother's instructions and did not stop with the relatively easy capture of Thuận Hóa. Instead, he continued his march into traditional Trịnh territory, crossing the Gianh River, and then entering Thăng Long in July of 1786. There was only light Trịnh resistance, as political infighting in the capitol had largely reduced the northern regime's capacity to mount a coordinated response to the Tây Sơn.

Many Vietnamese historians attempt to credit Nguyễn Huệ with the decision to seize the north in the 1786 campaigns, citing (among Marxists) a desire to unify the country or (among others) personal ambition. While there must have been some component of personal motivation, all indications are that the actual impetus to expand the campaign came from Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh. The *HLNTC* gives an extensive description of the conversation between the two, in which Chỉnh strongly urged Huệ to seize the opportunity to extend his offensive toward Thăng Long, noting that there were no men of great strength or intelligence in the north that might offer resistance.[209] Chỉnh argued for the restoration of the Lê as the chief justification for this venture. Other contemporary sources all suggest, however, that Chỉnh's eagerness to go north was a combination of personal ambition and a desire for revenge against the Trịnh who had forced him to flee the north in 1782. There are numerous letters by Europeans in the mid-1780s, which report that Chỉnh was known to harbor a strong

[209] *HLNTC* (1998), vol. 2, 106-109.

desire to return north to exact his vengeance. Moreover, some of these letters make it equally clear that the northerners fully expected Chỉnh to attempt such an action.[210]

Based on Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh's advice, the Tây Sơn emblazoned on their banners the phrase "Destroy the Trịnh, Aid the Lê."[211] Thus, as with their earlier campaigns when they had fought in the name of the "true" Nguyễn heir, the Tây Sơn advance on Thăng Long took place not under their own banner, but under that of the Lê. Once again the Tây Sơn acted in the name of the recognized orthodox political force in an attempt to portray themselves not as rebels but as restorationist forces, coming to "aid the king." To the northern Lê loyalists, however, the Tây Sơn did not necessarily constitute salvation. As a close aid to the Lê Emperor noted, "It is only because the Trịnh clan was oppressive and angered the people that the Tây Sơn have taken advantage of hostilities to borrow the righteous phrase 'assist the Lê and destroy the Trịnh.' It is because of this that the people in the country do not resist them."[212]

Although most evidence suggests that the Tây Sơn fought under the Lê restorationist banner, there are some intriguing sources that suggest the Tây Sơn now revived their use of the Nguyễn name. Specifically, there are four sources that argue that in 1786, during their campaign to the north, the Tây Sơn claimed to be the Nguyễn, coming to liberate the north from the Trịnh and to assist the Lê. This apparent Tây Sơn deception adds to our understanding of the nature of Tây Sơn political machinations, suggesting their willingness to adapt, chameleon-like, to the circumstances that they encountered. The first evidence for this strategy is an undated *quốc ngữ* work, *Sử Ký Đại Nam Việt Quốc Triều* (The Historical Records of the Great Southern Việt National Court) which states that:

The Tây Sơn troops had for a long time desired to seize all of the regions of

[210] See, eg. Journal de ce qui s'est passé dans la mission du Tong-king, depuis le mois de juin 1784 jusqu'a mois de mai 1785), MEP 691, 522.

[211] "Diệt Trịnh, Phú Lê." This was not the first time this banner had been raised in the north. During his long-running campaigns, Lê Duy Mất used the identical slogan.

[212] Văn Tân, *Cách Mạng Tây Sơn* (The Tây Sơn Revolution) (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Sử Địa, 1957), 100.

> Đàng Ngòai, and when they heard that Cống Chỉnh [Hữu Chỉnh] had fled to them they were very pleased. For this reason, Thái Đức sent out his younger brother, by the name of Long Nhương [Huệ], with a reputation for great intelligence and courage; he took the name of the Nguyễn house and brought a great number of soldiers up to Đàng Ngoài. First of all they sent a letter out to every place telling the people that 'The Nguyễn House has already defeated the Tây Sơn soldiers, and has also taken and pacified all the areas of Đàng Trong; now we are entering Đàng Ngoài, first to come to rescue the people and to destroy the Trịnh family, because in the past they have made great difficulties for the people; second to help to rescue the Lê family; and third because formerly the Nguyễn family acted as Chúa governing all of the regions of Đàng Ngoài and assisted the Lê house, and thus we wish once again to take up that position.' Thus some of the soldiers carried banners on which was written 'The Nguyễn court undertakes to destroy the Trịnh and assist the Lê.'[213]

This source suggests that in 1786 the Tây Sơn continued to make use of their supposed connections to the Nguyễn, viewing these as having considerable political capital in the north. This tale is at least plausible because of its reference to the established fact that Tây Sơn forces carried banners that spoke of destroying the Trịnh and restoring the Lê.

The second reference to the Tây Sơn purporting to be the Nguyễn is found in an account, published in 1812, that reported, with respect to Huệ's advance to the north:

> He entered, and by use of a stratagem which would not succeed but in a country where communication with neighboring countries is extremely difficult, and absolutely prohibited in times of war, made himself out to be Nguyen Chung, the legitimate king of Cochinchina, who was at the time a fugitive from his states, and announced that he had come to deliver the king of Tonkin from the oppression of the Trịnh, to whom he was a vassal and friend. This disguise procured for him the most favorable information; the army that the Trinh had sent against him refused to fight, and put down their arms. . . he put the king of Tonkin, Lê, back into possession of his lands, and married his daughter, always under the assumed name of Nguyen

[213] *Sử Ký Đại Nam Việt Quốc Triều* (The Historical Records of the Great Southern Việt National Court). (Sài Gòn: Nhóm Nghiên Cứu Sử Địa Việt Nam Xuất Bản, 1973), 37-38.

Chung.[214]

The third piece of evidence comes in the form of a description of the events of this period written by the Vietnamese Jesuit, Philiphê Bỉnh. Although written in 1822, this description's author had left Việt Nam for Europe in 1795, so his recounting of these events is less likely to have been influenced by later evidence. Moreover, he was living in the north in 1786, making his account that much more plausible. He wrote:

> In the third month (sic) of 1786, [the Tây Sơn] fought with Tạo Thể at Phủ Xuân, and also sent many ships to go up to Kẻ Chợ (Thăng Long) in Đàng Ngoài pretending to be merchant ships. On the sixteenth day of the 6th month, the naval troops arrived at and entered Vị Huàng, where they pretended to be from the Nguyễn House, in order that the people would admire them.[215]

Yet another source that mentions this deception is the *Cao Bằng Thực Lục* (The Veritable Records of Cao Bằng) a history of the far northern region of Cao Bằng, written in the first decade of the nineteenth century. This source reports that the Trịnh forces were ready to fight the Tây Sơn until they "heard Quang Bình spread the news that 'the troops of the Nguyễn Vương are coming' and then the rioting troops knew this to be true, and they immediately discarded their lances and knives." Then, however, "when Quang Bình entered the capitol, they realized that he had lied, and they repented, but they had to bear tying their hands [ie. surrendering]."[216]

All of these later accounts are reinforced by a French missionary writing in late 1786 shortly after the attack, who noted that during the Tây Sơn campaigns word was spread that the Nguyễn Chúa's arrival was imminent, making the assumption that the Tây Sơn armies were those of the anticipated Nguyễn lord a natural one.[217] Indeed,

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[214] *Etat Actuel* (1812), 167-168. Although allegedly by the French missionary de la Bissachère, Charles Maybon has demonstrated that this work was almost certainly by a Baron Antoine de Montyon, who borrowed considerable amounts from the writings of Barrow and possibly others. See Charles B. Maybon, *La Relation sur le Tonkin et Cochinchine de Mr. de La Bissachère* (Paris, 1920), 1-69.

[215] Philiphê Bỉnh, ms. *Truyện Anam Đàng Trao* (1822), 658-659. Borgiana Tonchinese No. 2, Vatican Library.

[216] *Cao Bằng Thực Lục*, DC 92, 3. TMs. (photocopy) Bình Định Provincial Library, Qui Nhơn.

[217] LeRoy to Claude-François L'Etondal, 6 December, 1786. MEP 700, 1307.

it is quite plausible that the Tây Sơn were actually attempting to portray themselves as the Nguyễn coming to rescue the Lê. Whatever antipathies the northern peoples might have held for the Nguyễn, it makes sense to think that they would have been more likely to welcome the Nguyễn than the perceived peasant rebels represented by the Tây Sơn.[218]

Finally, we also know that the Chinese court referred to the Tây Sơn as the "Nguyễn," both in its internal correspondence and in its direct correspondence with the new Vietnamese rulers.[219] The Chinese use of the surname Nguyễn in their references to the Tây Sơn obviously brought with it the potential for serious confusion, and indeed the Tây Sơn did not go out of their way to clarify for the Chinese their possible connections to the southern ruling house.[220] In fact it was quite natural for the Chinese, who had been aware of the long-standing Trịnh-Nguyễn tension in Việt Nam, simply to assume that the civil war had finally been decided in favor of the Nguyễn family. The *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện* reports a Chinese official, the *Tuần-phủ* Tôn Vĩnh Thanh who submitted a memorial during Qing court deliberations about the planned attack on the Tây Sơn:

> Previously the Lê and Nguyễn families fought one another. The Lê have surely been swallowed by the Nguyễn family. Is it not clear that peace has been fixed? If then you take the opportunity of their danger and (economic)

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[218] On the other hand, all of these accounts appear to be contradicted by a *Nôm* edict issued by Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh in 1786 in advance of the Tây Sơn offensive, in which he explicitly stated that the forces coming north were the Tây Sơn, and in which he described the reasons for their rebellion (see Nguyễn Cẩm Thúy and Nguyễn Phạm Hùng, 165). It is possible that these contradictions may be resolved if we consider that there were different audiences involved and that different elements of the Tây Sơn forces may have spread different types of information.

[219] See *Đại Việt Quốc Thư* 大越國書 (National Documents of Đại Việt) trans. Hoàng Văn Hòe (Sài Gòn: Bộ Giáo Dục Xuất Bản, 1967).

[220] Indeed, this confusion remains to the present day among China scholars attempting to write about this period of Vietnamese history. In his well-regard survey history *The Search for Modern China*, Jonathan Spence writes about the Tây Sơn-Qing battle by merely referring to the Tây Sơn as the "usurping Nguyễn family." Jonathan Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), 111 While technically true, if one regards the Tây Sơn adoption of the surname, it reflects much more the Chinese understanding of the situation, than it does the Vietnamese, and moreover reveals the very ambiguity of the Chinese perception of the state of affairs in Việt Nam.

exhaustion to seize them, it will not be too late.[221]

As this letter suggests, the Chinese were extremely unclear as to the precise political situation of their southern neighbor.

Whatever the guise in which they advanced on the north, once in Thăng Long, Nguyễn Huệ followed through on his promise to restore the Lê. He arranged for an imperial audience in which he made a great show of restoring power to the Lê ruler. In return the Lê ruler bestowed titles on the Tây Sơn commander, including the lofty sounding "Đại Nguyên Soái Uy Quốc Công" – Generalissimo and Mighty Grand Duke. The granting of the title "Đại Nguyên Soái " is particularly significant because it was precisely this title that the Trịnh rulers had held, and so by implication Nguyễn Huệ was apparently being viewed by the Lê as having supplanted the ousted Trịnh.

The granting of these titles apparently did not impress Nguyễn Huệ, however, and he reportedly complained to Chỉnh:

> I have brought several tens of thousands of troops, fought one battle and pacified the region north of the river. As for any inch of land or any person here they are all mine; if I wish to establish myself as Emperor or king, there is nothing that would prevent this. And as for the decree naming me as a Generalissimo and Grand Duke, does this really matter to me? Is this an attempt by the northerners to use heroic titles in order to corrupt me? Do they think that I am a barbarian who on receiving these titles of enfiefment will immediately take them to serve as sufficient honor and glory![222]

Unsatisfied with these titles and accolades the Tây Sơn leader sought a more substantive reward. He requested the hand of one of the imperial princesses in marriage.[223] Hardly in a position to refuse, the Lê Emperor offered Nguyễn Huệ his

[221] *ĐNLT*, vol. 2, 515.

[222] Quốc Sử Quán Triều Nguyễn, *Khâm Định Việt Sử Thông Giám Cương Mục* (The Imperially Ordered Mirror and Commentary on the History of the Việt) (1881), R. 524, Thư Viện Quốc Gia Hà Nội, Vol. 46, 24a-25b. Hereafter CM (1881). This speech in various forms can be found in other source as well. See eg. Nguyễn Thu, *Lê Quý Ký Sự* (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1974), 39; *HLNTC* (1998), vol. 1, 133.

[223] Some sources credit Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh with having suggested this request to Nguyễn Huệ. See, eg. *HLNTC* (1998), vol. 1, 133.

favorite daughter, Princess Ngọc Hân. In one respect this was a continuation of what had been a frequent occurrence during the years of Trịnh domination of court politics, namely the marriage of a royal princess to one or another member of the Trịnh family. Although the Trịnh had sufficient political and military power to exercise total control over the Lê court, by periodically renewing and deepening this relationship through marriage, the Trịnh were able further to solidify their political claims.

By marrying into the Lê royal family the Tây Sơn were further extending their own connections to the ruling political powers. First it had been Nguyễn Nhạc attempting to force a marriage between his daughter and the young Nguyễn heir to the throne, and now his younger brother was following a similar course, though under somewhat different circumstances. The marriage alliance between Nguyễn Huệ and Ngọc Hân is noteworthy because it has the appearance of an alliance being formed between sovereign states. The rhetoric of the time makes clear that the Tây Sơn troops, and their commander, were viewed by northern populations as having come from a distinctly separate country, whatever their ethnic commonalities. Moreover, as was noted above, it was reminiscent of the fourteenth-century marriage between Chế Bồng Nga and another Vietnamese princess. Once again one saw a southern political-military figure coming from a base in the Cham territories, and being supplicated to through the offering of a royal princess.[224] Thus, in a span of little more than ten years, the Tây Sơn brothers had created or attempted to create specific political or familial connections to all of the ruling powers of the period, and even, as in the case of the Chams, marginalized local powers.

Although Nguyễn Huệ's conquest in the north, and marriage into the Lê royal family would appear to have consolidated Tây Sơn authority over territory now stretching from Hà Tiên in the far south to the Chinese border, it also marked the onset of political discord in the Tây Sơn ranks. Two factors contributed to the eventual rift in Tây Sơn political authority. The first was clearly Nguyễn Huệ's

[224] Lê Thành Khôi, 193; The outcome here was a slightly happier one, however, as renewed warfare did not erupt over the princess, as had happened in the fourteenth century.

implied challenge to his brother's ultimate political authority. While this was not the first time that Huệ had challenged Nhạc's decisions, it was clearly the most blatant violation of the authority emanating from Qui Nhơn. The second factor was simply that the territory under Tây Sơn influence had more than doubled virtually overnight, and had become that much more unwieldy to control. While Huệ transferred authority in the north to the Lê, the Tây Sơn continued to maintain an active interest in affairs in the north, as events in 1787-1789 were to demonstrate. Thus, either through direct rule or through less formal attempts to influence political factors in the north, the Tây Sơn political might had been stretched thin, particularly considering the relative remoteness of Qui Nhơn to territories north of the Hải Vân pass.

The falling out between Nhạc and Huệ developed already in the summer of 1786, when Nhạc, on hearing of his brother's invasion of the north, himself hurried north to bring him back to the south. Shortly after their return to the south, Nhạc, in his capacity as Emperor, decided to divide the territories between the three brothers, possibly in response to the unwieldy size of the enlarged Tây Sơn territories, and perhaps in an effort to clarify his relationships with his brothers. Nhạc named Nguyễn Huệ as the *Bắc Bình Vương* (北平王 – Northern Pacification King), and placed him in control of Thuận Hóa, the territory which Huệ had just recaptured from the Trịnh, and Nghệ An, which had been pried away from the traditional Lê/Trịnh heartland. Nhạc himself remained Emperor *Thái Đức*, though now with the added designation *Trung Ương Hoàng Đế* (中央皇帝 – Central Emperor), with control of all of Quảng Nam, except for the area of Gia Định which he granted to his other brother, Nguyễn Văn Lữ as the *Đông Định Vương* (東定王 – Eastern Stabilizing King). In dividing the country in this manner, the Tây Sơn leaders appear to have created even greater political divisions than had existed previously during the Trịnh-Nguyễn schism. The sequence of events that began in 1786 was one that brought the country toward even greater political disunion, while continuing the contestation for true political legitimacy.

Unfortunately, the relationships between these three rulers is not clear from the

existing sources. There was now technically only one Emperor (Hoàng Đế) for all territory south of the Nghệ An border: Nguyễn Nhạc. We know that Nguyễn Huệ used the Thái Đức reign period as the calendar for this period, as reflected in his correspondence with Nguyễn Thiếp in 1787 and 1788.[225] Theoretically, the younger brothers might have been viewed as tributary kings under an Emperor, much in the same way as the Lê Emperor was viewed by the Chinese as the *An Nam Quốc Vương*, a title bestowed by the Chinese. But there is no evidence of their sending tribute to Thái Đức. There is also no evidence that their territories were given distinct territorial names which would have indicated a genuine political division. The reality is that there were now three high political figures controlling territory covering most of "Việt Nam."

The division took on a new dimension when Huệ and Nhạc became embroiled in a several months long civil war possibly spurred by Nhạc's ongoing jealousy of his brother. Some accounts argue that Huệ was angered at not receiving a suitable share of the plunder from the campaigns to the north. Others suggest that Huệ was outraged by his older brother's sleeping with one of Huệ's wives. In any event, the civil war culminated in Huệ gathering a large force and laying siege to Chà Bàn for three months in the spring of 1787 and ultimately forcing Nhạc to surrender. The terms of the surrender, negotiated by Huệ's close aid, Trần Văn Kỷ, complicated the territorial divisions further. Nhạc ceded two districts of Quảng Nam to Huệ, creating a somewhat awkward territorial configuration with Huệ's territories straddling the Hải Vân pass, which had traditionally served as a territorial boundary.

The discord between the brothers continued in a more subtle way after this open conflict was resolved, and manifested itself in Nguyễn Huệ's ongoing efforts to control the northern territories. He had been pulled back to the south by Nhạc in the late summer of 1786, and had established himself at Phú Xuân, while Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh had been left to keep watch in Nghệ An. When a Trịnh survivor attempted to reestablish his family's political dominance late in 1786, the Lê Emperor called Chỉnh

[225] See Hoàng Xuân Hãn. *La-Sơn Phu-Tử* (The Master of La-Sơn) (Paris: Minh Tân, 1952).

back to the northern capitol to help in driving away this challenger. Chỉnh was already suspect in Huệ's eyes, and for this reason efforts had been made to abandon him in Thăng Long earlier during the initial Tây Sơn retreat to the south. But even more significantly, Chỉnh was viewed by Huệ as a close ally of Nhạc, for it was Nhạc who had established ties with the Trịnh defector from 1782 to 1786. In this light the attack that Huệ ordered against Chỉnh in the summer of 1787, can be viewed as an indirect attempt to reduce his brother's influence in the north.[226] Similarly, when Chỉnh was replaced as the Tây Sơn lieutenant in the north by Võ Văn Nhậm, this man too was soon ousted by Huệ and like Chỉnh executed. Nhậm was Nhạc's son-in-law, and again by eliminating Nhậm, Huệ could be seen as taking steps to reduce Nhạc's real or imagined influence in the north. Although it would be an oversimplification to argue that Huệ's killing of these men was solely motivated by an attempt to reduce Nhạc's influence in the north, this factor must be considered as part of Huệ's calculus in taking these steps.[227]

The territorial divisions became even more complex in 1788. The Lê Emperor had fled the capitol in 1787 after his ally Chỉnh was ousted by Nguyễn Huệ, and, after some time in the countryside, had crossed the border into China and requested Chinese assistance to restore him to the throne. The Chinese court agreed and sent an invasion force in support of the Lê ruler in late 1788. Nguyễn Huệ, still at Phú Xuân, decided that the best way to unify his military forces and the populations generally in advance of an attack against the Chinese, was to take on the role of Emperor, a role he considered the Lê Emperor to have abdicated. Consequently, he held a coronation at the former Nguyễn capitol, issued an edict explaining his decision to take the throne and declared himself the Emperor Quang Trung. As he noted in his edict, "I restored power to the house of the Lê who, instead of looking to the affairs of state,

[226] Bùi Dương Lịch argues in his *Lê Quý Dật Sử* (85) however, that Huệ subsequently not only rued the death of Chỉnh, but that he praised his devotion and then also arranged posthumous honors and rewards for his surviving relatives.

[227] "Journal de ce qui s'est passé de plus remarquable dans la mission du Tong-king, depuis le mois de julliet 1786 jusqu'a mois de julliet 1787," (MEP 691, 899) – suggests that it was Ngọc Hân who pressured Huệ to go north on his 1787 campaign against Chỉnh.

ran to a foreign country for protection and aggression against us. The scholars and people of the North no longer esteem the Lê family. They simply count on me."[228] Here he indicated his reluctance to displace the Lê, noting that twice he had restored them, but that finally the Lê had betrayed the country and lost the support of the populations, suggesting that their time was finally at an end.

With Nguyễn Huệ's assumption of the throne as Quang Trung there were now two Tây Sơn Emperors covering, for the moment, territory from north of Gia Định up to Nghệ An.[229] At this point, the confusion over ultimate political authority in late eighteenth-century Vietnam had reached its zenith. North of the border, in Chinese exile lived Lê Chiêu Thống who still considered himself the Emperor of Việt Nam, and who retained a loyal group of followers both in exile and in place in northern Việt Nam. To his south there was Nguyễn Huệ, the Quang Trung Emperor, with actual political control of territory stretching into northern Quảng Nam. To his south was the Nguyễn Nhạc, the Thái Đức Emperor, who exercised authority south to the edges of Gia Định.[230] To his south lay the armies of the Nguyễn survivor, Nguyễn Ánh, who in the guise of an imperial loyalist, maintained fictive loyalty to the Emperor Lê Hiển Tông (who died in the summer of 1786) through the continued use of the Cảnh Hưng reign era to date his official documents.[231] Ostensibly, there were four claimants to the title of Emperor in a territory that traditionally had had only one – at least in theory – prior to 1778. It is perhaps not useful to blame the Tây Sơn for producing such a

[228] Ngô Thì Nhậm, *Tuyển Tập Thơ Văn Ngô Thì Nhậm* (The Collected Writings of Ngô Thì Nhậm). trans. Mai Quốc Liên and others. ed. Ngọc Hy (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1978), Vol. 2, 103-104.

[229] Taking advantage of the skirmish between Nhạc and Huệ, Nguyễn Ánh had come back and seized Gia Định from Nguyễn Lữ in 1787, bringing to an end any Tây Sơn control over territory from Gia Định to the south.

[230] Though in his edict on ascending the throne, Nguyễn Huệ describes his brother's territory as restricted to the single prefecture (phủ) of Qui Nhơn. see Nhậm, Vol. 2, 103-104.

[231] The *Sử Ký Đại Nam Việt Quốc Triều* (1973), 38, explains the continued Nguyễn adherence to the Cảnh Hưng reign dates by noting that "Chiêu Thống did not dare to change the reign name, and for this reason from that time until the time that Gia Long gained control of the entire country of An Nam, Cảnh Hưng continued to be used as the official reign name." So effective was Nguyễn Ánh's insistence on continuing to use the Cảnh Hưng reign name, that he is referred to by some contemporary European observers by their attempted transliteration of that reign era - "Caung Shung." See, eg. Barrow, 256ff.

complicated state of affairs, but it is worth noting that this situation emerged and challenges traditional assumptions about the unifying character of the Tây Sơn movement.

Less than a month after declaring himself the new Emperor, Quang Trung repulsed the Chinese invasion force, driving the Lê Emperor back into exile in China. Now Quang Trung was Emperor of a territory that stretched from the Chinese border, down across the Hải Vân Pass, matching the greatest extent of Trịnh-Lê authority, which had occurred in 1775 at the farthest thrust of the Trịnh invasion. The territory that Quang Trung controlled was a complicated one, containing as it did two former capitols, at Thăng Long and Phú Xuân. Because of their locations, however, Quang Trung deemed it necessary to construct a new capitol, more centrally located within the extent of his territory. While the third capitol, known as the Imperial Phoenix central capitol,[232] was never completed, it still contributed to a diffusion of political power in Quang Trung's territory which further challenges twentieth-century notions of a freshly united "Việt Nam."

Looking to China

The last act in the development of Tây Sơn political ambitions, perhaps not surprisingly, again involved Nguyễn Huệ. Having named himself Emperor over the former Lê territories he was now in a position further to consolidate his political claims, for interactions with China were an extremely important avenue of political legitimation among Vietnamese leaders. First, Quang Trung's defeat of the Chinese invading force constituted another powerful claim to legitimacy, for defense of the nation against the Chinese had a very strong resonance at both the popular and elite levels in terms of conferring political status. I noted earlier that Nguyễn Huệ's speech to his troops prior to the attack had made reference to earlier Vietnamese military heroes who had defeated Chinese invasions. By his own successful defeat of the Chinese, he had staked his claim to be placed in the ranks of those heroes.

[232] Phượng Hoàng Trung Đố

Paradoxically, while defeating the Chinese was a powerful form of domestic legitimation, so was appeasing them afterwards to receive Chinese recognition and hence further legitimation. Thus, after the initial Chinese retreat, Quang Trung was careful not to humiliate the Chinese army unnecessarily. He treated the captured Qing soldiers well and arranged for their repatriation. He also began a lengthy correspondence with the Chinese (using Ngô Thì Nhậm as his scribe), in which he expressed his desire to restore harmony between the two sides and to begin normal diplomatic and economic interactions. In exchange for his cooperation, he requested Chinese recognition as the legitimate ruler of his state in the form of the traditional Chinese-granted title of *An Nam Quốc Vương* [安南 國 王]. The Chinese, who could have opted to defer the granting of this title and to attempt a second invasion in support of the exiled Lê ruler, chose to accede to this request. Nguyễn Huệ was formally recognized as the leader of "An Nam" in exchange for his agreeing to make a subsequent visit to the Chinese court. The Chinese later also named his son as the crown prince, solidifying their support for the new Vietnamese regime.

This title and the legitimacy that it brought were apparently not sufficient for Quang Trung, for in the early 1790s he apparently began to make plans for further concessions from the Chinese. The first of these requests to the Chinese court was that he be given an imperial princess in marriage. As with his brother's earlier attempted marital connection to the Nguyễn, and Nguyễn Huệ's own subsequent marriage to the Lê princess, this request was clearly designed as a way to reinforce what was viewed as an important political connection. The request to the Chinese throne for a royal princess to be sent to the new Vietnamese ruler appears to be without precedent in Vietnamese history. It seems perhaps best read as an indication of Nguyễn Huệ's conviction that he had sufficiently intimidated the Chinese that they might consider such a request. It must also be seen as yet another step toward attempting to legitimate this newcomer in the eyes of a suspicious northern elite.

Bolder still, however, was Quang Trung's plan to demand that the Chinese give back the two large southern Chinese provinces of Guangxi and Guangdong (Quảng

Tây 廣 西 and Quảng Đông 廣 東). He viewed these provinces as having once belonged to the Vietnamese, and so saw their return as part of a restoration (rather than an expansion) of Vietnamese territory. If the Chinese were unwilling to turn over the two provinces, Quang Trung was apparently ready to take them by force. Although the concrete evidence for this planned attack is sketchy, there appears to be enough documentation in both Vietnamese and western sources to suggest that there had indeed been such plans in the works.[233] Among Vietnamese sources, the *Nam Sử*, an undated *dã sử*, noted that Quang Trung, prior to his death, had plans to retake the two Quảngs and to make a request to the Qing to send him a princess from the Chinese court.[234] Even more convincing is an imperial order hinting at a potential Vietnamese attack, the text of which has been preserved in a private family register. According to Hoa Bằng the following text was sent to Quang Trung's trusted lieutenant, Vũ Văn Dũng:

> A command to the *Hải Dương Chiêu Viễn Đại Đô Đốc Đại tướng quân dực vận công thần Vũ quốc Công* appointing you to serve as the advance guard to serve in the position as Official Envoy to go as an envoy to the northern country [nước Bắc] with complete power in the matter of memorializing and politely asking for the return of the two provinces of Quảng Đông and Quảng Tây, in accordance with our wishes, and also to request in marriage one princess in order to alleviate my anger. Heed this! Heed this! (In) this situation (we will) have troops that we can use to send. On another day (we) will use you to create a main advance guard. Respect the words of this command which has now been sent.
>
> Quang Trung, 4th year, 4th month, fifteenth day. [1791][235]

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[233] The *HLNTC* (vol. 2) (218-221); Gire to his family, 11 January, 1796 (MEP 746, 542) which touches on the plan indirectly, noting that Quang Trung "could easily have become master of China." [anonymous] to Pigneau d'Behaine, 7 July, 1792 (MEP 313, 983), which notes of Quang Trung that "he contemplates nothing less than making war on the Chinese." [Il ne pense à rien moins que faire la guerre aux Chinois.]

[234] *Nam Sử* (VHv. 2743), 60a.

[235] Cited in Hoa Bằng. *Quang Trung Anh Hùng Dân Tộc, 1788-1792* (Quang Trung: National Hero, 1788-1792) (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Hóa Thông Tin, 1998), 329. Bằng reports that the original of this command is preserved in a *gia phả* of the Vũ family.

This decree makes clear Nguyễn Huệ's determination to pursue the issue of the "lost" provinces, and indicates his desire to extend his personal connections to the Chinese imperial family as well. Although this decree was issued in 1791 it appears that the mission was somehow forestalled, for it did not set off for China until the spring of the following year. The same *gia phả* records that Vũ Văn Dũng did indeed present the Tây Sơn Emperor's requests to the Qianlong Emperor, who at least approved them for deliberations. The result of these court discussions, according to this record, was that while the princess would readily be given, only the province of Quảng Tây (Guangxi) be ceded to the Vietnamese. Before this could be finalized, however, word of the Quang Trung Emperor's death reached the Chinese court, and the embassy was quickly recalled.

At some level an attack against the Chinese would appear to be suicidal given the relative size of the countries and the armies at their disposal, but I believe that the logic driving Nguyễn Huệ's intentions can be discerned. His political credibility in the north rested largely on his defense of the Vietnamese state against the 1789 invasion by the Chinese. It was this action, more than any other, that had solidified his stature among the ranks of northern scholars as well as the general population. His victory over the Chinese had placed him squarely into the pantheon of Vietnamese national heroes – the Trưng sisters, Trần Hưng Đạo and Lê Lợi – all of whom had defended the nation against its northern neighbor. He had invoked the feats of these heroes as he rallied his forces to attack the Qing, and his victory explicitly linked his accomplishments to theirs. Secondly, Quang Trung's place on the national stage had been defined far more by his military feats than his political vision. While it cannot be proven, it appears that after several years away from the battlefield, Nguyễn Huệ needed the excitement and potential rewards of another military confrontation. Indeed, Nguyễn Huệ's planned invasion of China demonstrates the degree to which military and political logic became linked in the mind of at least one Tây Sơn leader. Born as a military threat to existing political figures and structures, the Tây Sơn movement remained in many ways a militarized response to a situation that demanded more

profound social and political solutions.

Finally, Nguyễn Huệ appears to have become convinced that the Chinese were genuinely frightened of his armies after he routed their forces in 1789. A contemporary letter described the situation:

> The Emperor of China appears to fear this new Attila, as he has sent to crown him the king of Tonkin by the hand of an Ambassador, it being only a few months later, and forgetting the honor and loss of more than 40 or 50,000 men whom the tyrant killed the previous year in a single battle, in which the Chinese were armed to the teeth with sabres and guns, and outnumbered them ten to one. It is true that this embassy is, in everyone's eyes, so unbelievable that one doubts with some justification that which the Emperor has done. The tyrant himself has not deigned to leave Cochinchina to have himself crowned at our capitol, and he has contented himself with sending in his place a simple officer, who took the dress and name of his master and imposed himself on the Ambassador.[236]

It was perhaps based on this conviction that he made the request for the Chinese to cede their two southern provinces. Whatever the factors motivating the Tây Sơn ruler, the plans to challenge the Chinese indicate the ambitions driving Nguyễn Huệ to confirm his political stature both within Việt Nam and in the all-important relationship with the Chinese. He appears to have been largely successful in establishing his political position in both Vietnamese and Chinese eyes, and it was only his premature death at the age of forty in 1792 that cut short his aspirations of establishing his lineage as a new and long-term dynasty.

Conclusion: The Tây Sơn Leaders' Limited Vision

What then can we conclude about the aims and outlook of the Tây Sơn leadership? The continual use of available political affiliations, to be retained until they had outlived their usefulness, suggests that the Tây Sơn leaders were not innovators or revolutionaries, but political opportunists. They pragmatically made a wide variety of appeals in different ways and at different times, using the tools they

[236]Charles La Mothe to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 20 January, 1790. MEP 692, 158

found and the circumstances they encountered to gather support and to legitimate themselves and their movement. Despite the efforts of more recent historians to attempt to attribute grand designs to the Tây Sơn movement, a closer look at the period reveals no master strategy, much less a guiding philosophy. The Tây Sơn pronouncements about objectives were calculated to advance their own interests and political authority, not to transform their nation or the lives of its inhabitants. The changes that did take place do not indicate a broad political or social vision on the part of any of the Tây Sơn brothers.

These leaders made use of existing philosophical and practical means of legitimizing their claims to power. Clearly, there was no single and unambiguous source of legitimacy, particularly in a period when all sitting political authorities were in effect tainted in one form or another. Indeed, the Tây Sơn case demonstrates the complex of sources of political authority and legitimacy that were available to claimants for power in the early modern period. Although there was clearly some overlap, the legitimating appeals of the Tây Sơn brothers were clearly designed to appeal to different groups in society. Some appeals, such as seeking titles, marrying into ruling families and restoring Confucian political structures worked best at the elite level. Other appeals worked more at the popular level, including linking themselves to the supernatural, carrying out concrete and symbolic acts of economic justice, and demonstrating heroic and charismatic qualities. Indeed, the hodgepodge of approaches is reflected in the fact that while Quang Trung was busy demonstrating his Confucian *bona fides* in a variety of ways, seemingly legitimizing his own rule by attempting to restore Confucian concepts, his brother in Qui Nhơn was little interested in Confucian niceties, as far as we can tell, and continued to derive his own legitimacy and stake his claims on his military successes, his links to the Chams, and his personal authority.

Finally, despite the grandeur of their political claims and the remarkable successes of their military campaigns, in many ways, the Tây Sơn brothers remained very parochial in their orientation and focus. They could drive their armies to the

very borders of the country, or in the cases of Cambodia and the Lao principalities, indeed across those borders, but in the end they always returned to their bases, where they felt the most comfortable. That their most trusted political advisors and military strategists, with few exceptions, remained early supporters from their home region is yet another indication that the Tây Sơn leaders continued to look back to their origins even as their campaigns and ambitions expanded far beyond the Qui Nhơn-An Khê axis. Nhạc in particular stubbornly remained at his capital of Chà Bàn, where he was vulnerable to repeated sieges. His only grand departure was his one extraordinary dash up to Thang Long in the summer of 1786 to chase and retrieve his brother. Huệ, although he demonstrated far greater mobility than Nhạc, also holed up at his new capital at Phú Xuân from 1786 until his death in 1792. Although he led several military campaigns to the north, he preferred to delegate authority there to others.

The nineteenth-century Nguyễn historians may have picked up on this aspect of Tây Sơn provincialism when they disparagingly referred to the Tây Sơn leaders as "bandits," and refused to recognize the Tây Sơn as having ever been legitimate rulers of Việt Nam. Yet the Nguyễn failure to acknowledge Tây Sơn legitimacy, which as we saw in the previous chapter was to become a major point of historiographical debate, reflected a very narrow view of political legitimacy focused on the formal transmission of political titles. As has been demonstrated in this chapter, there has always been a multiplicity of sources for demonstrating political legitimacy in Việt Nam's long history. The Tây Sơn claims to power arguably rivaled those of their eventual successors, and in any case were a potent demonstration of the ways in which political contenders in Việt Nam could rise from obscurity to political prominence.

Chapter Three

Willing Soldiers or Reluctant Laborers? The Tây Sơn and the Vietnamese Peasant

When buffalo and ox fight one another, flies and
mosquitoes die unjustly.
[Vietnamese proverb]

In the previous chapter I traced the manner in which the Tây Sơn leadership laid claim to power over the thirty-year period in which they struggled for control. Now my focus shifts to examine the people the Tây Sơn regime was seeking to govern, beginning with the Vietnamese peasantry. Specifically, I will consider three interrelated issues: the ways in which the Tây Sơn leadership exercised power, the impact of this exercise of power on the ordinary person as well as indirect factors affecting peasant life, and finally the responses of those people to life during the Tây Sơn years and under Tây Sơn political authority. In the course of examining these issues, I will attempt to give some sense of life under the Tây Sơn, at least at certain moments and in certain places, for it is quite difficult to make generalizations about the impact of the Tây Sơn movement or regime on the country or its people. No less difficult is it to describe the ways in which peasants responded to the Tây Sơn.

My purpose here is two-fold. First, I challenge conventional interpretations of the Tây Sơn as a "peasant movement." Vietnamese historians have tended to argue for widespread and enthusiastic peasant support for the Tây Sơn movement, when in reality there was far more resistance to the movement and its demands than has previously been recognized. These reactions varied over time and place and do not allow for ready generalizations so common to the writings of many contemporary Vietnamese historians describing the relationship between "the peasantry" and "the Tây Sơn movement." I argue, instead, that the movement's many and brutal military campaigns were far less about peasant desires or objectives, than they were about the political ambitions of its leaders. Peasants during the Tây Sơn period were above all, as they so often are, fodder for armies, bodies for corvee labor projects, and sources of

supplies and revenues. Vietnamese peasants of the late eighteenth century may have had aspirations for a better life, but most available evidence suggests that few achieved this goal. There were many responses to the Tây Sơn as a movement ranging from enthusiastic support for their initial program of economic redistribution, to grudging acceptance of seemingly endless military campaigns, to overt resistance by actions or words.

Secondly, I attempt to provide at least the outlines of a social history of the Tây Sơn period. Such an account has, to my knowledge, not yet been attempted and constitutes a major lacuna in the historical record concerning this period. Wars and changes of regime so frequently seize the imagination of historians, while those who suffer the most because of these events are frequently overlooked. In the body of this chapter I hope to depict the struggles of those who were forced to participate in the events of the Tây Sơn period, and the implications of this era for their lives. I also attempt to describe in as much detail as possible the types of peasant responses to the Tây Sơn and circumstances of life during the Tây Sơn period. Given the paucity of information and the scattered nature of the sources, this survey cannot purport to be systematic and yet I hope that it is suggestive of the responses of the peasantry to the environment in which they found themselves.

What this chapter should make clear is that whatever the political claims of the Tây Sơn leaders regarding their legitimacy, the view was often very different from the villages and fields. The previous chapter described the devices used by the Tây Sơn brothers and their chief lieutenants to stake their claim to authority through appeals directed at different elements of society. Here I begin to question just how effective these claims were and to what extent Vietnamese populations responded to them. Perhaps Nguyễn Huệ *was* viewed as an heroic figure, and perhaps the apparent supernatural signs *were* believed by segments of the rural population. However, it does not appear that such indications were sufficient, much less enduring enough, to enable the Tây Sơn regime to establish the type of legitimacy that puts down roots and produces wide-spread acceptance among the vast majority of the population.

After first considering the question of whether or not the Tây Sơn did indeed constitute a "peasant movement," I look at the various economic and political factors that played a role in stirring the Tây Sơn brothers to revolt. The chapter then looks at the impact that the Tây Sơn movement and later regime had on Vietnamese peasants, looking at the ways in which they were controlled and exploited and the hardships they had to endure under this regime. I then look at the ways in which the peasants were able to respond to these hardships, defying the Tây Sơn both through abstract means and concrete ones. I conclude by considering the implications of the existence of multiple contenders for political power in the late eighteenth century. The presence of various viable candidates for power and the shifting fortunes of the military campaigns meant that peasants could look for their salvation to competing military forces. I show that the peasants were never content with their lot under any given political power, and always hoped to be rescued by another force. In this regard, and from the perspective of the peasantry, there was little to distinguish the Tây Sơn from either the Trịnh or the Nguyễn.

Before engaging this subject more fully, I should note that when I refer to peasants in this chapter, I am speaking primarily of people whose livelihood is centered on agricultural production on a small (family or extended-family) scale. For convenience, I also include people connected to the rural economy centered on this agricultural production, including artisans, porters, ferrymen. I do not, however, include people whose vocation was more closely linked to the commercial sector, as limited as it may have been during this period. Rural merchants as well as more large-scale coastal merchants, while connected to the rhythms of the agricultural sector, were also more immediately affected by extra-local or extra-regional factors.

Background

Although the Tây Sơn movement is typically referred to as a "peasant movement," such a characterization grossly oversimplifies and even distorts what

went on for those thirty years. It certainly is true that the majority of the combatants in the many bloody battles of this period were peasants and that the three main political leaders, Nguyễn Văn Nhạc, Nguyễn Văn Huệ and Nguyễn Văn Lữ were from a small village. It is equally true that the majority of the people affected by these events were peasants. On the other hand, to make sense of this period one needs to attach some strong qualifiers to the notion of this as a "peasant" movement.

The Tây Sơn leaders, named for their home village of Tây Sơn (西 山 – western mountains), located at the foot of the south-central highlands, were not rural laborers, despite their repeated claims to peasant roots. Indeed, they might better be described as belonging to a rural lower gentry class. The eldest of the three brothers, Nguyễn Nhạc, had been a betel nut trader as well as a part-time tax collector for the Nguyễn court in the south. The youngest, Nguyễn Lữ, had been a monk, a Muslim cleric, or possibly a type of mystical healer.[1] And Nguyễn Huệ, the brother with the greatest military skill and political vision, was either still a student or according to some accounts an itinerant musician when the uprising broke out.[2] Furthermore, each of the three brothers had received some amount of education, and probably more than the average villager. Their teacher was a respected scholar who had fled the political infighting of the Nguyễn court, and who later encouraged the brothers in their rebellion.

From this it should be clear that the Tây Sơn brothers, while relying on peasants to fill their armies, and addressing some peasant concerns, were not themselves peasants in the general meaning of the word as tillers of the soil. Moreover, even in its earliest days, the Tây Sơn movement relied on the support of a broad spectrum of southern society that extended well beyond the scope of simple

[1] There is some debate about their birth order; on Lữ, the most poorly documented of the three brothers, see for example, Phan Du, *Quảng Nam Qua Các Thời Đại* (Quảng Nam Through the Ages) (Đà Nẵng: Cổ Hộc Tùng Thư, 1974), 326, or Đinh Văn Tuấn, "Hùng Kê Quyền Hay Thế Võ Từ Những Đòn Gà Chọi," (Brave Chicken Power or Fighting Strength from the Blows in Cockfights), in *Tây Sơn Nguyễn Huệ*, ed. Ty Văn Hòa Và Thông Tin Nghĩa Bình (Qui Nhơn: Ty Văn Hòa Và Thông Tin Nghĩa Bình, 1978), 371-381.

[2] The possibility of Huệ having been an itinerant musician is raised by Văn Tân, *Nguyễn Huệ: Con Người và Sự Nghiệp* (Nguyễn Huệ: His Life and Works) (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học, 1967), 16.

peasants. These supporters ranged from Cham royalty to highland tribal groups to ethnic Chinese coastal merchants. Each of these groups had different objectives, being united only in their dislike for the manner in which the Nguyễn lords were controlling the southern economy – including tax policies, control over land and policies affecting trade. Over time, new groups were brought into the movement, including its leadership core. These included in particular, first southern and later northern scholars and officials, who were to have a profound influence on the nature of the regime established by the Tây Sơn brothers. Thus, by the time that the Tây Sơn leadership exercised political power over most of the country in the form of a reconstituted monarchy, it was already the beneficiary of political, economic and diplomatic advice from some of the greatest scholar-officials of the eighteenth century.

This leads to my second point, namely that it was not only peasants who were affected by this movement. After all, when peasants rise up in armed movements, they are usually trying to get the attention of (or seeking to overthrow) some political or economic authority. In virtually all such instances, these movements remain quite localized and their impact on centers of political power relatively limited. There are numerous examples of this type of uprising in eighteenth-century Việt Nam. This description cannot, however, be applied to the Tây Sơn, who by the end of their thirty years had occupied every corner of the Vietnamese territories, formed a new dynasty occupying the former seats of power, and had forced the traditional political and economic elites to choose sides in the epic struggle. So what might initially have been a peasant movement, became much more than that the longer it endured and the further it ranged from its geographical and philosophical origins.

It seems quite clear that there is a point at which a putative peasant movement becomes something else, a point perhaps found by noting when peasants are no longer willingly joining the rebel armies, but are beginning to be drafted into them. It is at this point that a shift has taken place. The rebels, who once fought against the demands/exactions of the state now themselves represent the "state" and a new sort of

relationship now exists between the rebel leaders and the peasants being dragged into their armies. This is an uncommon occurrence in peasant movements for the simple reason that peasant movements rarely survive long enough to reach such a transition stage. In the beginning, it appears fairly clear that peasant involvement in the Tây Sơn movement, and peasant support for its objectives, were spontaneous acts, driven by the hope for an improved economic situation. A few years later, however, a shift took place, in which peasant involvement in the movement appears increasingly to have become the product of force instead of choice. The point at which this transition appears to have taken place in the Tây Sơn case is the year 1775, when Nguyễn Nhạc, formalizing his own political role in the greater Qui Nhơn region, declared that one in five villagers would be subject to conscription into his armies.[3] After that date, one finds increasing numbers of descriptions of the Tây Sơn armies as composed of reluctant soldiers, ready to flee at any opportunity, rather than of enthusiastic volunteers.

Finally, one should be careful when speaking about the Tây Sơn as a "peasant movement" for the simple reason that this too easily posits a false dichotomy between "peasants" and "elites/governments." This not only does an injustice to the complex nature of the peasantry, but it also suggests that relations between peasants and other groups are necessarily based on opposing objectives. As the Tây Sơn movement was to demonstrate, at times it is possible to find common ground between seemingly disparate socioeconomic groups and to build a powerful movement on this basis. Such had been the case in numerous earlier Vietnamese popular movements as well, particularly in the eighteenth century. I do not wish to argue, however, as some Vietnamese historians have, that the Tây Sơn constituted a "united front" in which class differences were set aside in the interests of larger national objectives. Rather, the pooling of resources evident in the early years of the Tây Sơn movement was motivated by the self-interest of various socioeconomic groups rather than some higher social or political purpose. The Tây Sơn were able to attract such an eclectic

[3] *Nguyễn Thị Tây Sơn Kí*, A.3138), 5a. Viện Hán Nôm, Hà Nội, Việt Nam.

group of followers precisely because they appealed to the specific interests of each group and made each group's particular grievance part of their own agenda.

With such an ambitious agenda it is hardly surprising that at some level, and for most of these groups, the Tây Sơn failed to meet their high expectations. The chief beneficiaries of the Tây Sơn movement appear to have been the leaders of the movement and their elite supporters. Although some of the subaltern groups benefited at times and in certain places from the Tây Sơn actions (eg. brief periods of restored order), these benefits were rarely systematic or enduring. The early property redistributions and ritual abolition of tax burdens, soon gave way to new demands from the rebel administration that were perhaps even more onerous than those they had replaced, for these demands were frequently made in the course of protracted military campaigns that rendered taxes and labor service particularly troubling.

It should then be clear that we cannot readily view the Tây Sơn movement simply as an expression of a collective peasant will. In its very early stages the movement may have had some egalitarian strains at a time when its followers were few and its leaders still striving to establish themselves. It was not long, however, before a clear division emerged between the aspirations of the leadership and the expectations of the peasants serving in their armies. It was also not long before the backlash against the Tây Sơn began among peasants in various locales. Put another way, just because an uprising is begun by (and even for) peasants, does not mean that it will remain a "peasant movement." Indeed, as Michael Adas rightly points out:

> A careful scrutiny of many of the rebellions that have been attributed to peasant unrest or labeled as agrarian risings often leads to the conclusion that these conflicts were, in fact, inter elite feuds or dynastic struggles in which peasant conscripts and peasant communities became unwillingly involved . . . .With important exceptions of risings in which the peasantry rallied to messianic figures or charismatic leaders struggling to overthrow inept or tyrannical rulers, the origins and outcomes of the struggles had little or nothing to do with the peasant concerns or conditions of the cultivating classes. The peasants themselves understood that they had little to gain and very much to lose – including their homes, crops, livestock, and lives – in

> these elite squabblings. It is not surprising then that the peasants' usual response to civil disturbances was flight en masse from the affected areas and a refusal to return until the conflict had abated.4

While the Tây Sơn movement would appear to belong to Adas' exceptional category – movements led by "charismatic leaders struggling to overthrow inept or tyrannical rulers" – it also manifested elements of what Adas calls "inter elite feuds or dynastic struggles." As was demonstrated in the previous chapter, the Tây Sơn became very much involved in the disputed successions that took place in both Nguyễn and Trịnh territories. And though it could be said that the Tây Sơn leaders used these opportunities to their own ends, it might equally be said that they were manipulated by contestants in these power struggles, and in turn manipulated the peasants to assist in their own involvement in those struggles. Thus, for instance, the Tây Sơn brothers' instructor, Trương Văn Hiền, appears to have encouraged Nguyễn Nhạc to rise up, and to act in support of the "rightful heir" to the Nguyễn lordship. Similarly, in 1786, the Tây Sơn campaigns to attack to the north, appear very much to have been propelled by the interests of the Trịnh defector, Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh, seeking to gain personal vengeance for his political downfall resulting from the northern succession crisis of 1782. Considering these cases suggests that the efforts of the Tây Sơn may have had less to do with promoting peasant interests than with promoting political ambitions, whether theirs or those of others.

Although I am stressing that the Tây Sơn movement was not truly a "peasant movement," I do not wish to argue that peasant enrollment in Tây Sơn armies was always entirely coerced. There remained some peasants who willingly joined the movement, even after 1775 and indeed into the 1780s and 1790s. Despite the general reluctance of peasants to enter military service, there are some circumstances under which entering the military might have been viewed as a positive step. The first may have been the opportunity to leave a rural setting where life had already been

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[4] Michael Adas, "From Avoidance to Confrontation: Peasant Protest in Precolonial and Colonial Southeast Asia," in *Colonialism and Culture*, ed. Nicholas Dirks (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 98-99.

marginalized either by war or environmental factors. The second would be if one had already been displaced from one's farm and become a vagabond, or even a bandit, existing somewhere on the social margins. Again, under such circumstances the opportunity for at least semi-regular meals and clothing might have been worth the risks of combat. Yet others might have joined not out of desperation, but out of a hope for personal gain, whether it be the potential for loot or perhaps the possibility of attaining political or military status, which might confer social and economic advantages upon return to one's village. And indeed, some may have entered out of a strong belief in the political or social cause being espoused by the Tây Sơn, an interpretation readily found in much contemporary historical literature, but one quite difficult to measure or substantiate.

Before turning to a closer examination of peasant life under the Tây Sơn movement and regime, and their responses to the Tây Sơn, let me first consider briefly the question of why this peasant movement developed in the first place.

Factors Arousing Popular Discontent: Why the Tây Sơn Movement?

The two main areas in which one can trace peasant discontent, not surprisingly, are those of official corruption and taxation. In addition, one can cite ongoing problems with weather-induced crop failures, particularly in the northern part of the country during much of the second half of the eighteenth century, but also in the south.[5] These are of course age-old problems in any agrarian society, and ones frequently cited to explain popular movements. There are also a host of smaller issues connected to these larger ones that further contributed to the discontent of peasants during this period: currency issues, declining trade, and state efforts to manipulate

[5] There is some debate about whether drought and famine contributed to, or were caused by the Tây Sơn uprising. The *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện* (vol. 2, 492) argues that it was a cause. (Quốc Sử Quán Triều Nguyễn. *Đại Nam Chính Biên Liệt Truyện* (The Principle Record of the Ranked Tales of Đại Nam) (4 volumes), trans. Đỗ Mộng Khương and others (Huế: Nhà Xuất Bản Thuận Hóa, 1993). Li Tana has argued quite convincingly that it was the Tây Sơn uprising, with its severing transport between the Mekong delta and the center of the country that caused the famine of 1774-75. See below.

popular culture. All of these factors must be considered as contributing to the bigger concerns. Finally, as was demonstrated in the previous chapter, political regimes in both the Trịnh north and the Nguyễn south were increasingly unstable and affected by internal divisions promoted by contending claimants for power. It is hardly surprising that regimes concerned with problems at their respective seats of government would be less able to address the economic concerns (sometimes bordering on crises) affecting the larger populations.

The Nguyễn south in which the Tây Sơn movement emerged was a region in turmoil after the death of the long-reigning Chúa, Nguyễn Phúc Khóat (1738-1765). The period between 1767 and 1771 saw a marked increase in the number and intensity of anti-government disturbances, most frequently being led by members of various ethnic minority groups. The Srê rose up in Quảng Ngãi in 1770; the same year, also in Quảng Ngãi, saw the rebellion of a group referred to in the nineteenth-century chronicles as the "Đá Vách."[6] The tyranny of the new (since 1765) regent of the Nguyễn court, Trương Phúc Loan, is routinely cited as the main reason for the increasing numbers of peasant uprisings linked to displeasure with the government. Indeed, as we saw in Chapter One, as early as 1776 Lê Quý Đôn was already ascribing the difficulties that the south was facing, and the Tây Sơn uprising in particular, to the policies and actions of Loan.[7] According to the Nguyễn records, after manipulating the royal succession and maneuvering himself into position as the key political figure in the Nguyễn state, Loan raised and extended taxes, which greatly increased his own personal wealth and influence.[8] It appears, moreover, that Loan and his supporters extended the extravagant spending of the Nguyễn court, which simultaneously depleted the state treasury and encouraged corruption at both the local and court level.[9] Loan himself was reported to accept bribes allowing

[6] Quốc Sử Quán Triều Nguyễn. *Đại Nam Thực Lục* (The Veritable Records of Đại Nam) (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Sử Học, 1962, 1963) vol. 1, 238.

[7] Lê Quý Đôn, *Phủ Biên Tạp Lục* (Chronicles of the Prefectural Borders) (Sài Gòn: Phủ Quốc Vụ Khanh Đặc Trách Văn Hóa Xuất Bản, 1972), vol. 1, 43b-44a. Hereafter *PBTL* (1972).

[8] *Đại Nam Thực Lục*, vol. 1, 236.

[9] See, eg. Yang Baoyun, *Contribution à l'histoire de la principauté des Nguyên au Vietnam méridional (1600-1775)* (Geneva: Editions Olizane, 1992), 179-181.

officials to exempt themselves from military service, raising the possibility that other forms of corruption were being tolerated that had even more direct consequences for the general population. Finally, another source of growing frustration was the complex and ever-changing system of additional fees and expenses tacked onto existing taxes, either systematically or in an ad hoc fashion, by local officials. Apparently this system of additional fees was at its worst in the Qui Nhơn area, where the Tây Sơn uprising, not coincidentally had its roots.

While official corruption was clearly a problem, of more profound and immediate relevance to the general population were tax issues. Specifically, the problem centered on both increasing taxes or tax rates and on an expansion of taxes to lands or peoples not previously subject to these state exactions. For example, in Thuận Hóa, in the 3rd lunar month of the year *canh dần* (1770) the Chúa ordered a new registration of fields in that province. It is quite likely that over the course of time a large number of new farms had been brought under cultivation in this region, but had avoided being registered in the official tax rolls. The new registration process would thus bring new revenue for the central government, but at the expense of people who had previously avoided taxation altogether or were still being taxed at a low level for land that had been enhanced since the previous land registries were compiled.[10] Consequently, there were widespread complaints about growing tax burdens, which the people blamed directly on the regent. Lê Quý Đôn reported of his own investigations that "when we pressed the people with questions, they all informed us: each of the types of taxes (*tạp thuế*) in the *xứ* of Quảng Nam were ones newly ordered by Trương Phúc Loan and they were not ones that had already been there since the times of all of the *vương công* (ie. the Nguyễn lords) in prior times."[11] And finally, Trương Phúc Loan apparently introduced a so-called head tax, which was, not

[10] *Đại Nam Thực Lục*, vol. 1, 235. which also gives a list of the number of residential units in each of the districts in Thuận Hóa.
[11] *PBTL* (1972), vol. 2, 2a.

surprisingly, particularly unpopular.[12] Unlike other forms of taxation, collection of which was directly proportional to crop yields, the head tax was a flat tax levied on each person living in a village. Such a tax would be particularly onerous in years of poor crop results, and in general it added an element of uncertainty to peasant economic calculations as they anticipated each year's harvest.

And yet the real problem lay not merely in the fact that taxes were being expanded, but in the fact that government exactions were especially burdensome in regions that were flourishing economically, for these were precisely the areas most attractive to corrupt officials. Thus, for instance, Quảng Nam was considerably wealthier than the northern region of Thuận Hóa, and it was there that the weight of taxation fell, along with the greater number of popular uprisings. As Lê Quý Đôn noted, "Thuận Hóa does not have much; everything that is taken is taken from Quảng Nam, since the region of Quảng Nam has the most fertile land in the world."[13] Consequently the Lê investigator concluded, "The taxes imposed in Quảng Nam are different from those in Thuận Hóa, and the requisitions are heavier than those in Thuận Hóa. Thus the amounts that are gathered and placed into the storehouses are very great and the salaries and benefits of the officials are also very troublesome (to the populations). And it is for this reason that the peoples there are the first to rise up."[14] For their part, when the Tây Sơn did rise up, they concentrated on the unequal distribution issue, portraying themselves as champions of the oppressed. Thus, they made their first objective a redistribution of the region's wealth, moving about the countryside with the slogan: 'take from the wealthy, and give to the poor.'[15]

As these issues spurred growing resentment among lowland peasants and

[12] Pierre-Yves Manguin, *Les Nguyễn, Macau et le Portugal: Aspects politiques et commerciaux d'une relation privilégiée en Mer de Chine 1773-1802*, (Paris: École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1984), 163, note 78; also Barrow noted that this tax "created a general discontent among the people," 250.

[13] *PBTL* (1972), vol. 2, 230b.

[14] Cited in Ban Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử Tây Sơn-Nguyễn Huệ, "Nghĩa Bình Với Khởi Nghĩa Tây Sơn và Quang Trung Nguyễn Huệ," in *Tây Sơn Nguyễn Huệ (Kỷ Yếu Hội Nghị Nghiên Cứu Phong Trào Nông Dân Tây Sơn* (Tây Sơn Nguyễn Huệ (The Essential Records of a Conference on Researching the Tây Sơn Peasant Movement) (Qui Nhơn: Ty Văn Hóa và Thông Tin Nghĩa Bình, 1978), 40.

[15] Ủy Ban Khoa Học Xã Hội, *Lịch Sử Việt Nam, Tập II*, (History of Viet Nam, Vol. II), Hà Nội, Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1976), 337.

merchants, discontent was spreading into the highland regions of the interior as well. Ethnic minority peoples living in these regions found themselves facing sharply increased tax burdens and greater attempts at direct control by the Nguyễn state seeking to enlarge its economic base.[16] The Nguyễn state had already been collecting taxes from highland groups as early as the late seventeenth century, a practice that only grew over the course of the eighteenth century. What appears to have changed in the Trương Phúc Loan period was simply an expansion of Nguyễn tax extractions from these regions, possibly designed, as Li Tana has argued, as a means to shift the tax burden from the more potentially volatile lowland populations.[17] This increased state demand for tax contributions can be seen as a significant factor contributing to the considerable ethnic minority support for the Tây Sơn movement during its early years.

In addition to problems with corruption and shifting and increasing tax burdens, two other economic factors contributed to the growing tension in the Nguyễn territories: coinage and commerce. As was noted in the previous chapter, the Nguyễn had introduced a policy of replacing copper coins with zinc ones. This move had become a necessity since they had no copper mines of their own, and the prices for copper coming on boats from China and Japan were increasing.[18] For the peasants, there were continually rising prices due to the depreciation of coinage as zinc was readily and quickly produced and introduced into the economy. In order to make the transition to the new metal, the Nguyễn rulers demanded that the zinc coins be accepted at parity with the copper ones, but the population largely rejected this. The people much preferred the more durable copper coins; in fact, they would rather hoard rice than sell it for the zinc coins, and consequently prices for rice rose as available supply shrunk, leading to the beginnings of famine. The Nguyễn court was not unaware of the problems that this policy provoked as these had been made very clear

[16] Văn Tân, *Nguyễn Huệ Con Người và sự Nghiệp* (Nguyễn Huệ, the Person and his Accomplishments), (Hà Bắc: Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học, 1967), 58-59.
[17] Li, 138.
[18] Lê Thanh Khôi, 311; Lê Quý Đôn reports on the copper problem as well in *PBTL* (1972), vol. 2, 20b-21a.

to them in a 1770 memorial by a retired official in Thuận Hóa, Ngô Thế Lân.[19] Lân called for the Nguyễn to produce more copper coins and to establish warehouses of rice to help to stabilize rice prices, but his warnings were ignored, and ultimately he threw his lot in with the Tây Sơn.

Finally, the 1760s and early 1770s had seen a dramatic drop in foreign commerce as merchant shipping, particularly from trading partners in Japan and China virtually dried up. Thus, for example, Lê Quy Đôn reported in his *Phủ Biên Tập Lục*, that only 16 foreign merchant vessels arrived in the key trading town of Hội An in the year 1771, and that two years later, only half that number had arrived.[20] This was in contrast to a thriving port that had once brought in hundreds of foreign trading ships. Although the ripple effects of this decline in trade had implications for many in the region, including the interior which provided exotic goods for export, the local ethnic Chinese merchants felt the change particularly acutely. Consequently, it is not surprising to find them among the earliest financial and military supporters of the Tây Sơn, hoping to see an administrative change that might help to restore the profitable coastal trade centers.

This was the economic situation confronting Vietnamese populations of the 1760s and 1770s just prior to the Tây Sơn outburst. As I will demonstrate below, this situation changed in the ensuing three decades, but rarely for the better. Instead, an entirely new series of concerns now beset the country as peasants found themselves burdened with immediate and dangerous military obligations, corvee labor requirements and miscellaneous demands for goods and materials to support the military efforts of the Tây Sơn and the Nguyễn. Most immediate among these were demands for military service, both on the part of the Tây Sơn and on that of their Nguyễn adversaries. Military service meant not only risking death on the battlefield, but also slow economic ruin for a family and farm left behind. The wars themselves also had profound implications for rural dwellers, for these campaigns disrupted rural life, as myriad armies destroyed farms, looted their contents or generally interfered

[19] The text of the memorial can be found in *Đại Nam Thực Lục*, vol. 1, 238-239.
[20] *PBTL* (1972), vol. 2, 32a.

with the cycles of planting and harvest.

In addition to military service, demands for corvee labor multiplied in this era of disruption and destruction. New roads and bridges had to be built. More citadels had to be erected. Palaces and other ceremonial buildings were needed to bolster the political claims of various leaders. Infrastructure destroyed by war or neglected by villagers serving in armies or displaced from their villages had to be repaired. All of these projects required mass participation and contributed further to disruptions of the rhythms of rural life. On top of these demands, the people also faced, to varying degrees, demands for contributions of goods to support military campaigns. These typically were local products of various types – wood, animals, rice, etc. – and while forced contributions might be considered a form of taxation, they were more akin to unpredictable requisitions that contributed greatly to uncertainty among the general populations. Moreover, the problems caused by these conflicts were considerably exacerbated by a series of very severe droughts and floods, particularly in the more populous northern part of the country. The period from the early 1770s through the beginning of the nineteenth century saw considerable death from starvation and disease related to destroyed fields, flooded villages, and related disasters. Thus, the Tây Sơn years were ones of severe hardship because they brought together the demands and impact of warfare and the tribulations apparently being sent by an aggrieved heaven.

Early Tensions in the Tây Sơn Movement

In looking at the early years of the Tây Sơn uprising, we begin to see some of the social tensions created by the movement's course that already suggest that the Tây Sơn were, even in this early period, viewed in very different ways by different groups in Vietnamese society. The earliest descriptions we have of the interaction between the Tây Sơn and rural populations date from 1774, and were provided by Spanish Dominican missionaries active in the area around Qui Nhơn. In a letter written

February 15, 1774, Diego de Jumilla wrote first about the early days of the Tây Sơn and then about the reaction of local populations:

> As they marched in their journey, some were armed with swords and others with bows, and (yet) others with guns. They did not cause any damage, either to the people or to their possessions. On the contrary, they sought equality for all Cochinchinese; they entered the homes of the wealthy and if they offered some things they would not cause any damage, but if they encountered any resistance, they would seize the most luxurious objects which they would distribute to the poor, preserving at the same time their rice and their lives. During the night they would retreat into the mountains; they would go to villages and demand their complete submission, threatening that if they did not receive it, they would burn and destroy all of their houses.[21]

and as a result,

> . . . [the people] began to give them the name of virtuous and charitable thieves with a regard for the poor commoners.[22]

Also, as the Tây Sơn began to burn land documents and announce the abolition of unpopular taxes, "the people rejoiced at this measure and took the oath, offering their liberators infinite numbers of gifts."[23] This description suggests, perhaps not surprisingly, that the Tây Sơn were quite popular among the rural peasantry in this early stage of their movement. The actions of the rebel leaders were precisely calculated to appeal to the local populations and to some extent were an end in themselves – that is, this is what the movement was all about in this period. The Tây Sơn leaders needed to broaden their support and to establish their reputations as champions of the oppressed.

By 1775, the Tây Sơn had come to control a considerable amount of territory in the central coastal region as well as a substantial fighting force, and a French Missionary, Halbout, reported that:

> The royal army is commanded by better generals; [but] the (armies) of the

[21] Perez, 74.
[22] Perez, 74.
[23] Perez, 75.

> rebels have no one as their leader other than a man of the people, a villager; but they fear this leader, respect and obey him; and in the space of two years, he has arrived at the point of coining money and he has been proclaimed king.[24]

The leader was Nguyễn Nhạc, and this letter indicates that the Tây Sơn continued to have considerable support, at least among their soldiers. At the same time, however, this letter hints at what may have been the first manifestation of a new dimension in the relationship between the Tây Sơn and their followers - the use of coercion. The phrase "They fear this leader . . ." suggests already at this point that the Tây Sơn leaders had begun to use intimidation to control their troops and possibly even to gather soldiers into their ranks.

By the late 1770s, the situation at least in the area under firm Tây Sơn control, stretching from the Hải Vân pass down to Qui Nhơn, and possibly further south, appears to have stabilized. A French missionary, Liot, travelling from Macao in early 1778 visited both Tourane and Qui Nhơn, spoke of his good reception among local Christians. He mentioned, in particular, several visits to and by a devoted Christian woman, whom he referred to as an "aunt of the tay son" and who pressed money on him for his mission.[25] While Liot's failure to discuss the situation in the countryside is not proof of a general improvement, it is certainly suggestive, particularly when coupled with the eyewitness descriptions of another European visitor in that same year, Charles Chapman.[26]

Chapman's report is one of the most detailed accounts by a westerner of the Tây Sơn court and state of affairs for this period in both Tây Sơn and Trịnh-controlled areas, as he spent nearly half a year (from July first to December eighteenth) sailing up the southern coast. At the time of Chapman's visit, the Nguyễn had just reoccupied the Sài Gòn (Đồng Nai) area, and according to the *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện*, had retaken territory as far north as Bình Thuận and were threatening the

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[24] Halbout to MEP Director, July 1775, in *Nouvelles Lettres Edifiantes*, vol. 6, 282.

[25] Jacques Liot to ? 1 May, 1778, in *Nouvelles Lettres Edifiantes*, vol. 6, 306-307.

[26] On the other hand, the *Sử Ký Đại Nam Việt Quốc Triều* (19) describes a great deal of Tây Sơn harassment of local populations around this general time (though no specific date is given).

prefecture of Diên Khánh.[27] Chapman's report constitutes a series of snapshots of the conditions at various points along the southern coast from Hà Tiên, on the border with Cambodia, north to the Trịnh stronghold at the former Nguyễn capital of Phú Xuân.

When Chapman sailed up the coast toward Qui Nhơn in 1778, he was able to observe that "The coast, in many places highly cultivated, had now a most delightful appearance, the lowlands planted with paddy and the hills with pepper to their very tops."[28] This description suggests that the situation in Tây Sơn-controlled territory had stabilized in the aftermath of the early warfare, allowing the populations to continue (or perhaps resume) their agricultural pursuits. After setting anchor at Qui Nhơn Chapman traveled overland to the Tây Sơn capital at Chà Bàn, and again testified to the stability and fecundity of the countryside he passed:

> Our route lay at first along the banks of a considerable river till we entered a well-cultivated valley which appeared encompassed on all sides with high mountains. In this valley we passed through three or four pretty villages pleasantly situated in which as well as on other parts of the road were public houses where country tea (most vile), fruits and other refreshments were sold to travelers.[29]

It is clear from these descriptions that despite the disruptions of warfare, at times people living in the Tây Sơn period could enjoy relative tranquility and economic well-being. This was not always the case, and indeed Chapman's descriptions were probably of the one place that enjoyed this tranquility in this time for the Tây Sơn capital was rarely threatened by attack for much of the period after 1776.

Indeed, in much of the rest of the territory under Tây Sơn control or being contested by the rebels, life was often very difficult. There are numerous accounts of the miseries produced by the war and fallout from the fighting. There was, for instance, a large-scale famine in the south in the mid-1770s, a function of the fighting that had cut off rice shipments from the south to the less fertile central

[27] Tạ Quang Phát, 10a. Diên Khánh lies directly inland from the coastal city of Nha Trang.
[28] Chapman, 92.
[29] ibid., 96.

coastal regions. When Chapman's team made its first landfall, somewhere in the southern reaches of Mekong delta region, he reported:

> After sometime they [his scouts] came back leading two or three of the most miserable objects I ever beheld, upon the very point of perishing with hunger and disease. The linguists telling us that we might land in security, we did so. These poor wretches then acquainted me that they belonged to a village hard by in which were left about fifty more much in the same condition as themselves; that a fleet of Ignaac's [Nguyễn Nhạc] in its way to Donai, which it is now blockading, had two months before paid them a visit and plundered them of the scanty remains left by a horrid famine, supposed in the preceding year to have carried off more than one half of the whole inhabitants of Cochinchina . . .[30]

Chapman's description here reflected both the aftermath of yet another Tây Sơn attack against the Nguyễn centered on Gia Định, and the aftermath of the earlier famine that had lingered for several years in parts of the south.

Destruction and disease were, moreover, not limited to the south, or to rural regions of the country. Early in the course of their movement, Tây Sơn armies had not only seized, but also sacked the city of Qui Nhơn. The Tây Sơn troops had destroyed the troop barracks and massacred the troops stationed there, while also setting ablaze the Governor's residence. Thereafter, the Tây Sơn troops had moved north up the coast with similarly disastrous effects. In 1774 as these attacks unfolded, Diego de Jumilla described what had taken place in the city of Hội An (known to the Europeans as Faifo), the important central coast trading city which lay just to the south of Tourane:

> As for the inhabitants, they rallied to the soldiers of the king, because the rebels had stolen all that they possessed, after having sacked the entire province; it was thus that the soldiers of the king had no difficulties in retaking the city and in setting their adversaries to flight.[31]

Four years later, the extent of the destruction was still very much in evidence as Chapman reported:

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[30] ibid., 90.

[31] Perez, 80.

> On arriving in Faifo we were surprised to find the recent ruins of a large city; the streets were laid out on a regular plan paved with flat stone and well built brick houses on each side. But, alas, there was not little more remaining than the outward walls within which, in a few places, you might behold a wretch who formerly was the possessor of a palace sheltering himself from the weather in a miserable hut of straw and bamboos. Of the few edifices left standing was a wooden bridge built upon piles over a narrow arm of the river with a tiled roof. The temples and their wooden gods were no further molested than in being robbed of their bells which I understand the present usurper had seized for the purpose of coining money.[32]

Both of these men also reported the devastation visited on the larger city of Tourane (Đà Nẵng) during the course of this same early Tây Sơn advance. Jumilla noted that the Tây Sơn had "seized the port, burned the houses and devastated everything in their path."[33] Chapman similarly observed:

> There had been several large and good houses here, but most of them were destroyed in the troubles . . . [and] . . . the banks of the river were cultivated with rice, brinjalls, and some sweet potatoes. The country further back seemed entirely neglected, covered, however, in several places with groves of oranges, limes, jacks, plantains and bamboos, in most of which were the remains of dwelling houses.[34]

Almost twenty years later, the evidence of the destruction that was wreaked on both Tourane and Hội An was still evident, as revealed in a description provided by a visiting Englishman, John Barrow in 1793:

> That it (Tourane) had suffered considerably from the late revolutions was evident from the ruins of larger and better buildings than any which now appeared, and from inequalities of surface indicating a former existence of walls and forts, and which, by our officer's account who was taken prisoner, were still more invisible and extensive at *Fai-foo* (Hội An).[35]

Given the level of destruction revealed in these accounts, it is not surprising to find some early bifurcation in popular attitudes toward the Tây Sơn. Impoverished

[32] Chapman, 105.
[33] Perez, 82.
[34] Chapman, 103.
[35] John Barrow, *A Voyage to Cochinchina in the years 1792 and 1793* (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1806; reprint, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1975), 310-311.

rural populations, apparently enthusiastic over the burning of tax registers and the abolition of various tax obligations, and those living near the Tây Sơn heartland would have been more inclined to support the Tây Sơn movement in its early years, while city populations and those in more distant regions, subject to Tây Sơn looting and destruction, would have been less likely to do so. The core of Tây Sơn support appears always to have resided in their home region around Qui Nhơn, and later also at their capital at Phú Xuân, which served as a major political center between 1786 and 1801. The former site no doubt benefitted from its place as the center of the Tây Sơn political world. Since the chief political figures in the Qui Nhơn court had been recruited from the immediate area, they would have been in a position to benefit their nearby home villages, ameliorating many of the economic or social downsides of the Tây Sơn rule. The latter site benefitted both from being a political center, and from being relatively insulated from most of the fighting during this period, which took place to its north and south. In other parts of the country, however, the Tây Sơn armies and their leaders were not only a source of great instability, but also quite literally strangers – outsiders with a limited understanding of local conditions, and often motivated more by immediate military objectives than long-term thoughts about local economic or social stability.

Given these realities, and accounts of Marxist historians to the contrary, not every region of Việt Nam welcomed its "liberation" by the Tây Sơn troops.[36] In fact it is difficult to determine precisely what these areas were supposedly being liberated from or to. In the south, around the region of Gia Định, the Tây Sơn made repeated efforts to establish firm political control over the region where the Nguyễn court had set up its initial court in exile. After being forced out of Phú Xuân, the Sài Gòn region changed hands numerous times between 1776 and 1787, with the Tây Sơn

[36] The seemingly anachronistic use of the term "liberation" (*giải phóng*) – appears frequently in Marxist writings on the Tây Sơn actions. See, eg. Nguyễn Hữu Hợp, "Mối Quan Hệ Giữa Khởi Nghĩa Tây Sơn với Làng Xã" (The Relationship between the Tây Sơn Righteous Uprising and the Villages) in *Nông Thôn Việt Nam Trong Lịch Sử Tập I* (The Vietnamese Countryside In History, vol. 1) (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1977), 294; see also Nguyễn Lương Bích, *Quang Trung-Nguyễn Huệ*, (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Quân Đội Nhân Dân, 1989), 39.

never able firmly to establish their own authority. The Nguyễn were always able to fight their way back, and moreover, they were able to organize local forces in the Gia Định region with considerably more effectiveness than the Tây Sơn.

One reason for the inability of the Tây Sơn to solidify their control in this region is suggested in a memorial allegedly submitted to Thái Đức (Nguyễn Nhạc) by Trương Văn Hiến (his teacher):

> Gia Định is far from Phú Xuân and the people there have not felt oppression because of the disturbances of Trương Phúc Loan. Therefore they do not have the same hatred for the Nguyễn that the people of the center do. Thus when our troops go in to attack the troops of the Nguyễn, the people of the South will view it as a dispute between competing powers, and not as an attempt at liberating them. Thus, whichever side is stronger they will follow at first. Then, whoever wins or loses, they will surrender themselves indifferently. It is for this reason that our troops are able to take Gia Định, but then lose it again. If we wish to retain that territory for a long time, then we must do what is necessary to seize the hearts of the people, and chiefly those of the scholars.[37]

This is a plausible outline of the reasons that the Tây Sơn repeatedly failed to consolidate their hold on the Gia Định area. As the author of this memorial suggests, the Tây Sơn did not fully appreciate that the situation in this region, and its experiences under the Nguyễn, had been quite different from those in the south central area of Qui Nhơn. Indeed, it appears that the only time that the Tây Sơn made substantial inroads in gaining the support of southern populations was in the wake of the 1784-1785 Siamese invasion, which arrived ostensibly to help the Nguyễn drive out the Tây Sơn. As even the Nguyễn records noted of this episode, "the Siamese forces were cruel and went everywhere to loot and rob, and . . . the people greatly resented this."[38] To the extent that the Tây Sơn were able to connect the Siamese troops with the Nguyễn they apparently were able to sway popular sentiment to some degree, but this influence appears to have been short-lived. When the Nguyễn returned

[37] Cited in Quách Tấn and Quách Giao, *Nhà Tây Sơn* (Qui Nhơn: Sở Van Hóa và Thông Tin Nghĩa Bình Xuất Bản, 1989), 106.
[38] *Đại Nam Thực Lục*, vol. 2, 57.

in 1787 their armies were themselves welcomed as liberators.[39]

In fact, the Nguyễn appear always to have had a distinct advantage over the Tây Sơn in the south, most likely because their leaders had arrived in the area first, and had taken the opportunity to publicize their plight and claims to power. This was to give them a lasting advantage. In particular, the Nguyễn appear to have been able to solidify their support in the south through establishing good relations with the southern ethnic Chinese communities. Although the Tây Sơn had initially been able to draw on the support of ethnic Chinese communities living in the south-central and central coastal areas, they were not able to translate this into a broader and enduring pro-Tây Sơn ethnic Chinese coalition. Indeed, it appears that there was from the outset a strong tension between the ethnic Chinese and the Tây Sơn, in part because of the rural-urban tension manifested early in the movement. Cities were attacked as centers of political and economic power perceived to have created the problems of the countryside. The reports of Tây Sơn massacres of ethnic Chinese in urban trading centers date to the early years of the movement, including such attacks in Tourane and Hội An. The subsequent Tây Sơn massacre of as many as 10,000 ethnic Chinese in Sài Gòn in 1782 appears to have been only the most violent manifestation of this tension. The Nguyễn, on the other hand, offered these groups greater social and economic freedom, and began to enroll a number of influential members of the ethnic Chinese communities in their southern administration.

As these brief descriptions of the early tensions in the Tây Sơn movement demonstrate, it is virtually impossible to generalize about the impact of the Tây Sơn or the popular response to the movement. The uprising and its rebel soldiers affected various social and economic groups in very different ways. Some groups, at least at times, were very enthusiastic regarding the rebellion, hoping that it might provide economic relief. Other groups, including quite often urban dwellers, ethnic Chinese and those living at greater distances from the Tây Sơn capital, often suffered

[39] ibid., 67.

considerably more and consequently were far more hostile toward the rebels. In what follows I propose to consider various elements of the Tây Sơn relationship to the peasantry in this period, looking less at the precise course of the movement itself, than at particular aspects of Tây Sơn-peasant relations. Above all, the Tây Sơn regime, in the same manner as all regimes before it, sought to control the populations in territories it governed. Thus, it tried to find ways in which to count these populations as a starting point for being able then to utilize them. They used the people they counted first in their military, secondly to tax them in cash and kind, and finally to support their public works projects of various types. In response to these demands, peasants found ways to cope, including resistance in various forms. They also tried to find ways to express hope for a better future, a hope that was often shattered when they discovered that their anticipated saviors were not much better, if at all, than those from whom they had been rescued.

Tây Sơn Demands on the Vietnamese Peasantry

> This is the year 1787 and I am still alive. But I have remained alive only thanks to the mercy of the Virtuous Lord of Heaven, because I live amidst the points of swords and knives, and live surrounded by death.[40]

There are several central features of the relationship between the Tây Sơn and the peasantry, all related to the ways in which the movement's (and later regime's) leaders sought the best means by which to make use of these populations. First, the Tây Sơn leaders attempted to count and categorize populations in territories under their control, both to organize and to utilize these peoples. Thereafter, the rebel leaders were able to exploit these populations for military and labor service as well as for contributions in cash and kind. I argue that understanding these relationships is critical to comprehending the dynamic that existed between the Tây Sơn leadership and the Vietnamese peasant populations, and to our understanding of the peasant

[40] Visente Liêm Ký to ?, 18 July, 1787. MEP 691, 1036.

reactions to this supposed "peasant movement."

Population Control

The starting point for any new administration (or any group that attempts to assert political or military authority) is determining precisely what numbers and types of people are under its control. The Tây Sơn were no exception to this rule and, if anything, their need may have been greater in this respect, and their task more daunting. To understand and thus control the territory they held, the Tây Sơn needed ways to count and categorize the populations living therein. Thus, once the Tây Sơn regimes had been established, after 1775 in the south, and 1788 in the north, its leaders, responding to military and fiscal needs, but more generally to the population displacement and chaos caused by the years of conflict, sought ways to regain control over populations in the territories under their political authority. Such strategies included conducting censuses, which would give the new government some idea of the number of people in these territories, and how these populations were distributed. Secondly, once the populations had been counted, the Tây Sơn instituted a system to classify populations based on age and thus to calculate the various military and economic obligations of different members of society. Finally, Quang Trung developed a system of identification cards that would allow the state keep track of individuals within the larger population control system. By each of these methods, the Tây Sơn attempted to gain control over populations that had, for the previous quarter century or more, been dislocated and uprooted to the extent that the state had largely lost its authority over them.

The major population control device employed by the Tây Sơn was the census. The Tây Sơn conducted censuses at a variety of points in their reign. In the north, the Trịnh-Lê regime had conducted periodic enumerations of their populations, but these had been conducted unsystematically, with the last relatively precise survey

having been conducted in 1658.[41] Moreover, between the social disruptions of a century of popular unrest, and the consequences of numerous years of famine and widespread death, any existing population registers would have been extremely inaccurate. In the south, the Nguyễn similarly conducted censuses for tax and conscription purposes. The most recent had taken place in 1769, suggesting that the population figures were relatively up-to-date when the Tây Sơn rose up.[42] Like their successors then, the Tây Sơn made attempts to count their populations. Their efforts in this respect represented a means by which to begin to stake out their own political authority, but even more fundamentally represented a necessary attempt to establish a baseline from which to determine population needs and potential tax, military and corvee contributions.

It is not clear when the first Tây Sơn census took place. When Nguyễn Nhạc announced, in 1775, that one in five villagers would be subject to conscription, it must be assumed that the Tây Sơn either had access to some sort of population figures or were intending to carry out such a survey in the several provinces then under their control. The *Đại Nam Thực Lục* reports that in the same year Nhạc was forcing people into his armies based on registered names (籍) in the villages around Qui Nhơn, again suggesting access to population rolls.[43] It was not for another decade, however, in 1785 when we have the first direct evidence of a Tây Sơn census. This census was, moreover, not comprehensive, but rather targeted a specific group within Vietnamese society – Vietnamese Christians. Nhạc ordered that all Christians in his realm be registered in order that they could be either taxed or forced to renounce their new religion.[44]

A few years later, at some point in 1787 or 1788, the Tây Sơn began to register populations in the north, first in the former Nguyễn territories. and later in

[41] Đặng Phương Nghi, *Les Institutions Publiques du Viêt-Nam Au XVIII^e Siècle* (École Française D'Extrême-Orient, 1969), 112.

[42] *Đại Nam Thực Lục*, vol. 1 235-236.

[43] 大南寔錄前編 (*Đại Nam Thực Lục Tiền Biên*) (Tokyo: Keio Institute of Linguistic Studies, 1961), vol. 1, 168.

[44] This topic will be taken up at greater length in Chapter Four.

the Red River delta region. The Tây Sơn desire to carry out population tallies would have been particularly acute in the north, for this was a region where large-scale population movements had been under way since the 1770s. Thus, however inaccurate the existing seventeenth-century census figures might have been by the middle of the eighteenth century, twenty years into the Tây Sơn era, these figures would have been almost entirely worthless. It is clear that the Tây Sơn hoped to restore order and stability in the north primarily by turning the migrant populations into sedentary ones, and by focusing on a restoration of the long-disrupted agricultural economy. A French missionary reported of these early control measures in the north that all travelers were required to have an identity card if they wished to travel around the country. Moreover, each village was required to construct two or three offices in which passers-by would have to register, thus constituting a means by which to regulate the population and to gather population figures.[45] This is, unfortunately, the only evidence we have for this particular form of population control, so there is no way of knowing how systematic this effort was.

Once the Tây Sơn leader Nguyễn Huệ had assumed imperial authority from the Lê, he too began to turn his attention to population counts. Thus, in the fourth month of the year *kỷ dậu* (April-May 1789), Quang Trung "repaired the legal status registers" of the population. This may have been intended as the prelude for a larger population count.[46] And indeed, in January-February 1790, Quang Trung issued a decree which read in part: "All of the governor generals from the Linh Giang River northward should instruct all of the prefectures and districts to urge the people in the hamlets to list the numbers in their village (*đinh*) according to their ranks . . . ."[47] In the same year, he also issued a decree concerning taxation, population classification and village expenditures, in which the onus for maintaining current population records was placed on the villages. Specifically, villages were expected to continue to pay their

[45] M. Jean-André Doussain to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 16 June, 1788, in Cadière "Documents Relatifs," 19-20.
[46] *Lê Quý Dật Sử*, 90.
[47] ibid., 95.

population assessments on all previously registered inhabitants, with assessments only being reduced if the village chief formally certified that inhabitants had died.[48]

Perhaps around the same time (the decree is not dated), Quang Trung issued a decree entitled "Encouraging Agriculture." In this document, he described the problems that had developed with vagabondage during the years of turmoil, which in turn had led to declining crop output and growing concerns about hunger. The edict went on to call for all peoples to return to their homes over the next two years and to resume their agricultural activities.[49] The purpose of this was clearly two-fold: first to restore agricultural output to support the northern populations, and second, to return people to their homes where they could be counted and thus controlled more effectively by the state. Although from a peasant point of view this degree of state control might be seen as a drawback, it is possible (though the data is very sketchy) that the more immediate effect of the attempt to return people to their villages was to improve social stability and to begin the resumption of agricultural work, both of which would benefit the people.

Then, in 1792, shortly before his death, Quang Trung ordered an even more systematic census, suggesting that previous efforts had either been unsuccessful or unsystematic. Bùi Dương Lịch, described the problems of the population registers as they existed at that time:

> The village registers had been set up in the year *nhâm dần* [1722] during the old Lê times, and by now sixty or seventy years had passed, in which time the numbers of inhabitants had increased in some places and decreased in others. And they were very different from each other, and thus the taxes and the corvee labor were not all (there). In the year *quý tị* [1773] there was an order to record [the registers] again, but the people then were stubborn and unyielding, and the officials accepted bribes, and they were unable to complete [the project] and after that they had to follow the old registers. Reaching the present, the Tây Sơn sent down an order that the people in the commune in every place had to open the registers of the hamlets and

[48] *Lệnh Chí*, VHc. 120, 3.

[49] Ngô Thì Nhậm, *Tuyển Tập Thơ Văn Ngô Thì Nhậm* (The Collected Writings of Ngô Thì Nhậm), trans. Mai Quốc Liên and others, ed. Ngọc Hy. Volume 2 (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1978), 117-120.

villages.[50]

The 1792 census was described by a missionary as being carried out with the strictest of rigor, and tallying every citizen between the ages of 9 and 70. The census figures were then to be used for assessing both military and tax obligations.[51]

The final Tây Sơn census for which we have evidence took place in 1801. This census may have been part of a wider restructuring of the Tây Sơn regime exemplified in the change of reign name from Cảnh Thịnh to Bảo Hưng in the previous year. The change of reign name was part of an attempt to rejuvenate a regime that was faltering under continuing Nguyễn attacks, and which was in imminent danger of losing its capital at Phú Xuân. This was also a period of growing popular unrest against the Tây Sơn in their northern provinces, in which increasing numbers of small-scale revolts were being reported, rebellions spurred by the expectations regarding the imminent arrival of Nguyễn forces. Whether the new census was part of the ritual rejuvenation of the Tây Sơn state is unclear. What is clear, however, is the fact that this census was designed not so much to gain a population count as it was an attempt to establish which men were away from their village. Men not found in their village were assumed to be in rebellion against the Tây Sơn. Furthermore, and based on this census, any individual not registered in the village records would automatically be assumed to be part of the emergent resistance movements.[52]

The Tây Sơn regime was right to be suspicious of the population counts they were getting, for, not surprisingly, many villages tried to falsify their census statistics. Villagers and village leaders understood very well that it was in their best interests to attempt to have the lowest possible population count registered for their particular village. Consequently, many northern villages were able substantially to reduce their military obligations by underreporting their local population figures. This practice was no doubt very widespread throughout the Tây Sơn period and throughout the country (as it had no doubt been practiced for centuries before as

[50] *Lê Quý Dật Sử*, 106.
[51] Philippe Sérard to Chaumont, 6 May, 1792. MEP 692, 495.
[52] Pierre Eyot to Claude-François L'Etondal, 19 June, 1801. MEP 701, 450.

well), but there are few specific accounts of such activity. One that has survived is an 1801 description by a French missionary, who noted that it was the villages that had been able to underreport their populations that were best in a position to survive the demands of the state. From his description it is clear that this process was apparently not a matter of a slight fiddling with the population figures, but rather consisted of very substantial underreporting. His village, for example, with a true population of approximately 300, had reported only about 10 percent of that figure.[53] Clearly, if a village could get away with such reporting, it would be in a much better position vis-à-vis the state. The Tây Sơn regime was no doubt aware of these deceptions, and so took various precautions to prevent them, but in most such cases the state would have been largely powerless to enforce accurate counts, which, of necessity, required local cooperation.

As populations were being counted under the Tây Sơn governments, they were also being classified, continuing a practice developed by earlier regimes. The Trịnh regime, for example, had established the following six categories:

1) Tráng Hạng – young men and adults subject to military service
2) Quân Hạng – young men and adults subject to military reserve service
3) Dân Hạng – the general population
4) Lão Hạng – the aged, from 50 to 60 years of age
5) Cố Hạng – mercenaries
6) Cùng Hạng – the indigent[54]

The Nguyễn had similarly categorized their own populations, as Lê Quý Đôn reported in 1776.[55] As part of the population count that was conducted early in the Quang Trung reign, the Tây Sơn government classified people based upon their age, clearly drawing to some degree on the earlier Trịnh designations:

1) Vị Cập – those 9-17 years of age

[53] Pierre Eyot to Chaumont and Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 15 December, 1801. MEP 693, 547.
[54] Phương, 112-113.
[55] *PBTL* (1977), 158. This section was omitted in the 1972 bilingual version.

2) Tráng hạng – those 18-55 years of age

3) Lão hạng – those 56-60 years of age

4) Lão nhiêu – those 61 and up[56]

Moreover, everyone in this group between the ages of ten and fifty-five was potentially subject to military service, in which one villager in three was taken for duty, though members of families that were involved in political administration of their local areas were exempt. This categorization, in which the Tây Sơn followed the lead of their predecessors, was clearly an attempt to organize society from above in an idealized manner. Classifying villagers fit into the Confucian logic that elaborated social relationships at all levels, relationships that even if not always accepted by villagers, continued to be promoted by political elites.[57] Moreover, these classifications also fed into village social structures, in which elaborate hierarchies were developed to determine status, rights and obligations.

Finally, once the populations under their control had been counted and classified, the Tây Sơn sought a way to control their movement and to link them more directly to their homes. In response to this need, Quang Trung developed a system of identity cards, introduced to serve as a way to control people and readily identify the villages to which they belonged. These so-called trust-cards (*tin bài*), were among the most important population control measures developed by the Tây Sơn. These cards were identification documents, that contained a person's name, village, and lineage, as well as an imprint of the person's thumb to protect against fraud. A later source provides a useful description of the cards and the way in which the system functioned:

> Each person would have one placard, on which would be engraved "The Great Trust of the Empire," a seal and (these) four characters. On the four edges [it] made known their surname, given name and antecedents, and contained an imprint of their left thumb . . . And when they went out the people always had to carry it. And if they should happen to be questioned

[56] *Nguyễn Thị Tây Sơn Ký*, DC. 112, 44. Bình Định Provincial Library, Qui Nhơn, Việt Nam

[57] See Chapter Five for a discussion of the ways in which northern Confucian scholars influenced Tây Sơn social policy.

> then they had to take it out and present it. And this was called "the trust placard." And if you did not have the placard then . . . the people were permitted to look and know it and then the people would (should) report it, and they would be taken and put into the army . . .[58]

The system of identity cards was, like the other population control measures, not unique to the Tây Sơn. A similar system had been used by the Ming during their occupation of Việt Nam in the first decades of the fifteenth century, in which everyone had to carry an identification card, and those found without one were forced into the army.[59] The Tây Sơn leadership applied precisely the same logic, and thus failure to possess such a card and to present it on demand could lead to immediate impressment into the Tây Sơn armies.

Some sources, such as the *Hoàng Lê Nhất Thống Chí*, suggest that these cards were the prelude to a massive invasion of China.[60] Another account, however, the *Tây Sơn Thuật Lược*, described the trust card policy as having been designed by Ngô Thì Nhậm, which if true more likely indicates that the policy was a population control device rather than a way to enhance conscription of soldiers, since there are no indications of Nhậm's having had any military designs or ambitions.[61] But Nhậm was deeply concerned about vagabond populations, something about which he had memorialized to the Trịnh ruler in the 1770s, and so such a system would have helped achieve his desire to bring populations under control. Clearly, however, population registers could be used for a variety of purposes, and were almost certainly used to calculate village obligations for military service in general terms, if not specifically for a planned invasion of China.

Whatever the intended purpose of the identity cards, they were extremely unpopular among the people, and were carried only with great reluctance. As one account described it, only fear led the people to consent to carrying the cards: "the

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[58] *Nam Sử*, VHv. 2743, 59b. Similar descriptions can be found in other sources as well. See, eg. Đào Nguyễn Phổ, *Tây Sơn Thủy Mạc Khảo*, DC. 156, 30-31. Typescript held at the Bình Định Provincial Library, Qui Nhơn; also *HLNTC* (1998), vol. 2, 218.

[59] Lê Thanh Khôi, 203.

[60] *HLNTC* (1998), vol. 2, 218.

[61] *Tây Sơn Thuật Lược*, 12.

people feared the power and the severity of Huệ and they hung the identity cards around their necks."[62] Other witnesses described the populations as so resenting the identity cards that they rose up numerous times in rebellion, only to be crushed by the powerful Tây Sơn forces.[63] The continued popular hostility toward the system of trust cards led the Tây Sơn regime to reconsider it. Shortly after Quang Trung's death in 1792, the trust card system was abolished by the new Emperor, Cảnh Thịnh, who also halted the rounding up of vagabonds.[64]

Military Service

Once people had been counted and classified they could more easily be drafted into the Tây Sơn armies, for one of the most obvious and immediate of the numerous Tây Sơn demands on rural populations was military service. Whatever else it might have been about, the Tây Sơn uprising was primarily concerned with the mobilization of armies. Although the Tây Sơn leaders were merely the latest in a long line of Vietnamese regimes that had called on the populations to serve in their armies, the demands they made of populations under their control were particularly onerous. There was always an enemy confronting the Tây Sơn, and when they were not being challenged by the Nguyễn they sought out conflict: with the Trịnh in 1786; then again several times in the north attempting to stamp out Lê restorationist efforts; and finally in the early 1790s as Quang Trung contemplated attacking China in an effort to retrieve the two "lost" provinces of Guangdong and Guangxi, and then planned a major offensive against the Nguyễn shortly before his death. There were, in addition, periodic episodes of open warfare within the Tây Sơn camp, including most dramatically the brief war between Nguyễn Nhạc and Nguyễn Huệ in 1787, but also the conflicts of the late 1790s that pitted the Tây Sơn court at Phú Xuân against renegade generals at Qui Nhơn, Nhạc's former seat. All this makes clear that the Tây Sơn movement was at heart a military one, which defined itself chiefly in terms of

[62] ibid., 16.

[63] Philippe Sérard to Chaumont, 6 May, 1792. MEP 692, 495.

[64] see, for example, *Nguyễn Thị Tây Sơn Ký*, A. 3138, 38a; or *Nhà Tây Sơn*, 45a.

its military campaigns and successes. As long as there was a battle looming, its leaders could find a sense of purpose and direction. Lulls in fighting were potentially dangerous, for they allowed the substantial political divisions within the movement time and opportunity to manifest themselves.

The rhythms of the Tây Sơn era were thus, to a great extent, those imposed by the almost incessant warfare between the Tây Sơn and their many adversaries. The warfare of this period and the military service it necessitated, more than anything else, had a profound effect on rural dwellers. Military service was, of course, rarely popular, for peasants obliged to join the military were often (though not always) forced to abandon their farms and families.[65] Military service was particularly unpopular during periods of actual warfare, when the danger of being called into battle escalated dramatically. Moreover, the armies of this period were considerable and the casualties of warfare also large. Although the Tây Sơn armies started small, with perhaps only a few hundred men surrounding their leaders in the first two years of the insurrection, these forces grew rapidly as the movement expanded beyond its origins in the hinterland. As the armies grew in size so did the number of casualties and correspondingly the impact that the Tây Sơn wars had on the Vietnamese people, both soldiers and civilians. While estimates are sketchy, the fragmentary evidence suggests that several hundred thousand people were killed directly on the battlefields, and tens of thousands more died as a result of factors immediately related to the conflict. The Tây Sơn armies had already killed 1,600 Nguyễn soldiers by early 1774, while by March of that year already fielding an army of as many as 26,000 soldiers.[66] Later as many as 30,000 Trịnh soldiers may have died in a single battle at Phú Xuân in the summer of 1786,[67] and when Nhạc and Huệ fought a brief war between them in

[65] For some peasants, military service may have been seen as an opportunity for personal advancement, and so one cannot argue that military service was uniformly seen as onerous, but for the majority it would certainly have been more a burden than a benefit.

[66] Perez, 78.

[67] Durand Manuscript, 9. See also Đỗ Bang, "Tình Hình Đấu Tranh Giai Cấp Ở Thuận Hóa Thế Kỷ XVIII (The Situation of the Class Struggle in Thuận Hóa in the Eighteenth Century)," *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử*, No. 3 (216), (1981): 43.

early 1787 one missionary reported that Nhạc lost 40,000 troops.[68] Then, in battles around Qui Nhơn in 1801, a European observer cited total casualties (dead and wounded) for Tây Sơn and Nguyễn forces as numbering more than 54,000.[69] These figures make clear the scale of the Tây Sơn wars and the corresponding need for soldiers to fill these large and often depleted forces.

Although the large Tây Sơn armies were initially filled by volunteers, this clearly changed as the rebel forces grew larger and spread into the lowlands. Increasingly troops were brought in by force, particularly by the mid-1770s. Earlier it was noted that in 1775 Nguyễn Nhạc named himself king, and then as part of this new political stature imposed a standardized troop quota on villages under his control. Each village was forced to send one out of every five men for military service.[70] This suggests that the Tây Sơn ranks were no longer being filled merely by enthusiastic volunteers, but rather increasingly by reluctant conscripts. At one level, this was not much different from the manner in which the Nguyễn had imposed military obligations on the populations under their control. There was, however, one important difference: those who were being forced into the Tây Sơn armies actually found themselves facing almost continuous warfare from the mid-1770s until the mid-1780s and beyond. Earlier under the Nguyễn, with the exception of minor skirmishes with short-lived uprisings, men in the military had had little to fear from actual combat. Li Tana, for example, noted that European observers' accounts of the seventeenth-century Nguyễn army described it as being relatively well looked after and reported that soldiers were allowed to keep their families with them.[71] Although the situation of those in the Nguyễn military may have deteriorated into the middle of the eighteenth century, there remained a qualitative difference between being forced into Tây Sơn

[68] Jean-André Doussain to ?, 8 July, 1787. MEP 746, 205. It is not entirely clear what percentage of these were dead or wounded and what percentage had merely fled the ranks of Nhạc's armies.
[69] Barisy in Leopold Cadière, "Documents Relatifs a L'Époque de Gia-Long," *Bulletin De L'École Française D'Extrême-Orient*, (1912): 43.
[70] *Nguyễn Thị Tây Sơn Ký*, 5a.
[71] Li, 38-39.

armies and being forced into the pre-1771 Nguyễn military.

Moreover, the evidence suggests that the difficulties of life in the Tây Sơn armies during the years of conflict manifested themselves in extremely high attrition rates. There is considerable evidence that many of those forced into the Tây Sơn armies left them as quickly as was possible, fleeing poor conditions that included lack of food, very cruel treatment, and the difficulty of lightening-fast forced marches against enemy troops.[72] It is not surprising that numerous accounts describe the Tây Sơn, particularly in the center and north, as constantly having to recruit new armies to replace the large numbers of troops that routinely deserted due to. A 1787 letter, for example, noted that "[Huệ] returned here at the end of March or early April with around 50,000 men, or more precisely, 50,000 peasants or adventurers raised in haste, his former soldiers having nearly all abandoned him due to his cruelty, which left them to die of hunger."[73] While Tây Sơn armies lost a great many troops to desertion, they also suffered high numbers of casualties on the battlefields as well, troops that also had to be replaced. In 1784, for example, the French missionary D'Arcet, living near Qui Nhơn, reported that there had been eighteen battles between the Tây Sơn and Nguyễn over the course of a six-month period, during which time Nhạc lost one third of his army.[74] As a result of both desertion and death or debilitating injuries, the Tây Sơn leaders had repeatedly to rebuild their forces to meet the challenges of their adversaries.

Faced with growing resistance to serving in their armies and a declining number of voluntary troops, the Tây Sơn came to adopt coercive measures to keep their armies at full strength. Although frequently hailed for their tolerance toward

[72] Bùi Dương Lịch's *Lê Quý Dật Sử*, contains a description of a defeated Trịnh force in 1786, which one can imagine may have had echoes of similar Tây Sơn forces: "The soldiers who had lost the battle were grabbed and gathered together in tens, hundreds and thousands, and in their hands they held swords and lances, and they looked like so many young buffalo boys who had fled there, and panicked and did not know what to do, and they tossed aside nearly all of their belongings and fled." [66] See also, eg. MEP 801, 201. Extract of a letter dated June 30, 1788 (author unknown).

[73] MEP 690, 899. "Journal of the Most Remarkable Happenings in the Mission to Tonkin from the month of July 1786 to the end of July 1787."

[74] Jean-Pierre-Joseph D'Arcet to ?, 30 May, 1784. MEP 801, 20; and Jean-Pierre-Joseph D'Arcet to Jean-Jacques Descourvieres, 20 September, 1785. MEP 801, 80.

those who resisted them, the Tây Sơn troops and leaders regularly used brutal force in their interactions with local populations or officials. According to some accounts, the Tây Sơn were quick to force people into their armies, and just as quick to punish those who refused to join them. There are numerous descriptions of summary executions and other forms of naked force being applied at different times and in various places. Already early in the movement, the same Spanish missionary who described the Tây Sơn as being hailed as "virtuous and charitable thieves," also observed of them: "They set fire to the palace [of the Provincial Governor] to make themselves masters of the entire province, without encountering any resistance because they executed all who opposed them."[75] Thus, not only were people dying in the battlefields if they were unfortunate enough to find themselves pressed into service, but many were dying for their efforts to resist conscription in the first place. Again, it is very important to note that the Tây Sơn had not initiated this type of brutal forced conscription. Li Tana notes of their predecessors:

> The Nguyễn recruiting law was very strict. In approximately 1671 Vachet reported that "a man will lose his head if he is found trying to avoid being a soldier." He also added that if a recruiting officer accepted a substandard conscript, he too would lose his head. Judging from Da Shan's 1690s account, the process of military recruitment manifested itself in each village as little less than a disaster.[76]

Clearly army-related brutality was already part of the militarized culture of the southern realm in the period well before the Tây Sơn emerged.

In any case, the theme of executions as a response to resistance thus developed during the earliest days of the uprising, and remained a significant element of Tây Sơn military recruitment and retention. According to other observers, the Tây Sơn also practiced particular cruelty among their troops, to harden them for battle, to intimidate them from attempting to flee the army, and probably to intimidate the local populations. A 1788 letter described the brutal control exercised by Tây Sơn general Võ Văn Nhậm over his troops:

[75] Perez, 70.
[76] Li, 39.

> [His] talent was to kill a great many people to make them fearful and to obey promptly. They also killed many people for no reason. As they left and brought this large number of forced troops they made to redouble their cruelty. For an error or for bothering someone or another similar thing, or even those who had done nothing would have their heads cut off. In the space of a half a league on the road, one can see 15 bodies killed in this manner.[77]

Moreover, it was not only supporting generals, but the Tây Sơn brothers themselves who participated in the use of force. An early nineteenth-century account by a French missionary, who had been in the region at the time, wrote of the Tây Sơn attack on the Chinese in 1789 that Nguyễn Huệ had been largely without an army at Phú Xuân, when he heard the news that the Chinese had invaded:

> On the field he assembled a small army, which he put to a forced march to go to attack the Chinese army, taking along the way all of the men to serve as arms porters, forcing them to take part in his army, and massacring all those who refused him, and taking for his troops all of the supplies, leaving the elderly, the women and the infants without resources, and burning the houses of those who refused to provide him with supplies, or terrifying them into fleeing.[78]

Thus there appears to have been a pattern of intimidation designed both to force people into the Tây Sơn armies and to keep them there. A letter, probably written around 1795, made the claim that: "The rebels who occupy all of Tonkin and upper Cochinchina carry out vexations here and cruelties of the most extraordinary nature, to the point of making their soldiers drink human blood and to making them eat men who are still fully alive in order to accustom them to cruelty."[79] Reports of this cruelty are found not only in the French missionary materials (which might be suspected of gross exaggeration), but also in the nineteenth-century Nguyễn records, which while critical of the Tây Sơn may be more accurate. For example, the *Đại Nam Thực Lục* describes a 1776 encounter between Tây Sơn and Nguyễn forces in which a

[77] Louis-François Le Breton to Directors, July, 1788. MEP 692, 12(8).

[78] Pierre-Jacques Lemonnier de La Bissachere, *Etat actuel Du Tonkin et de la Cochinchine et des Royaumes de Camboge, Laos et Lac-Tho*, 2 Volumes (Paris, 1812; reprint, Gregg International Publishers, Ltd. Westmead, England, 1971), vol. 2, 169-170.

[79] Charles-François Langlois to ?, 1795. MEP 692, 359.

Nguyễn general was captured. Refusing to compromise himself in the face of Tây Sơn threats, he was killed, and, according to the records, then eaten.[80]

Although frequently used as a form of punishment or coercion in recruitment, execution of soldiers was not always used for those purposes. On occasion, it was used to inspire faith in the Tây Sơn among local populations. Thus, for instance, during the 1786 campaign to the north, in which the Tây Sơn sought to enhance their reputation among the northern populations, they were reported to have executed members of their own troops for even minor offenses against the local populations.[81] This does not appear to have been maintained as a consistent policy, however, for in subsequent years there are countless descriptions of Tây Sơn troops ransacking villages in the north. Indeed, the missionary who reported the executions of troops for minor violations during the 1786 campaign, went on to observe that "these rebels, who entered peacefully have not departed in the same way. They have committed many acts of violence against the people on both sides of the river."[82]

Not surprisingly, the military service demands of the Tây Sơn remained high, particularly in the final years of their reign, during which the regime was fighting for its survival against a reenergized Nguyễn force. The patterns of brutality and coerced military service became particularly intense in this period, as the Tây Sơn leaders found it more difficult than ever to retain soldiers among their armies. Numerous missionary letters speak of the large-scale desertions among Tây Sơn troops, which required constant recruitment of replacements. A letter from 1801 reported, for instance, that "even in the midst of all these troubles, the Tây Sơn are not losing their heads, and are carrying out another levy of soldiers; no one dares refuse, for those who do are summarily decapitated."[83]

For all their threat, the use of execution and other forms of intimidation does

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[80] *Đại Nam Thực Lục*, 256. That such an incident is not implausible is suggested by other accounts of later nineteenth and even twentieth century episodes of soldiers eating parts (usually internal organs) of their enemies.

[81] Jean-François Le Roy to Claude-François L'Etondal, 6 December, 1786. MEP 700, 1307.

[82] ibid., 1308.

[83] Pierre Eyot to Denis Boiret, 21 June, 1801. MEP 693, 497.

not appear to have been enough to maintain sufficient troop strength within the Tây Sơn armies. Consequently, other techniques to retain soldiers were also employed, including ones that relied on suasion rather than force. Among these techniques, the most widespread, particularly in the last years of the Tây Sơn regime, was to appoint large numbers of troops as officers. Perhaps it was hoped that pride in rank might persuade soldiers to remain with the Tây Sơn armies. Thus, a 1797 letter reported that "almost all of the men have died in the wars or other calamities that have been suffered in this country for 25 years, and the few men that remain are in the service of the Tyrant and *are almost all commanders or officers*, some in the service of the army, and others in the offices and the jurisdictions."[84] A few years later, a keen European military observer wrote about the structure of the Tây Sơn armies, after an important Nguyễn victory:

> There are more than 144 colonels, lieutenants, colonels, and majors in one large encampment at the palace to the right of the entrance; all are in chains; moreover there are 5 to 600 others who are more lightly chained. The captains, ensigns, sergeants and corporals number 3,500 to 4,000 and are all in the cangue.[85]

For example, a village register from a hamlet north of Phú Xuân, and dated from 1799, recorded that of 295 eligible males in the village, 122 of them carried either noble titles or officer level military positions.[86] It seems highly unlikely, under normal circumstances, that 41% of the men in a village would bear titles or such military ranks, suggesting that a considerable expansion of ranks and titles was indeed occurring during this period. Moreover, this rank inflation was not lost on the general populations observing the military events of the late 1790s and early 1800s. A mocking saying emerged in the last years of the Tây Sơn regime, commenting on this

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[84] Philippe Sérard to Claude-François Létondal, 26 July, 1797. MEP 701, 253. [Emphasis added] It should be noted that the Nguyễn used such devices as well. The *Đại Nam Thực Lục* notes that at one point in 1788, Nguyễn officers were sent on campaigns with thousands of blank promotion certificates that could be used for field promotions if necessary. [*Đại Nam Thực Lục*, vol 2, 75.]

[85] Barisy to Marquini and Claude-François Létondal, 16 July, 1801. MEP 801, 964.

[86] Bùi Thị Tân, "Nhân Dân Làng Dã Lê Thượng với Phong Trào Tây Sơn," *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử* No. 269 (4, 1993): 67-70.

peculiar structure of the rebel armies:

> As for commanders-in-chief, we have 3,000
> As for commanders we have 80,000
> As for lieutenants and captains, they are too numerous to count.
> And as for corporals and sergeants, we need boats to transport them all."[87]

Although the Tây Sơn continued to be able to field large armies against the Nguyễn as late as 1802, it appears that many of the soldiers in these armies were reluctant conscripts and not the enthusiastic volunteers often depicted in modern accounts. Through a combination of threats of force, acts of brutality and the inducements of officer status, the Tây Sơn armies were kept full even as large numbers of soldiers regularly deserted the rebel leaders. Military service during times of war was not merely a grave threat to life and limb, it was a severe disruption to the important rhythms of agricultural life, as will be discussed below. But military service was not the only burden the Tây Sơn were placing on populations under their domination. These same populations were also being subjected to almost continuous demands for corvee labor, another onerous and time-consuming obligation that threatened the peasants' livelihood and pulled them away from their fields.

Labor Service and Direct and Indirect Taxation

Like the Nguyễn and Trịnh lords before them, and the Nguyễn dynasty after them, the Tây Sơn relied on subject populations not only for military service but also

[87] Phạm Văn Đang, *Văn Học Tây Sơn*, (Sài Gòn: Lửa Thiêng, 1973), 27-28

for coerced labor service to carry out projects, both grandiose and mundane.[88] While some of the labor service demanded by the Tây Sơn regime can be said to have benefited local populations – repairing dikes or rebuilding roads – many other projects were of little or no concrete benefit to the participants. In fact, it is hardly surprising in a period that saw as much warfare and destruction as the late eighteenth century that enormous labor contributions would be required both to support the many ongoing military campaigns and to build and rebuild infrastructure of various types that was being destroyed in the course of these campaigns. Perhaps the most important thing to note is that accounts that depict the Tây Sơn as saviors of the peasantry have not only overlooked the burdensome military demands, but also the often onerous labor demands that this new regime placed on the populations under its control.

The need to rely on corvee labor manifested itself already very early in the course of the Tây Sơn movement. The particularly destructive Tây Sơn approach to warfare – putting to torch what might have been useful edifices – greatly contributed to their insatiable need for corvee labor. On seizing their first provincial capital at Qui Nhơn for example, rebel troops promptly burned down the governor-general's mansion. A short while later, "they burned the palace of the mandarin governor of Quang Ngai and built a new one."[89] Such incidents were only the beginnings of a pattern that

[88] The imposition of labor service was not something unique to the Tây Sơn during this period, but was an imposition endured by populations regardless of who their overlords happened to be. During this period the Nguyễn side also made heavy labor demands of the populations under its control, for example in constructing their new citadel at Gia Định. And, under their new Trịnh overlords, the populations of Thuận Hóa had found themselves being "recruited" to, among other things, labor in gold mines for several months in the mid-1770s. See, eg. *Đại Nam Thực Lục*, vol. 1, 258.

[89] Perez, 76. The Tây Sơn, it should be noted, however, were hardly unique in this particular practice, for the new Nguyễn regime in the nineteenth century also destroyed numerous structures associated with their predecessors, and then promptly rebuilt them using corvee labor. As Huỳnh Sanh Tông has noted: "Even after the Nguyễn lords triumphed over all their enemies, unified the country and founded their own dynasty, they could not escape popular criticism. Gia-long ordered the dismantling of old palaces and shrines that reminded him of his erstwhile foes and the construction of new monuments to himself – he came in for this rebuke in folk verse: "He's destroyed temples, then he builds them all over again. Why does anyone have to fight for power and grab the country like that?" [Huỳnh Sanh Tông, "Folk History in Vietnam," *The Vietnam Forum*, No. 5, (1985): 73-74.]

would necessitate a considerable (and seemingly unnecessary) expenditure of labor power. Clearly, whether edifices were destroyed by torch or taken apart brick by brick, such actions reflected the caprices of the rulers or claimants to power, and in the end it was the general population that ultimately suffered from the need to reconstruct what had been destroyed.

While populations were being drafted to rebuild structures destroyed by war, they were also being called on to help build the new political centers of the Tây Sơn leaders. By 1775 Nguyễn Nhạc was relying on local labor to help to construct his citadel at Chà Bàn, which he was to make his capital in 1776, and the site of his imperial throne in 1778.[90] Although the remains of a Cham citadel already existed on the site, substantial work was required sufficiently to fortify the walls and to construct living and working space within the citadel grounds. The one detailed eyewitness description of Tây Sơn-controlled Chà Bàn that we have dates from 1778, and tells of a city whose ramparts remained in a state of disrepair.[91] This suggests either that the work had not been completed – though the eyewitness (Charles Chapman) does not mention seeing any labor crews – or that work had been abruptly halted as forced labor had fled the scene, leaving the Tây Sơn ruler with insufficient numbers of workers to complete the project. Another much briefer account from this same period, by the Portuguese Jacinto da Fonçeca e Sylva, noted too that the Tây Sơn capital, while surrounded by a large wall, was a fairly unimpressive site with only a few well-constructed houses for the leaders and a population of perhaps 500 living in straw houses.[92]

A similar pattern of using corvee labor for constructing political centers can be seen in the wake of the Tây Sơn advance toward the north in 1786. Nguyễn Huệ began to put the populations there to work as well, commencing a series of labor demands that in no small measure contributed to resentment of Tây Sơn rule in that region. Paralleling his brother's earlier use of forced labor to construct the imperial

[90] *Lê Qúy Dật Sử*, 35.
[91] Chapman, 96.
[92] Manguin, 154-155.

city at Chà Bàn, Nguyễn Huệ put his populations to work on what would become his own political center. Thus, after his troops seized Phú Xuân from the Trịnh, Huệ gathered corvee laborers and forced them to work day and night to rebuild the fortifications of the city, where he entrenched himself beginning in 1786.[93] A missionary also reported that shortly after their seizure of the north the Tây Sơn restored the "Lũy Sầy" ramparts, which had formerly protected the Nguyễn against the Trịnh. This was a project almost certainly requiring major contributions from local populations.[94] In a 1786 letter after the Tây Sơn attacked north of the Gianh River, the French missionary Jean La Bartette reported that everyone had been put to work on public works projects and that the only exemptions were for nursing mothers.[95] Another 1786 letter noted: "[The Tây Sơn] have taken the cultivators from the fields to make them into soldiers; they have burned a great part of the villages and imposed on the people onerous taxes and labor requirements. And what has this produced? All of the evils to which we have testified and which continue still: famine, pestilence, deaths of people and animals, and this without any remedy."[96]

Nor was this the end of Tây Sơn demands on populations for labor service on large-scale projects. A few years after using forced labor to build up fortifications in and around Phú Xuân, Nguyễn Huệ, now in his capacity as the Quang Trung Emperor, also used corvee labor in the preliminary construction of what he envisioned as his own new capital in Nghệ An. To be located half-way between Phú Xuân and Thăng Long, the new capital – the *Phượng Hoàng Trung Đô* (The Imperial Phoenix Central Capitol) – was to be built on a massive scale, as indicated by the remains of the never-completed structure. Its walled dimensions reveal a planned width of 300 meters and a length of 450 meters. The surviving remains of the outer walls are 20

[93] "Extrait d'une lettre de Mgr. L'Eveque de Veren coadjuteur de Mgr. l'Eveque d'Adran en datte de 23 Juilliet, 88." MEP 306, 1008.
[94] Jean LaBartette to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 23 June, 1786. MEP 746, 177.
[95] Jean LaBartette to Denis Boiret, 15 July, 1786, in *Nouvelles Lettres Edifiantes*, vol. 6, 491.
[96] LeRoy to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, June 1789. MEP 692, 112.

meters in height.[97] A near contemporary description noted that:

> [A]t this time, there was an order for the construction of the palace at Vĩnh Đô (in the hamlet of An Trường). The officials of the region urged the people of all the districts to go to An Trường to fill in the lakes and ponds, and to cut down trees.[98]

It is perhaps not surprising that the popular response was to resist this project. We have already noted that the Tây Sơn had repeatedly to enroll new soldiers in the ranks of their armies as conscripts fled whenever the opportunity presented itself. The same was true of labor service. As Bùi Dương Lịch noted of the popular reaction to forced labor on the new Phoenix Capital, "this task was hard and many of the people abandoned it and fled."[99]

Although corvee labor was most visible in the projects to construct grand new political edifices, it was not limited to such projects. Far more labor power was surely involved in less dramatic and ongoing projects of various types. Thus, there was a pattern of continued use of corvee labor throughout the Tây Sơn period. As a 1791 letter from the north noted:

> The taxes are exorbitant everywhere, as are the corvees, especially in this province of Xu-nghe, adjacent to Cochinchina. The people and the soldiers are overwhelmed and are almost continually occupied with the reconstruction of a village that the rebels had built . . . .[100]

Yet another description from that same year provided somewhat more detail:

> All those who are capable are forced to provide their services, and they must provide supplies at their own expense. In the houses there remain only women and the elderly; if there remain any younger people, it is because they have been exempted by paying very large contributions. What is more, there is an order these days to take all of the young men from around 12 to 15 years of age, to serve the children of the king. It appears that this order,

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[97] Chu Trọng Huyến, "Phượng Hoàng Trung Đô," (The Imperial Phoenix Central Capitol) In *Gop Phần Tìm Hiểu Phong Trào Nông Dân Tây Sơn Nguyễn Huệ* (Contributions to Understanding the Tây Sơn Peasant Movement and Nguyễn Huệ) (Qui Nhơn: Sở Văn Hóa Thông Tin Nghĩa Bình, 1983), 148.

[98] *Lê Qúy Dật Sử*, 90.

[99] ibid., 90.

[100] Philippe Sérard to MEP Directors, 26 April, 1791, in *Nouvelles Lettres*, vol. 7, 97.

> which has greatly alarmed the families, is not being carried out with all of the force that had been feared.[101]

This description suggests that labor demands affected every age level and gender in society. Neither the young nor the aged were exempt, and women appear to have been forced to work to a greater extent than had previously been the case.

As was noted above, already in 1786 the Tây Sơn troops entering Thuận Hóa had put everyone to work, including women, with the only exception being for nursing mothers. There may have been a decline in the employment of women thereafter, but by the summer of 1792, it apparently became necessary once again to employ women more directly in the many public works projects. A missionary reported from the north that:

> There has come recently an order that in all the villages where there are insufficient men for public works, that they women will be employed, and that they unmarried women be sent to carry stones to construct fortifications.

The villagers, at least in this instance, were able to resist this order by the expedient of tracking down the unmarried girls in the village and forcing them to marry. In this way the village could avoid having to bear the burden of providing supplies for the girls that would have been sent away on the construction project.[102]

In addition to women, other formerly exempted groups in society also found themselves pressed into service during these extraordinary times, including children, the aged and Buddhist monks. In 1791, for instance, the Tây Sơn established a special guard unit for the young princes of the Tây Sơn Emperor, which would be composed of children as young as seven or eight years of age.[103] There is even more evidence about the Tây Sơn employing the elderly, or at least elderly men, both as laborers and as soldiers. For example, in 1786-87, "the old men and the old women and their children were forced to repair the bridges and the great roads, and to harvest rice,

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[101] Pierre Gire to Claude-François Létondal, 13 July, 1791. MEP 801, 375.
[102] Guérard to ?, 14 May, 1792, in *Nouvelles Lettres Edifiantes*, vol. 7, 141-142.
[103] Philippe Sérard to de Chaumont, 6 May, 1792. MEP 692, 495.

etc."[104] At the same time, older men were also placed into the Tây Sơn army. The cut-off point for enrollment appears to have been 55, but there is anecdotal evidence that older men were frequently rounded up and placed into Tây Sơn forces. At other times older men may even have joined the Tây Sơn armies voluntarily. In one case a group of elderly men from the region of Thăng Long formed a "troop company of the aged" to help in the 1789 attack on the Chinese, an act for which Quang Trung personally rewarded them.[105] Finally, the Tây Sơn leaders, who had little regard for institutional Buddhism, had few qualms about looking to Buddhist monasteries for usable labor. Most frequently, they forced the bonzes to leave their monasteries (many of which Tây Sơn troops had already ransacked) and to serve as porters or even soldiers in the rebel armies.[106] These cases suggest that there was virtually no group in Vietnamese society that was not profoundly and directly affected by the labor demands being made by the Tây Sơn regime.

As the war with the Nguyễn dragged on, Tây Sơn labor demands further intensified. In 1794 there was another round of demands for labor services, described as exhausting the people living under Tây Sơn control.[107] By the late 1790s, the situation in the north had become even more difficult. "It is true that they [Tây Sơn government] are recruiting all of the regiments, completing them to make up for the dead and those who have fled to Đồng nai, and there are also places, such as Bố Chính, where the villages are being forced to pay for the firearms, swords, and uniforms that those who fled took with them. They are forced to pay 30 ligatures for a firearm and 15 ligatures for a uniform."[108] These forced charges reflected the idea of collective responsibility among Vietnamese villages, the idea being that villages would suffer if their members sought to flee the difficulties of military service. Two years later, the situation had not improved a great deal as reported in a missionary

[104] Letter from M. Jacques-Benjamin Longer to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 26 July, 1786, and 3 May, 1787, in Cadière, "Documents Relatifs," 17.

[105] Nguyễn Vinh Phúc, "Nhân Dân Hà Nội Và Tây Sơn" (The people of Hà Nội and the Tây Sơn), *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử* 1, (1989): 53.

[106] Jean LaBartette to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 23 June, 1786. MEP 746, 177-178.

[107] Philippe Sérard to Claude-François L'Etondal, 20 September , 1794. MEP 701, 69.

[108] Philippe Sérard to Claude-François L'Etondal, 4 August, 1796. MEP 701, 169.

letter of 1798:

> Now the people are more troubled than ever before. They have to pay a double tribute this year, excavate canals for the transport of rice from Tonkin into upper Cochinchina, and make baskets to transport it over land in places where one cannot excavate.[109]

Although labor demands were frequent and onerous, they were not always without concrete benefits for the populations performing them. Projects to repair dikes, for example, were particularly important in the northern part of the country, where farming close to the edges of the Red River made dikes critical to controlling its unpredictable course. Periodic dike breaks could and did cause destruction on an enormous scale, including one such catastrophe in the early 1770s.[110] We have a description of a 1795 dike repair project in the *trấn* of Sơn Nam (the large alluvial region stretching along the southern banks of the Red River from Thăng Long to the coast) carried out under the supervision of the key Tây Sơn official, Phan Huy Ích:

> I received the order to supervise the matter of building the dikes, and personally traveled to go to see and inspect all the places, and to communicate to all of the district officials to concentrate on the villages near the river and to force the people to assist and to bring bamboo wood in order to begin the work of setting them up, and the deadline by which it had to be completed, so they could not dawdle. After one month, the work was completed, and the amount that had been gathered and submitted reached more than 50,000 quan of cash, and the people were a bit tired, but they had gained a common benefit, and they all recognized that this was advantageous.[111]

While Ích's description is probably somewhat idealized, it is conceivable that the laborers did view their contributions in this manner. Indeed, it is likely that the workers understood clearly the need for dike maintenance projects, which would have been left undone during years of turmoil. Dike work in the north was perhaps the

[109] de Gortyne to Claude-François L'Etondal, 31 March, 1798. MEP 701, 287.

[110] See, eg. *CM*, vol. 2, 704 about a large 1773 flood.

[111] Introduction to his poem, "Recording the work of the spring, obeying the order to supervise the work of constructing dikes in the Trấn of Sơn Nam" in Phan Huy Ích, *Thơ Văn Phan Huy Ích: Tập II, Dụ Am Ngâm Lục* (The Poetry of Phan Huy Ích, Vol. 2, Recorded Recitations of Dụ Am) (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1978), 147-148.

most notable example of labor projects that directly benefited the ordinary population. The only other public works projects with some incidental benefit might have been road reconstruction projects that permitted not only the movement of armies, but also the transport of much-needed food supplies and commercial goods more generally. Most other projects, however – constructing ramparts, citadels, palaces and offices – were of little immediate or apparent benefit to workers forced to labor on them.

The population registration and control methods developed by the Tây Sơn, in addition to serving as the basis for conscripting soldiers and extracting corvee labor, also allowed them to implement taxation policies and to calculate taxes for particular villages based on the number of people of each classified rank living in that village. Collecting taxes was never easy for the state, and it was particularly difficult for the Tây Sơn. Already in the wake of the Tây Sơn arrival in the north in 1786 there was extensive tax-evasion, which was probably an indicator of things to come. A letter of December 1786 reported that:

> The people, moreover, are as in mutiny and do not want to pay any of the taxes of this harvest of the 10th month, because the state is tottering and one wishes to see its troubles. Each village has become like a small city fortified with forts of hedges and of high terraces, and all of the inhabitants have forged arms for themselves: sabers, halberds, and guns and they guard themselves as in a military camp, and they reciprocate in each canton to support themselves in their need.[112]

Writing nine months later, Philippe Sérard again noted that:

> From another side, there are formed in four large provinces a number of strong parties by the grand Seigneur Chua, by land and sea. A great number of villages which fortified themselves by hedges, terraces and forts, and forged arms against the brigands, are entered into these parties, less due to an attachment to the grand seigneur and more due to a desire to maintain their independence and to not pay tribute to the new government. These different parties have risen up, (and) nearly all at the same time, against the Grand Mandarin . . . The obstinate people who refuse to submit to the legitimate authority are treated as enemies of the state.[113]

[112] Philippe Sérard to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 3 December, 1786. MEP 691, 756.
[113] Philippe Sérard to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 20 August, 1787. MEP 691, 793.

Despite the difficulties and resistance it faced, the Tây Sơn state in the north had to attempt to levy and collect taxes. In a 1790 decree, Quang Trung spelled out the tax obligations that were to be imposed on villages according to the classifications of their inhabitants. It also addressed the taxes imposed on crops based on varying qualities of field lands, and stipulated the manner in which taxes were to be collected and taxes in kind to be stored.[114] It is clear from this document, that the Tây Sơn regime sought to reimpose order on the tax structures, and to systematize what had become chaotic, particularly in the north, during the 1780s. This systematization, however limited it may have been, began to break down toward the end of the Tây Sơn regime, as military and political crises became acute. In 1800, for example, and facing an increasingly desperate situation, the Tây Sơn military commanders in the southern region assessed an additional tax of one *hộc* of paddy rice and one *quan* of cash per *mẫu*, on top of the regular taxes for that year.[115] In other words, taxes became less predictable to the population, and consequently more onerous.

Finally, in addition to regular taxes, the peoples under Tây Sơn control were also frequently called on to make contributions of various types of goods or sometimes additional taxes, sometimes in conjunction with their services and sometimes to address various state ceremonies. These demands essentially constituted an irregular form of taxation, imposing a burden of uncertainty on peasants already struggling with frequent and time-consuming labor demands. Already early in their campaigns in the north, the Tây Sơn were making demands on local populations, apparently seizing goods from villages in proportion to the number of inhabitants each had. Thus, for instance, in 1789, a missionary observed that "our Christians have been forced to make a contribution of ten thousand pieces of copper in order to cast cannons, and the Chinese living in Cochinchina are not exempt from this unjust exaction."[116] Then, in 1791, another missionary reported that:

[114] *Lệnh Chỉ*, VHc. 120, Viện Hán Nôm, Hà Nội.
[115] *Nguyễn Thị Tây Sơn Ký*, DC. 112, 53.
[116] Jean-André Doussain to Claude-François L'Etondal, 23 July, 1790. MEP 801, 330.

> In the single small district in Bố Chính, where I have been for the past 15 days [the people] have been ordered to build more than one hundred [small boats]: these poor men and all of our unfortunate Christians who have consecutively lost their harvests of the 10th and 5th months, and will perhaps also lose that of the following 10th month, have never before had to endure such an enormous burden: the number of planks that they must submit for this effort is two thousand five hundred, with each one having to be 30 to 35 cendees in length, and one and some poueces in width. [The cendee of Tonquin is shorter than ours], and the price of each for those who are forced to purchase them is 15 ligatures. Aside from these planks, everyone must submit all of their produce . . . . The bad air in the forests, the tigers, and fatigue have taken a great number of these unfortunates, who have been cutting the wood and bringing them down from the mountains.[117]

It is clear from this description, that demands for products of various types, fell more heavily on areas capable of supplying them. Thus, Bố Chính, a heavily wooded area to the north of Phú Xuân divided by the Gianh River, was called on to provide wood for boats. Moreover, when cooperation was not forthcoming, villagers were occasionally executed and in some cases villages put to the torch.[118] In this respect, the Tây Sơn were again following the practices of their predecessors. The Trịnh had forced peoples to work in mines in areas where those existed, and the Nguyễn had made the heaviest demands for rice contributions on those parts of their territory that were the most productive in this respect.

It is from this same period that we have evidence of extraordinary taxes being imposed to support high state ceremonies. The first took place on the death of Quang Trung's first wife in the spring of 1791, when there were elaborate preparations for the funeral and period of mourning. Of Quang Trung in this regard it was reported that "he incurred considerable expenses, which all fell on the impoverished people."[119] Then, after Quang Trung's own death the following year, equally lavish arrangements were made in the area around Phú Xuân to receive the formal Chinese recognition of the new Tây Sơn ruler, Quang Toản. These preparations, viewed by a European

[117] Philippe Sérard to Claude-François L'Etondal, 17 July, 1791. MEP 700, 1468.
[118] Loren to ?, 23 February, 1788. MEP 887, 124-125.
[119] Philippe Sérard to Claude-François L'Etondal, 30, April 1791. MEP 700, 1443.

observer as "a scheme contrived to collect taxes from the people in the form of silver, animals . . ." were not to receive the Chinese mission, for it was not to be allowed to travel further south than Thăng Long.[120] These preparations were merely for the formal procession that was to bear the documents of investiture back to the Tây Sơn capital at Phú Xuân. Whatever the objective of these ceremonies, it appears that the general populations had to bear the financial burden of producing them.

Although the descriptions here contain only a small sampling of examples, the evidence suggests that the demands made on peasantry during this period were enormous. I do not wish to argue that the Tây Sơn were inherently harsher masters than the Trịnh had been or than the Nguyễn were and would be. Instead, they were probably in many ways similar in their expectations of the peasantry. The major difference, however, was that the demands of the Tây Sơn were those made during a period of open and protracted warfare, and were more onerous because of this. Although peasants sometimes had respites from the demands of military or labor service, these were neither frequent nor lengthy. In a period of such extensive conflict the demands of the Tây Sơn and their adversaries were considerable, and most frequently fell on their subject populations.

The Tây Sơn Years, Agriculture, and the Environment

> Famine and its attendant pestilence have distroyed (sic) one half of the inhabitants of the country. Shocking are the accounts of the methods taken by the remainder to preserve a miserable existence. At Hue, the Capital, though in possession of the Tonquinese and better supplied than any other place, human flesh was publicly sold in the market. The country is almost drained of gold and silver, part, on breaking out of the troubles, was plundered and carried away by the Tonquinese and Chinese. The remainder, since the great neglect of cultivating the lands and distruction (sic) of manufacturers, is daily decreasing by sums sent to China in return for the

[120] Philippe Sérard to Claude-François L'Etondal, 9 June, 1793. MEP 700, 1513.

> common necessaries of life supplied from thence at an exorbitant price by the junks.[121]

Throughout the many challenges confronting Vietnamese peasants during this period, they continued to struggle to sustain agricultural production necessary to feed themselves and their families. Regardless of state or other demands, the Vietnamese peasant always hoped for proper conditions for growing crops – chiefly rice. The success or failure of this endeavor obviously had broad repercussions for the rest of Vietnamese society. Central to rural life in Việt Nam during this period was the cycle of sowing seeds, transplanting seedlings, and then harvesting crops. The period from 1771 to 1802 saw a great many disruptions to this vital cycle, disruptions that quickly led to rural and urban hardships. Three chief factors impeded this cycle and often made life difficult for rural populations: the direct impact of war through battles, the indirect impacts of war through demands for soldiers and laborers, and finally the effects of climate and weather patterns. I will address the first two of these elements briefly, for they have been dealt with in some detail earlier, and then focus more closely on the impact of weather patterns on agricultural production.

The first of the factors impeding agricultural production was the direct impact of war. Both actual battles and the movement of large numbers of troops across the countryside destroyed villages and crops. Unchecked troops also frequently seized farming implements or other materials necessary to the cultivation process, further undermining the agricultural process. There were several periods and places during the Tây Sơn period in which these factors had a particularly profound effect on the Vietnamese peasant producer:

Qui Nhơn region: 1771-1775, until the Tây Sơn stabilized their authority there; then 1790-1802

South of Qui Nhơn to Sài Gòn: 1776-1780; 1782-1785, 1787; thereafter there was

[121] Chapman, 101.

relatively little fighting in the far south, where the Nguyễn were able to consolidate their own authority.

Phú Xuân north to Thăng Long: 1786-1789, 1801-1802; there were also scattered, but light, resistance movements between 1789 and 1801.

Nha Trang north to Phú Xuân: 1790-1802; this was the central battlefield of the so-called Monsoon wars between the Nguyễn and the Tây Sơn, first centered at Qui Nhơn, and then at Phú Xuân.

These places and dates are very general, but give some indication of the military pressures that were being placed on local populations. Under these circumstances a rural producer could not count on being able to harvest his crops, which might be stolen, destroyed or the cultivation cycle disturbed in some other way.

This points to the second way in which the cycle was disrupted – non-agricultural demands on man (and woman) power. As was described earlier, both the Tây Sơn and Nguyễn sides regularly recruited tens of thousands of soldiers for their armies under standing orders for conscription. Moreover, these soldiers found themselves facing actual combat, often far from home, thus making this military service considerably more onerous than it had been in times of peace. The chances of being killed were also not insignificant. In addition to military conscription, which was reserved for men, there were heavy corvee labor demands, again by both sides, and these often fell on women as well as men. While labor demands were often filled locally, allowing people to remain resident on their farms, the time involved in constructing new roads, building new ramparts or repairing dikes or other aspects of the rural infrastructure, obviously took away from time needed to cultivate crops. Moreover, in the case of military service, many tried to flee the conscription squads, and this also meant leaving one's farm, at least temporarily, to avoid being enrolled in the armies. Consequently, the mere existence of forcible conscription had an impact on rural dwellers.

Finally, in addition to the effects of warfare and the demands for labor service, individual cultivators also had to contend with the impact of climate and weather patterns on agricultural production. While the effects of warfare were quite unpredictable, they could at times be avoided through flight or other strategies. The impact of the environment was perhaps even more unpredictable and almost always inescapable. Moreover, when one looks at the weather patterns of the eighteenth century, it becomes clear that this was a period of particularly brutal and destructive weather patterns. Already early in the century dramatic and heavily damaging storms and alternating droughts wreaked havoc on rural populations, particularly in the northern part of the country. Later in the century similarly destructive patterns caused large-scale famines and vagabondage, and contributed in no small measure to some of the political instability that fueled the turmoil of the era. And lastly, there were also periods of infestations of various types, from caterpillars to locusts to rats that could swiftly devastate crops.[122] What follows is an attempt to describe some of the weather patterns seen during the Tây Sơn period, and the ways in which this affected agricultural patterns, the availability of food, and indeed the course and impact of military and political events. Greater emphasis will be placed on the north, which has always been subject to more dangerous and disastrous weather patterns, though there will also be a briefer examination of notable weather events and their impact in the south and center.

The North

Climatically, the northern part of the country was, and remains, subject to severe weather and unpredictable cycles of excesses and shortages of rain. Neither event was inherently devastating, but depended on its timing in relation to the cultivation cycles. Rains were needed at certain times, while dry weather was helpful

[122] I will not elaborate this topic, but there are several references to such attacks in the missionary letters. See, eg. Philippe Sérard to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 31 July, 1786, (MEP 691, 728) which describes a succession of such attacks by pests on peasant crops.

at others. It was when the rains and dry spells were out of synch with the planting seasons that problems emerged. There was little that peasants could do about the weather, of course, though in places with more regular access to water, irrigation could serve to alleviate some of the problems. While the peasants might not be able to affect weather patterns, their rulers were, in principle, held accountable for the weather. Floods and droughts, or indeed any weather pattern that might have a negative impact on rural agriculture could be seen directly to reflect on a given ruler and his apparent relationship with "heaven." Thus, when the rains failed to come at the right times, rulers would seek ways to encourage the rains to begin. Often, this involved carrying out elaborate ceremonies calling on the gods to provide the needed moisture.[123]

The first of the major famines of the Tây Sơn years took place in the north between 1776 and 1778.[124] One of the more astute and careful chroniclers of such environmental factors in the north, the Nghệ An scholar, Bùi Dương Lịch, wrote of the year 1777:

> The entire country had a great hunger, and the price of one small bowl of uncooked rice rose to one quan of cash, and the people even had to take bulbs to cook them. Banana bulbs were substituted for rice, and as much as half the population died from hunger, and there was furthermore a widespread plague and many of the common people became sick and died. [Then] in the tenth month there was a large flood.[125]

Of the following year he reported more tersely, "The entire country again had great hunger."[126] The situation became so critical that the northern Chúa Trịnh Sâm decided to become directly involved in the hopes of bringing an end to the drought:

> [T]here was a ceremony summoning rain at the Respecting Heaven Palace. The Chúa Trịnh Sâm greatly worried about the matters of the people, and any

[123] Note, for example, the description in the *ĐVSKTB*, for the year 1776, in which a drought occurs. Page 422 describes Trịnh Sâm travelling to the Báo Thiên pagoda to hold ceremonies to call for rain.
[124] *Bản Quốc Ký Sự* (A. 989), 99a-b.; see also MEP 691, 989. [no author or date indicated, but probably written in 1786 or 1787.]
[125] *Lê Qúy Dật Sử*, 36.
[126] ibid., 36.

> time there was a great drought he became greatly worried, and this would become an urgent matter in his heart, and he would order all of the [officials] in all of the areas to establish altars to call for rain. And as for the yamen inside and outside they would carry out the task of looking into all of the violations and would collect fines, and look for and arrest [violators] and this would greatly disturb the people.[127]

When these ceremonies did not work, the Chúa continued to seek ways to procure the needed rain. He finally asked the king's permission to pray at the Respecting Heaven Palace, and, permission being granted, he went there to pray in secret, at which point the rains promptly began. Sâm then issued a decree noting:

> Recently, the work of agriculture has needed, but not received, rain. I suffered from this day and night thinking: There is something in governmental affairs that is not right, and this is interfering with harmony. It is I who have been at fault, and not the hundred surnames who are to blame, and if the people are hungry it is because I have made them hungry, and thus I continued to worry about this. Now heaven has sent the great rains, and perhaps the rice-growing season rains can be expected. If heaven loves the people, then I can dare to think that it is because of my will that we have succeeded and that heaven has changed its feelings. And so I, along with all of the people, work to repair the matters of heaven in order to be able to reply to the blessings of heaven.[128]

This decree makes quite clear the responsibility that rested with the ruler in these matters, and the grave need to justify one's continued claims to legitimate rule by finding ways to regulate the weather, and to ensure that rains fell at the right times.

The situation apparently improved somewhat from the mid-1770s, whether because of or in spite of the Chúa's ceremonies, and for roughly a decade weather conditions appear to have been relative normal. In the mid-1780s, however, unfavorable weather patterns returned, contributing to one of worst famines of the century. In the 1785-1786 period there appear to have been extraordinary floods, followed by long dry spells both of which contributed to the resulting famine. One eyewitness estimated the dead from the northern 1785-1786 famines at between

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[127] *Đại Việt Sử Ký Tục Biên*, 425.
[128] ibid., 438.

150,000 and 600,000. While these numbers are somewhat difficult to believe, and the range extremely broad, another missionary who had lived in the north since the early 1770s described it as the worst famine he had ever seen.[129] The problem was compounded by the widespread effects of disease, particularly among various types of farm animals, further crippling the northern rural economy.[130]

The accounts of European missionaries give some sense of the difficulties facing rural populations during this period:

> Toward the end of 1785 and the beginning of 1786, there was in many provinces of this kingdom, an extraordinary flood, a long dry spell, and a prodigious boiling over to the point that in many places people were devouring the newly planted rice down to its roots. The price of this product rose day by day. Armies of brigands and of beggars spread out everywhere, pillaging, burning and killing. The government did not dare to resist them. To make matters worse, this was followed by a cruel famine, which lasted for three months; it did not begin to diminish until the beginning of the harvest, which was not very abundant. The means employed by the public authorities to assist these poor people, simply added to their misfortune. The majority of the mandarins and their subalterns, charged with executing the orders of the prince, instead abused [their authority] to bring trouble, confusion and terror, and to turn a profit on the feeble resources they were able to extract from the people.[131]

A year later, another description largely echoed this one:

> The wealthy have closed their doors and their granaries, bandits gather into troupes and put everything to the torch. A village in the neighborhood of our college was pillaged in broad daylight . . . The chua is occupied with finding a means to aid the people: he commanded the officers of the three chief tribunals in each province to travel everywhere and to take the excess goods of the wealthy in order to give them to the poor. At the first news (of this), the rich acted quickly to hide their rice or to lend it: but the mandarins were unable to agree among themselves how to proceed in their mission and thus the edict was not carried out: the prince gave another in which he charged

[129] Roux to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 16 June, 1786. MEP 691, 735.

[130] Louis-François Le Breton to Dufress, 14 June, 1785. MEP 700, 1257.

[131] "Journal de ce qui s'est passé de plus remarquable dans la mission du Tong-king, depuis le mois de mai 1785 jusqu'a mois de juin 1786, rédigé par Mgr. l'êvêque de Céram en 1786," in *Nouvelles Lettres Edifiantes*, vol. 6, 448-449.

> the civil mandarins to go from village to village offering positions or titles for money: these officers forced the wealthy to buy them. Elsewhere, the mandarins, far from assisting the people, carried out horrible vexations and caused even more hardship than the brigands themselves.[132]

It is clear from these accounts that the response of the Trịnh/Lê government to these famines was limited and largely ineffectual. Even in the best of times, there were limits to what the state could do to alleviate problems, and the 1780s were far from the best of times. When officials did travel to the countryside to become involved, it was frequently more of a burden than a relief to the populations they encountered. Clearly the weak government response reflected the political instability of the northern regime during this period, when factional disputes in Thăng Long rendered rural problems, if not less pressing, then perhaps less immediate. In the face of the massive problems posed by the major famine, imperial ceremonies could do little to help, and the crippled state was clearly not in a position to render more than token assistance to the devastated populations.

Just as these famines severely threatened the northern population and further undermined the tottering Trịnh government, their occurrence, which coincided with the decisive Tây Sơn defeat of the Nguyễn-Siamese force in 1785, presented a ready opportunity for the southern rebels. The Tây Sơn decision to advance on the north in 1786 was driven in part by their knowledge of the northern famines and the crippling impact they had had on the readiness of the Trịnh armies and regime. Furthermore, when the Tây Sơn armies made their first landing in the north at Nghệ An, their troops opened the grain storehouses at Vị Hoàng and distributed food among the populations there.[133] Thus, the Tây Sơn used the famine both as a way to assure themselves of a less prepared northern army, but also as a useful propaganda tool among the population whom they effected to help with the opening of state granaries. Although the Tây Sơn food distributions were certainly not decisive, the famine eased in the fall of 1786 and conditions improved briefly for the next two years.

[132] Jean-François Le Roy to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 6 December, 1786, in *Nouvelles Lettres Edifiantes*, vol. 6, 466-467.

[133] Philippe Sérard to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 31 July, 1786, in Cadière, "Documents Relatifs," 10.

It was not long, however, before a new round of famines struck in 1788 and 1789 taking a further toll on the long-suffering northern populations. The *Bản Quốc Kỷ Sự* noted that:

> In (1788) in the fifth month, in the summer, there was a drought until the seventh month when the rains began. Under heaven (people) were able to begin plowing and sowing the crops. In the 8th month there were great rains. In the ninth and tenth months there was a drought. Under heaven there was great famine.[134]

A missionary also commented on this famine noting that the 10th month harvest (that is the one planted in late 1788) had been destroyed because of searing heat, and that what rice remained from previous harvests was being held in Tây Sơn warehouses: "It is said that this famine has killed more than half of the kingdom. That which is certain is that a great number of villages were left without inhabitants."[135] While the reports of 50 percent mortality from the famine were no doubt an exaggeration, the description clearly suggests that this second round of famines was also very severe.

The Tây Sơn victory over the Chinese in early 1789, while a great morale boost for most northern populations, did not immediately improve the situation in the north, which remained in great upheaval for much of the rest of that year. Indeed, the huge battles of that year were followed by a major epidemic, possibly of cholera, and probably a result of the numerous bodies left behind from the battle. The impact of this epidemic was only mitigated by the prompt and successful intervention of the noted physician, Nguyễn Gia Phan (Nguyễn Thế Lịch), who was able to develop a useful cure that apparently saved a great number of people.[136] The miseries of that year were succinctly summarized in a letter by a Vietnamese Christian, dated June 24, 1789, which read in part:

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[134] *Bản Quốc Kỷ Sự*, A. 989, 103b.

[135] Jean-François LeRoy to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, June 1789. MEP 692, 113.

[136] Lâm Giang, "Những Tác Phẩm Y Học Của Nguyễn Gia Phan" [Some Medical Works by Nguyễn Gia Phan], *Tạp Chí Hán Nôm*, No. 1 (34, 1998): 32-38; see also Lê Trần Đức, "Nguyễn Gia Phan, Danh Y Thời Tây Sơn" (Nguyễn Gia Phan, a Doctor in the Tây Sơn Period) in *Danh Nhân Quê Hương, tập III* (People and the Homeland, vol. 3) (Hà Sơn Bình: Ty Văn Hóa Thông Tin, 1976), 54-61.

> There are a myriad hardships: there has been an absence of rain, there has been a flood like that of Noah, there are bandits and enemies, and people are being killed . . . fully half of the people of Anam, and as for the clerics, even half of them have died, and for this reason there are places where entire villages and hamlets have been killed. And the fields are abandoned to grasses and thickets . . .[137]

As disease and the aftermath of war caused disruptions and death in the north around Thăng Long, further to the south in Nghệ An the situation was even more grim. As Bui Dương Lịch wrote of the conditions there:

> In that year [1789] there was no rain, and there was a drought, and the rice out in the fields withered. There was a great hunger under heaven, and the people died of disease, lying down on one another for pillows.[138]

When water finally arrived in the region, it came in a form that caused only further misery. Lịch reported that in the early fall of the same year, Nghệ An was struck by what must have been a typhoon, which was then followed by a series of tidal waves:

> On the 13th day of the 8th month [October 1, 1789] there was a great storm and many of the homes of the people of Nghệ An were washed away. At that time, the people of the hamlet of Vạn Phân, directly at the thân hour, saw a waterspout as tall as a mountain on the ocean, which then fell down and overflowed (the land), and the people were unable to flee. The sky suddenly became dark and there were three great waves that chased the people and one-tenth of the livestock died.[139]

Finally, late in 1789, Nguyễn Huệ's confidant in Nghệ An, the reclusive scholar Nguyễn Thiếp, sent a memorial summarizing the situation in his hard-hit region, and confirming the miseries that Lịch had been reporting:

> Nghệ-an is a desperate area and the people are poor. Formerly the people were only required to contribute soldiers, and were exempted from paying rice taxes. Now we are also expected to contribute supplies for the armies. The number of soldiers increases daily. The people working the fields are few, but the number who are hungry is great. The private expenses for nourishment are greater than the public contributions. In this year without rains, an epidemic

[137] Benedictus Đinh to ?, 24 June, 1789. MEP 692, 49.
[138] *Lê Qúy Dật Sử*, 91.
[139] ibid., 93-94.

> of disease has developed, the people are dying of hunger and are drifting away. Perhaps only 50 to 60% of the original populations remain. We are now in the dry season. The rice fields have been abandoned, and the plowed fields are very few in number.[140]

The following year (1790) the situation continued to be grim. The *Tây Sơn Thuật Lược* reported that a major famine took placed and cited the (perhaps apocryphal) case of a woman forced to sell herself to the commander of a local Tây Sơn fort in order to buy food for her family.[141] This famine appears to have been the result of a poor harvest, brought about by uncooperative winds in the first half of 1790.

Finally, in the the wake of these continued hardships, the Tây Sơn regime began taking some steps to improve the situation. Bùi Dương Lịch reported that "the Tây Sơn saw that the people were hungry, and they gave out an order for the large houses to rent out land."[142] The new government also attempted a more long-term approach to the enormous disruptions of both warfare and weather, when Quang Trung issued his edict encouraging agriculture.[143] In the decree, the Tây Sơn Emperor acknowledged the decline in agricultural output and the widespread abandonment of fields, both of which he sought to reverse in his decree. In this respect, he was following the precedent of Lê Lợi, who similarly issued decrees ordering people back to their villages and farms in the aftermath of the long struggle with the Ming in the early fifteenth century.[144] In both cases the agricultural policies of these new rulers reflected the highly pragmatic need to restore a degree of order both to stabilize populations and to increase output, long disrupted by the exigencies of warfare. Although there was little that the Tây Sơn could do about the weather, the new regime did understand the importance of taking the practical steps that it could to restore agricultural production to more normal levels. Indeed, it should be kept in mind that the difficulties of this period were really a combination of factors as I

[140] Hoàng Xuân Hãn, *La Sơn Phu Tử* (The Master of La Sơn) (Paris: Minh Tân, 1952), 141. Letter dated November 28, 1789.
[141] *TSTL*, 11-12.
[142] *Lê Qúy Dật Sử*, 91.
[143] Although the date is not clear, it was most likely promulgated in 1790.
[144] Lê Thành Khôi, 221.

noted at the beginning of this section. The difficulties with the weather only served to exacerbate already difficult circumstances created by the disruptions of warfare and the destruction and dislocation that these entailed.

Despite some further setbacks – there was a major flood in Xứ Nam in 1791 that submerged virtually the entire region and led to the loss of that season's rice harvest – there was apparently some progress in the north, whether as a result of Tây Sơn policies or more generally improved weather conditions.[145] The *Tây Sơn Thuật Lục* noted that paddy prices were once again at comparatively normal levels, allowing the people to put aside stores of grain, and the situation in the country was reported to be one of tranquility.[146] Another text, *Liệt Truyện*, reported of 1790 that the winter saw a great deal of rain resulting not only in very high yields, but even in spontaneous rice growth in abandoned fields, something the people noted had rarely been seen.[147] The *Bản Quốc Kỷ Sự* observed further that "In (1794) in the second year (of Cảnh Thịnh), under heaven the field grains doubled," suggesting a considerable improvement.[148]

Yet even with some improvements there continued to be weather-related difficulties, at least in certain regions. A poem by the northern scholar, Cao Huy Diệu, writing in 1796, commented on the various calamities that had struck the fields over the preceding decade, presumably near the capital where he lived:

> In the year *bính ngọ* (1786) there was chaos and disorder, and in the year *mậu thân* (1788) there was a drought.
>
> In the year *tân hợi* (1791), and in the year *nhâm tý* (1792) there were fierce infestations of grasshoppers.
>
> In the year *giáp dần* (1794) there was a great flood worse than that of the year *qúy tỵ* (1773?)
>
> In the year *tí mão* (1795) there was a great drought and the rice fields were all dried up.
>
> And this is the year *bính thìn* (1796) and there are still more hardships.

[145] Philippe Sérard to Chaumont, 6 May, 1792. MEP 692, 494.
[146] *TSTL*, 18.
[147] *Liệt Truyện (Dã Sử)*, DC. 139, 2.
[148] *Bản Quốc Kỷ Sự* (A.989), 105a.

Throughout the spring there were no rains, and the paddy fields all dried up.

At the end of the spring there were persistent rains, and the paddy rice was all destroyed.

In the middle of the summer there was scorching sun and the potatoes and beans were singed.

In the 6th month, the high fields and the low fields were all cracking.

In the 7th month the fields were plowed, and in the 8th month the paddy blossomed.

In the 7th and 8th months the rains were very fierce.

In the flood plains near and far the shrimp and fish floated by happily.

As for paddy rice, one bowl costs 60 *tiền*.

This recitation of hardships by Diệu, is in contrast to the other sources on some points, but the precision of his dates and the prices noted suggest that what he described had some basis in fact. Widespread variations between regions could also account for these considerable differences.

In the period after Diệu composed this litany of difficulties, there is anecdotal as well as more concrete evidence suggesting that the overall situation in the north improved in the final years of the eighteenth century. Phạm Đình Hổ, a northern scholar writing during this period, for instance, described a carefree expedition that he and some friends undertook from Thăng Long in the spring of 1796 to visit several rural temples and other sites of noted beauty.[149] The account describes no hardships in the countryside, nor does it suggest that there are any problems being endured in this area. Another expedition that Hổ took to see the sites in the fall of the following year is similarly lacking in commentary on problems in the countryside.[150] Although the absence of information is certainly not proof, it suggests, as does the journey itself, that there was a degree of normalcy being enjoyed by people living at least in the immediate region around Thăng Long. More substantial evidence comes from a letter

[149] Phạm Đình Hổ and Nguyễn Án, *Tang Thương Ngẫu Lục* (The Viscissitudes of this Life), trans. Trúc Khê and Ngô Văn Triện (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Học, 1972), 57-62.
[150] ibid., 165-66.

written by the Vietnamese Christians, Simon Xavier Liễn and Paulo Marîa Thuyên, and dated November 26, 1800. They reported to their friend Philiphê Bỉnh, then living in Lisbon, that "in our country things are peaceful, and these past two or three years we have benefited from a lot of rain."[151]

Finally, the most evocative description of the tranquility, stability, and indeed prosperity during this late period, is found in a famous epic poem by Nguyễn Huy Lượng. In 1801 Lượng was either commissioned or inspired to write a lengthy poem to coincide with ceremonies marking the Tây Sơn Emperor, Quang Tỏan's changing his reign name from Cảnh Thịnh to Bảo Hưng.[152] This move was designed to turn around the fast fading fortunes of the Tây Sơn regime. The poem Lượng produced, the "Tụng Tây Hồ Phú," (Phú Poem in Praise of West Lake), is a paean to the prosperity and tranquility that he saw as marking Tây Sơn rule in the north. The poem describes the smoke from lake-side industries indicating economic well-being, and the serene and beautiful setting of the lake itself. The poem is not the first to comment on the beauty of West Lake, a popular theme for Vietnamese poets, though it is certainly one of the most detailed in its descriptions.[153] Although the poem may have reflected the hopes of the Tây Sơn Emperor rather than the reality of the situation, it was probably a reasonable representation of a period of relative harmony in the north, a harmony that apparently persisted until the very last months of the regime itself.

South and Center

While the north suffered extensively from weather related problems during the

[151] Philiphê Bỉnh, *Nhất Trình Kim Thư Khất Chính Chúa Giáo Cuyển Thứ Nhất*, 364. Borgiana Tonchinese, #7; letter to Philiphê Bỉnh in Lisbon, Portugal.

[152] There is some debate on this point. Phạm Văn Đang (46) argues that the poem was commissioned, while other sources, Thúy and Hùng (123) for instance, merely note that Lượng submitted the poem – suggesting personal initiative, rather than a royal commission.

[153] For the full text in *nôm* and a *quốc ngữ* transliteration with detailed annotations see Nguyễn Cẩm Thúy and Nguyễn Phạm Hùng, *Văn Thơ Nôm Thời Tây Sơn* (Nôm Poetry of the Tây Sơn Period) (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1997), 124-147.

Tây Sơn period, the situation in the south was considerably better. The south had always been a region with more stable weather patterns and fewer of the devastating typhoons and periodic droughts that struck the central and northern parts of the country. It was because of the relatively predictable weather in the region that it was a critical agricultural center supplying not only the lower part of the country, but also the central coastal regions with their much less certain agricultural cycles. The central coastal provinces, particular that of "Cham" [Quảng Nam], were heavily dependent on the southern agricultural output to sustain them. The French missionary, Halbout, wrote of thousands of ships regularly plying this route and of Cham being dependent on the region of Đồng Nai for its sustenance.[154]

When the Tây Sơn uprising led to the center being entirely cut off from the south, famine in the center was the result. As Li Tana has rightly pointed out ". . . the worst famine in Cochinchina history, which Nguyễn Lương Bích presented as a convenient explanation for the Tây Sơn, actually happened some years after the rebellion broke out, in October 1774, when Tây Sơn success in Qui Nhơn cut the transportation route between Gia Định and Huế. In other words, the famine was a result rather than a cause of the Tây Sơn upheaval."[155] In the early years of the Tây Sơn wars, both the level of destruction caused by various armies and the breaking of trading connections had enormous consequences for southern populations. The consequences of this war prompted one European witness to write of the Tây Sơn as having "pillaged and ravaged everything; for example, in the province of Cham, there remains hardly a twentieth of the inhabitants: the entire population is dead of famine and misery."[156] Another missionary Labartette, living only a few miles away added: "The famine increases here day by day. The items necessary for life are unaffordable."[157] Yet other missionary letters from 1776 also speak of an extensive

[154] Halbout to MEP Directors, July 1775, in *Nouvelles Lettres Edifiantes*, vol. 6, 285.
[155] Li, 141. The Nguyễn records also blame the famine for the Tây Sơn outbreak. See, eg. *ĐNLT*, vol. 2, 492.
[156] Halbout to MEP Directors, July 1775, in *Nouvelles Lettres Edifiantes*, vol. 6, 283.
[157] Jean LaBartette to ?, 21 July, 1775. MEP, 800 (2), 1473.

famine in the south at that time.[158]

The evidence for later years is sketchy, suggesting perhaps that weather conditions and harvests were adequate until some problems developed in the 1790s. In 1790 it was reported that there was another major loss of the harvest, and it was reported that "misery was desolating their country."[159] Then, Nguyễn records for 1792 noted that there had been a loss of the harvest affecting the populations in and north of Bình Thuận, which was causing considerable hunger.[160] This was followed a few years later by reports of a serious famine in Cham and Quảng in 1797 that raised prices dramatically.[161] In 1800 there was apparently a major drought that caused crop shortages and the beginnings of a famine. This induced the two chief Tây Sơn generals in that region, Trần Quang Diệu and Võ Văn Dũng, to impose additional taxes on the local populations, making their lives even more miserable.[162]

From this brief description, it should be clear that although there were times of weather and troop-induced agricultural hardships in the south and center of the country, these did not begin to compare with the great difficulties faced in the north for much of the 1780s and parts of the 1790s. The major disruptions to the agricultural cycle in the south would have been more the result of warfare and the demands of the military leadership rather than weather patterns. As was indicated earlier, the patterns of warfare most profoundly affected the region from Qui Nhơn south to Gia Định during many of the Tây Sơn years, with the north seeing comparatively shorter periods of open warfare.

Indeed, it appears that the region that suffered the least during most of the Tây Sơn years was that around the main Tây Sơn political center of Phú Xuân, particularly after 1786. Its stability derived from its status as the imperial center for the strongest Tây Sơn leaders, Quang Trung and then Quang Toản. This stability was also a product of the fact that Phú Xuân had generally avoided the warfare that so

[158] A. Thiebaud to ? 27 May, 1776. MEP 700, 891-892.
[159] Jean-François LeRoy to Claude-François L'Etondal, 13 June, 1790. MEP 700, 1403.
[160] *Đại Nam Thực Lục*, vol. 2 (1963), 160.
[161] Philippe Sérard to Claude-François L'Etondal, 26 July, 1797. MEP 701, 254.
[162] *Nguyễn Thị Tây Sơn Ký*, DC. 112, 53.

devastated much of the rest of the country. It was only attacked three times in the Tây Sơn years: 1774 by the Trịnh, in 1786 by the Tây Sơn and in 1801 by the Nguyễn, and each of those attacks was very brief. In each case the city's inhabitants and troop offered relatively little, if any, resistance. At other times in the Tây Sơn period Phú Xuân was a place of relative ease and tranquility. For instance, when Lord Macartney's mission visited the Tourane-Phú Xuân region in the summer of 1793, the appearance was one of stability and prosperity. Macartney wrote:

> And I am informed from the person [one of his sailors], who was seized on going into the [interior of the] country, and who in his march back was halted often in the market places of the inland villages, that he saw sugar sold there at about a penny a pound. The same person observed the country to be every where very populous, which it certainly is round Thuron. He saw considerable plantations of cotton, rice, and sugar-cane. It yields also pepper and species of Cinnamon prized in China much beyond that of Ceylon.[163]

Macartney himself traveled up one of the rivers near Phú Xuân on a one-day expedition, and also reported a prosperous region: "We then rowed a considerable way up the river, the banks of which afford on each side a very agreeable prospect of populous villagers busied about their boat, canoes, nets and fishing tackle, and here and there a single farmhouse enlivened by the noise and appearance of pigs, poultry and other rural accompaniments."[164] Macartney reported, moreover, that once the Tây Sơn court had gotten over its initial suspicion of the European vessel, it had sent one hundred tons of rice by way of providing supplies to the visitors, suggesting a government that was not short of basic supplies at this time.[165] The situation in and around Phú Xuân remained stable, to the extent that Gire, a missionary living near Phú Xuân was able to observe at the beginning of 1796 that:

> At the moment we are all enjoying peace in Cochinchina and in Tonkin. Since the seizure and punishment of the *Thới Sứ* [the former regent Bùi Đắc Tuyên] and his principle accomplices, it does not appear that anyone is thinking about us (the missionaries). The mandarins are all occupied with

[163] Macartney's letter to Dundas, dated June 18, 1793, in Lamb, 177.
[164] Macartney's journal, entry for June 7, 1793, in Lamb, 169.
[165] ibid., 174.

> their affairs; they have chosen three among them to hold the reins of government. They are, all three, men of peace and courage, and are held in high esteem among the people.[166]

Weather and related crop difficulties, while not often examined in studies of the Tây Sơn, must be part of any consideration of the lives of the peasantry. The peasants are always at the mercy of the elements, and there are periods in which worse than average environmental circumstances can have a devastating impact. During the Tây Sơn years (1771 to 1802) the north in particular faced such a period of exceptionally difficult circumstances. Coupled with political instability and then several invasions by the Tây Sơn and a Chinese invasion, poor weather patterns devastated the north. While the famines of 1785 and 1786 constituted the worst crisis of the era, weather conditions were not much better in the 1770s or the 1790s, and only the fact that large-scale military campaigns were not a factor in either of those decades spared the populations far worse. The situation was somewhat better in the far south and in the center, though again poor weather, when coupled with other circumstances (such as warfare) could very quickly push populations into famine and starvation. Although the Tây Sơn cannot be blamed for the weather (whatever their responsibility for other factors), the regime often exacerbated poor weather conditions with its slow response to changing circumstances and its harsh demands on populations in terms of military and labor service.

Depredations of Officials and Troops

Discussion to this point has focused on various factors that disturbed the peasantry during this period, ranging from military service to labor service to demands for goods and disruptions to the cycles of agricultural work. These were not the only problems confronting the Vietnamese peasantry in the Tây Sơn period, for the depredations of officials and of official armies also loomed large as major

[166] Gire to ?, 12 January, 1796, in Cadière, "Documents Relatifs," 36.

difficulties for these populations. We have already seen that part of the initial impetus of the Tây Sơn movement came from popular discontent with corrupt officials. The problem of official corruption was a long-standing theme in Vietnamese history, particularly when viewed from below. In a system that relies on local officials to exercise a considerable degree of discretion in enforcing policies the potential for corruption is great. The system was not without means to investigate questions of this nature, and we know that in the north in the 1760s and 1770s there had been a number of fact-finding missions to outlying areas in response to popular complaints. Despite such efforts the problem remained a serious one. Moreover, although the initial Tây Sơn movement was in part a response to official corruption, it appears that there was not a great deal that the Tây Sơn as a regime could do to improve matters, especially in the short-run.

Particularly in the north there were numerous reports of official corruption in the Tây Sơn years and frequent comments both by Vietnamese and outside observers that local-level officials were ill-trained and often quite venal. This is not to argue that responsibility for these types of transgressions lay with the highest Tây Sơn officials, but rather that they were not in a position to reform the system. Indeed, some Tây Sơn measures may even have exacerbated the situation, which was nowhere worse than in Nghệ An (a region as we have already seen, also subject to particularly cruel weather patterns). For example, Nguyễn Thiếp in late 1789 commented on the local officials serving in his native Nghệ An:

> The more the number of officials increases, the more the people must bear mistreatment. Now the power is questionable and the work is inconsistent. The generals, the officers, and the mandarins continue to be without supervision.[167]

The comment on increasing numbers of officials was linked to the division of Nghệ An into no less than 12 districts, a division that Thiếp linked to the increasing oppression of the officialdom. Moreover, the officials that did not directly oppress the population did little to assist the people. Nguyễn Thiếp also commented on this,

[167] Hãn (1952), 141.

in a memorial to Quang Trung in 1791:

> There are people who are already performing military service, but who are also being forced to contribute supplies, such as cloth and firewood. And there are individuals who have many times suffered a lack of rain, and who have found all of their fields turned to dust, and are being forced to eat sorrow. Although there have already been officials who have come several times to investigate, they have not yet been able to provide assistance or to lower the taxes. Thus I request that the Supreme Emperor issue a decree ordering the officials who oversee these areas to reduce the required submissions of supplies according to great or small losses.[168]

The situation in Nghệ An became so difficult that the populations there actually rose up in rebellion against a particularly corrupt Tây Sơn Governor in 1791.[169]

Possibly because of the problems Thiếp reported, or the reports of other overseers in Nghệ An, the Tây Sơn court ordered an extensive investigation into official corruption in that province. Bui Dương Lịch described the Tây Sơn response to these problems, which began in June-July 1790:

> Before this, those at the highest levels had personally written an edict in red characters[170] secretly ordering all of the governors-general to restrain the disaster of corruption. All of the officials in the province ordered the three local bureau officials in the area to divide themselves to go to interrogate all of the hamlet residents in order that all of the people in the hamlet might declare the offices that were corrupt. The officials secretly investigated and took and gathered petitions and requests, and then brought them back to the province (officials). All of the provincial officials were sent down to the bureaus of the district officials to set up places for investigations in the military camps in the province to investigate (these matters).[171]

From this report, it appears that the Tây Sơn government, at least under Quang Trung, was actively seeking to address the issue of corruption, especially in Nghệ An. The Tây Sơn response was no doubt spurred by Quang Trung's respect for Nguyễn Thiếp's advice, as well as a sense that Nghệ An was central to Tây Sơn efforts to

[168] Hoàng Xuân Hãn, *La Sơn Yên Hồ Hoàng Xuân Hãn*, vol. II (Trước Tác) (Nhà Xuất Bản Giáo Dục, 1998), 1064.
[169] *Lê Qúy Dật Sử*, 104-106.
[170] ie. those reserved for the ruler
[171] *Lê Qúy Dật Sử*, 99.

strengthen their regime. This, after all, was to be the future home of their central capital, and so was an area where a contented population would be essential.

While official corruption was one factor straining Tây Sơn relations with rural populations under their authority, an even bigger one was the looting carried out by the Tây Sơn armies. Indeed, the movement arguably was founded on looting – more frequently referred to as "redistribution of wealth." In any case, it is clear that the seizure of goods and military supplies, whether to redistribute them or retain them, was an important element of the Tây Sơn philosophy. Evidence from the earliest days of the movement makes clear that the Tây Sơn were not only "redistributing goods" but were also looting on a much more grand scale as their armies grew larger. The following description comes from 1774:

> Before they departed, the rebels devastated the entire region, without leaving a single chicken alive it is said by all; they seized the 82 bronze cannons given by the Dutch and the English to the Cochinchinese king for the defense of the capital of this province in which is found the port of Tourane; the rebels also took 45 elephants, numerous arms, the drums and flags, and an infinite number of other objects. Each mandarin left with more than 12 large boats filled with riches, which they took by sea to the province where they rested. The rebels burned the palace of the king in the city, and a large number of the residences of mandarins, as well as the nine temples which they found in the interior of the city and where are worshiped the nine kings who had governed the kingdom after it had become separated from Tonkin. The rebels left behind all this destruction when the troops of the king forced them to abandon the city.[172]

Looting again became a big issue during the Tây Sơn northern campaigns between 1786 and 1789. Little mention is made by most scholars of this dimension of the Tây Sơn actions, despite the fact that the Vietnamese sources do describe the Tây Sơn plunder of the north in this period. Even more detail is to be found in the missionary letters, which describe repeated looting of northern regions, both by the Tây Sơn armies proper, and affiliated bandits and other mercenary forces. The following description from 1789 is not atypical:

[172] Perez, 80-81.

> The enemy enters the homes, examines and takes that which pleases them. This is the state of the poor villagers, who are not in a condition to pay the tribute. The poor Tonkinese still have to sustain the insatiable cupidity of their enemy, and of the Tonkinese who are followers of the Cochinchinese . . .[173]

In fact, the first major internal struggle that the Tây Sơn movement faced appears to have been prompted by a dispute over dividing the spoils from Nguyễn Huệ's 1786 northern campaign. Existing accounts state that Nhạc seized most or all of the loot taken from the northern capital – chiefly from the palaces of the Trịnh and the main armories – for himself. It was in retaliation for this action that Huệ then gathered an army and laid siege to his brother at Qui Nhơn. Moreover, according to some accounts, Huệ then permitted (or possibly even sent) some of his troops back into northern territory to make up for the booty he had lost to his brother.

Although some looting took place to satisfy the demands of troops, generals or political leaders, at other times it was prompted by more practical concerns. One consequence of the constant fighting during this period was the need to provide sufficient ammunition for the forces on all sides. To meet this need, armies frequently turned to the treasures of local communities, and most often their religious shrines. There the soldiers would seize bronze bells, drums and other artifacts, which could then be melted down to produce cannonballs for their artillery pieces. In another instance, local treasures were looted to help in building and decorating the planned Tây Sơn central capital in Nghệ An as Bùi Dương Lịch noted:

> The local *trấn* officials again communicated an order . . . to take the tiles of the temples and pagodas and to look into taking all of the good things of the houses of the people to serve as the corridors on left and right. All of the people sang laments.[174]

Clearly both public and private wealth was being seized by Tây Sơn soldiers to serve their armies as well as their larger political needs. While this approach resulted in a

[173] Pierre Eyot to Grinne, 5 July, 1789. MEP 692, 123. Numerous other accounts of Tây Sơn looting also exist. See, eg. Louis-François Le Breton to MEP Directors, July 1788. MEP 692, 12(7).
[174] *Lê Qúy Dật Sử*, 90-91.

great many treasures being seized and melted down, the peasants and other rural dwellers were not without their own defenses. Word of the seizure of pagoda relics, from drums to bells to gongs and statuary, clearly spread in advance of the Tây Sơn movements. Forewarned, many villages took the relatively simple step of burying their artifacts until a future time when the threat had passed and stability had returned to the countryside. The missionary letters described this means by which peasants sought to protect local treasures, but even more eloquent is the steady stream of such artifacts being unearthed by contemporary archaeologists.

With the exceptions of relatively brief periods of calm in some parts of the country, the Vietnamese peasantry were confronted by enormous disruptions to their lives and livelihoods during the Tây Sơn years. They faced constant demands for military service by all sides in the conflicts. They were also subject to corvee labor demands to work on projects large and small, few of which provided them with any personal benefits. They were also forced to pay heavy taxes and when circumstances or leaders demanded it were also obligated to contribute goods toward military campaigns or ceremonies of various types. On top of these hardships they had to bear the unpredictable patterns of weather as they struggled to produce crops they were unsure would survive the growing cycle. Particularly in the northern part of the country, repeated periods of drought or intense rain sometimes accompanied by flooding destroyed crops and killed tens of thousands of people. Warfare too impacted the agricultural rhythms as farmers were dragged away from their crops into battle and then often saw their fields fall victim to hungry armies or their trampling feet. Looting troops and avaricious officials in times of minimal formal government took a further toll.

These patterns and their impact on the peasantry are certainly not unique to the Tây Sơn wars, for they have been seen again and again in many places. We must bear them in mind, however, when considering the Tây Sơn period, for too often the miseries of war and the profound impact it has on people living in the middle of the

fighting have been ignored. Even if one posits that the Tây Sơn were fighting for a noble goal (which as I argued in Chapter Two was not the case), one must recognize the toll that the Tây Sơn wars took on those who lived in their midst. Given the devastating impact of these wars, it is hardly surprising to find that peasants hoped for nothing so much as an end to these wars, a hope which for them frequently meant an end to the Tây Sơn regime. In the next section I look at the ways in which the peasantry sought to cope with the hardships they faced by trying to see a way out of their situations.

Peasant Resistance: Defiance, Prophecy and the Hope for Salvation

While the Tây Sơn movement was initially a massive act of resistance against the existing political and economic patterns that had developed in the south, the movement's subsequent shift toward orthodox government, combined with the demands it made on the populations, provoked resistance against the movement itself. Peasants in the Tây Sơn period frequently sought to resist the demands for labor, military service and taxation. The forms of resistance were no doubt varied, and existed at many levels of sophistication. Unfortunately, the documentation allows us only limited glimpses of particular acts of resistance that enabled peasants during this period to gain some brief control over the circumstances in which they were living. In addition to physical acts of resistance, which have already been addressed in the discussions of Tây Sơn demands on peasant populations, there were also what might be termed psychological forms of defiance. In this category one finds such ideas as divination, prophecies, rumors and dreams. These were forms of defiance in that they constituted an autonomous realm of thought and interpretation of events and circumstances. These intangible but profoundly important forms of communication and understanding enabled the peasantry, and the population more generally, to gain some measure of control over their lives, by seemingly providing a means to understand and even predict the course of events. Finally, into this category of

defiance, I place the notion of calling for political alternatives. That is, people under the rule of a particular polity might look for, or occasionally call for, the aid of others. Thus, those living under the Trịnh might hope for assistance from the Nguyễn. Those living under the Tây Sơn might have expected salvation from the Chinese. And later, those living under the Nguyễn at several junctures hoped to be rescued by the Tây Sơn. The placing of hopes in political alternatives must also be seen as a form of resistance.

As warfare swirled around them in the late eighteenth century, Vietnamese populations sought to make sense of their times and to find ways to gain some measure of control over them. People at all levels of society tried to find meaning, insights, and when possible indications about what the future held in a variety of ways. The Vietnamese greatly admired and looked to people who were said to be able to predict the future. One such figure in this period was the noted recluse scholar, Nguyễn Thiếp, who developed an important relationship with the Tây Sơn after 1786. Bùi Dương Lịch noted of him that "the people said that he knew all things before they happened."[175] Such sages were one means by which to discover the coming course of events, though numerous other methods also existed. One of these methods was to examine the portents to be found in the natural world. Another was to look at local prophecies, whether of recent or ancient vintage, which might give clues to the future. Yet another was to interpret dreams, while a last method attempted to extract meaning from words, hoping to dissect them for answers. Each of these methods was open to a wide variety of interpretations – even prophecies tended to be enigmatic enough to lend themselves to numerous interpretations. But this is precisely the point: people tried to understand what was going on and were probably constantly changing their interpretations of the signs to reflect changing circumstances. The existence of these signs, prophecies and portents is not a means by which to understand the course of the Tây Sơn movement or its rise and fall, but a way to understand popular mentalités in a time of great uncertainty.

[175] *Lê Qúy Dật Sử*, 44.

There is of course an inherent problem in trying to use these signs and prophecies as evidence of the perspicacity of those who were interpreting them. Much of the evidence that records them post-dates the events that were being predicted or anticipated. Clearly it is the predictions that came true (or more accurately the proper interpretations of these predictions) that found themselves being recorded in the private and official chronicles. We do not hear about the many other interpretations, which must have existed alongside these, that did not come to pass. Despite this caveat, the reports of these attempts to understand supernatural indications are nonetheless very important in the more general sense of how people in this period understood their world. Many of the sources that talk about these issues date from the late Tây Sơn years and the early years of the Nguyễn dynasty, making it that much more likely that the tales being recorded were in circulation during the Tây Sơn period. In addition, some of these prophecies were also recorded in contemporary missionary letters, further proof that such concepts were a central part of both popular and elite understandings of the world in this period.

Natural Phenomena

The most common realm to which people looked for signs of political change was that of natural phenomena. At the most obvious level, people saw continuing natural disasters – floods, famines, droughts, storms – as indicators of heaven's sentiments toward their political rulers. Periods of frequent and severe natural disasters were readily viewed as signs that a given ruler had lost the favor of heaven. The episode described earlier involving Trịnh Sâm and his ritual attempts to bring the rains is an example of how closely rulers were linked to the heavens and various natural phenomena. Both official chronicles and unofficial histories recorded major and catastrophic climatalogical events, as well as strange natural phenomena of all types. They also recorded the portents in the skies: solar and lunar eclipses, earthquakes, star positions, shooting stars and a miscellany of events that defy ready

categorization. These "signs" were available to be "read" by the people as indicators for good or ill, suggestions as to the future course of events, or judgment on one or another political or military faction. It is important to understand that these were not merely popular attempts at making sense of troubled and troubling times, but ideas that permeated every level of society. Court chronicles that recorded various and often mysterious natural phenomena did not do so merely to reflect popular beliefs, but also to reflect an elite view that held such signs to be of great importance.

The Tây Sơn period, with its often convulsive political upheavals was, not surprisingly, one in which natural as well as supernatural indications of impending changes were commonly being observed. Some of these events apparently predicted or reflected the Tây Sơn rise to power. Lê Qúy Đôn, for example, reported that:

> In the year *kỷ sửu* (1769), there was the *Chổi* star [a comet], and Nguyễn Quang Tiền spoke with people at that time, saying that: "In the province of Quảng-nam, in not more than five or six years, there will certainly be an uprising. As for the capital of the Lê it will go back in the direction of the the north-east, and will seize the handle of the comet in order to clean up in the west and south, and then the destiny of the Nguyễn house will be at an end.[176]

Nguyễn Quang Tiền was an official at the Nguyễn court and appears to have been predicting the rise of the Tây Sơn in 1774, the year they burst onto the national stage. The later *Đại Nam Nhất Thống Chí* (The Unification Records of the Great South) also reports indications of the Tây Sơn rise to power as well as their demise:

> At the beginning of the national dynasty, during the troubles of the year *giáp ngọ* [1774 – ie. the Trịnh invasion], the waters of the river were red and turbulent, but then in the summer of the year Tân Dậu (1801), when the great army was able to attack and retake the capital city, the waters of the river once again became bright and clear as usual, and the people all knew that this was an omen of great peace.[177]

While there were numerous signs relating to the rise and early years of the Tây

[176] *PBTL* (1972), vol. 2, 154b.

[177] Quốc Sử Quán Triều Nguyễn, *Đại Nam Nhất Thống Chí* (The Unification Records of Đại Nam), ed. Đào Duy Anh, trans. Phạm Trọng Điềm (Huế: Nhà Xuất Bản Thuận Hóa, 1996), Vol. 1, 142. Hereafter *ĐNNTC*.

Sơn, there were even more apparent portents swirling around the events of 1786, the year in which the Tây Sơn attacked the north. First of all, the remarkably destructive series of droughts and famines during the mid-1780s in the north were interpreted either as a sign of impending political change or as a divine comment on the usurpation of the Trịnh authority by a faction within the court. More specific phenomena were also frequently cited as evidence of impending change in the northern political system. Among these were several incidents reported in Phạm Đình Hổ and Nguyễn Án's *Tang Thương Ngẫu Lục* (The Viscissitudes of this Life), a collection of unusual and historical tales that was compiled and written in the later 1790s – after the Lê had already been defeated, but still during the Tây Sơn rule.

For example, in the summer of 1786, from the waters of the legendary Lake of the Restored Sword, a glistening creature suddenly appeared, flew toward the southern shore of the lake and then vanished. Moreover, the waters of the lake were suddenly roiling with waves and the following day the lake's surface was covered with dead shrimp. Others reported seeing a similar phenomenon taking place at the palace compound of the Chúa at about the same time.[178] Another tale referred to this episode and placed it into the context of the returned sword story. In this accounting, the popular view was that the mysterious item that was seen departing the lake was the magical sword used by Lê Lợi.[179] The implication was clearly that the sword, which had been used to help establish the Lê regime, was now abandoning the Lê, suggesting that their downfall was inevitable.

Another mysterious incident from this period reported by Hổ involved Cham statues of a water buffalo and a deer that had apparently been looted by the Trịnh military commander in his 1770s campaigns in the south. The statues were brought back to Trịnh territories, and installed on the grounds of a Buddhist monastery. Strange sounds were heard there one night, and the next day it appeared that the two statues had been fighting with each other during the previous night. This was

[178] Phạm Đình Hổ and Nguyễn Án, *Tang Thương Ngẫu Lục* (The Viscissitudes of this Life) (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất BảnVăn Học, 1972), 22-23.
[179] ibid., 129.

reported the court, which saw this as inauspicious, and ordered that the two statues be destroyed.[180] Another version of the tale reported the presence of only the water buffalo statue (looted from Nguyễn palaces), which allegedly was heard bellowing in the night, an act witnessed by Trịnh soldiers. Again, when the court was informed of this incident, the statue was ordered destroyed and the remains thrown into a nearby river.[181] Each of these incidents seemed to portend problems for the ruling court, as suggested by the dramatic response of the ruler in each case.

Bùi Dương Lịch was another observer who related various apparent indications of the inevitable fall of the Trịnh and Lê regimes. He reported, for example, a tale that echoed, in some respects, that cited from the *Đại Nam Nhất Thống Chí*, for it also related to waters being mysteriously disturbed:

> In the 11th month of that year (1783), during the exam, there was a great star that fell down into a lake in the capital city, and it made a loud sound, and on the surface of the water smoke rose up, and all of the fish were killed. The officials submitted a memorial that the star fire fell. Seeing this thing, there was a prediction that went: "Poetry is degenerating, the scholars will suffer bowing in shame for thirty years."[182]

The event was apparently an indication that changes on a dramatic scale would shortly be taking place in the northern regime. Yet another natural sign reported by Lịch and much closer to the event it foretold was an unusual solar eclipse. Occurring on the first day of the fifth lunar month (May 27, 1786), the eclipse lasted longer than usual, stretching into the afternoon and so darkening the sky that stars were clearly visible. This too was seen as a clear indication that the days of the Lê dynasty were numbered.[183] Other signs soon followed, also pointing to portentous changes in the north.

The fates might also be revealed in dreams as evidenced in several accounts. The *Tang Thương Ngẫu Lục* reported the tale of an exam candidate, one Trần Văn Vỹ,

[180] ibid., 47.

[181] *Lê Qúy Dật Sử*, 59. The author goes on to note a popular poem that mocked the Trịnh for their belief in stone creations becoming animated.

[182] ibid., 55.

[183] ibid., 77.

who rented a room to concentrate on studying for the upcoming exams. One day, overcome by exhaustion, he lay down on his bed and dreamt that a beautiful young girl came and sat down next to him. She looked at him and said: "The Lê dynasty will soon be lost, and you still will not pass your exam, so stop reading your books and bothering me with your reading." Thereafter, events unfolded as the girl had predicted. He sat for the examination and did not pass, and later that year the Lê house was overthrown.[184] A dream also gave guidance to Bùi Dương Lịch during the initial Tây Sơn invasion of the north in 1786. He dreamt about a man reading him a poem with repeated references to swords, which he interpreted to mean that he should take up a sword to resist the southern troops.[185] Finally, an even more famous dream story, though of considerably later vintage, reports that the death of the Tây Sơn Emperor, Quang Trung, was forewarned in a dream shortly before that ruler's demise. The *Đại Nam Thực Lục* reported that:

> One day Huệ had been sitting in leisure in the afternoon, and suddenly he saw a vision of an old man with white hair who came down from heaven. He wore a white outfit, (and) in his hand he held an iron cane, which he pointed at Huệ saying, "Your grandfather and father were born in a place belonging to the king, and they were servants of that king, how dare you impolitely invade the royal tomb?" Then he struck him once on the forehead and Huệ fell unconscious. Everyone right and left was frightened.[186]

Again, the stories found in this and other collections are perhaps less important in terms of the truth or falsehood of their actual content, than they are in describing a general environment in which such supernatural phenomena were taken seriously and used as indicators of things to come.

Prophecies

Portents were not only found in the natural world. Words too foretold events.

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[184] *Tang Thương Ngẫu Lục*, 28-29.
[185] *Lê Qúy Dật Sử*, 66.
[186] *Đại Nam Thực Lục*, vol. 2, 169.

As in earlier times, the people during the Tây Sơn period took note of existing prophecies, trying to match the words of prophecies with events or figures of their time. People acted on these prophecies and encouraged popular sentiment to support their interpretations. There is considerable evidence of the import of prophecies in the minds not only of ordinary people, but even those in the highest ranks of the court. Signs and prophecies could not easily be dismissed by political elites, not only because they often had a powerful hold on the populace and thus the potential for swaying popular beliefs and actions, but also because these same courts acknowledged that signs of the supernatural were one means by which the intentions of heaven became known. The most notable demonstration of the impact that prophecy could have on political elites occurred in the middle of the eighteenth century at the Nguyễn court.

A prophecy that gained currency at the time apparently predicted the demise of the southern polity. According to one account the prediction ran: "After there have been eight generations, he will return to the central capital."[187] A more elaborate version of the prophecy read: "When there are eight chiefs in Cochinchina, and not one more; when the mountains have been transformed into valleys; when the seaports are blocked up; when the natives of our houses have been dispersed; when new men appear, then this kingdom shall pass into other hands and be governed by strangers."[188] At that time the Nguyễn Chúa, Võ Vương, did indeed constitute the eighth generation of southern lords, and this prophecy, which was apparently in very wide circulation at the time, appeared to predict that his generation of leaders would be the last, and that a return to the "central capital" – that is the Lê-Trịnh capital of Thăng Long – would take place. Hoping to avoid this outcome, Võ Vương carried out some important changes at the court, most notably in customs of dress, in an effort to preempt the predictions. That a ruler would take such a prophecy so seriously and respond in such a dramatic fashion suggests the power that such ideas held in

[187] L. Cadière, "Le Changement de Costume Sous Vo-Vuong, ou une Crise Religieuse a Hué au XVIII Siècle," *Bulletin des Amis de Vieux Hué*, vol. 4 (Oct-Dec, 1915): 418.
[188] ibid., 418.

Vietnamese society at this time.

Given these predictions and the eventual defeat of the Nguyễn at the hands of the Tây Sơn uprising one might wonder whether the two were somehow connected. The noted French scholar Leopold Cadière who chronicled the above tale concluded his study by attempting to establish a link between the two events:

> In 1771, in effect, the Tay Son began their campaign. Who knows whether this revolt, which would (eventually) mark the rise of the Nguyễn Dynasty, did not have its deepest roots in the state of mind we have just seen; who knows if these rebels, at the very least, did not find some of their strength, or a confirmation of their pretend mission, in these confusing, but intense rumors, in these sounds of supernatural evils and of the general disruptions that troubled the court and the people these many years.[189]

Although Cadière's speculation cannot be answered, we do know that the Tây Sơn movement's origins are widely traced to their teacher's encouraging the eldest brother, Nguyễn Nhạc, to consider himself the fulfillment of the longstanding local prophecy: "A righteous uprising in the West (Tây Sơn) achieves a feat of arms in the North."[190] There is no question that reference to such a prophecy played an important role in Tây Sơn efforts to recruit followers.

Just as significantly, we know that the prophecy that had so shaken the Nguyễn ruler Võ Vương must have remained in circulation well into the years of the Tây Sơn movement. When helping lead the Tây Sơn forces north in 1786, Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh issued a proclamation that directly referred to the content of that prophecy. In this proclamation Chỉnh included the line "Everyone knows the throne of the vua will have (only) seven (generations)"– suggesting that the collapse of the Nguyễn had already been foretold and that the actions of the Tây Sơn had been fore-ordained.[191] Chỉnh's reference to this phrase, moreover, suggests that the population was already acutely aware of these prophecies and that despite the passage of more than a quarter century they were still part of the popular consciousness. Furthermore,

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[189] ibid., 424.

[190] Tạ Quang Phát, 1b

[191] Nguyễn Cẩm Thúy and Nguyễn Phạm Hùng, 266.

since Lê Quý Đôn reported that this prophecy had actually originated in Nghệ An, it is logical to assume that reference to it in a proclamation issued to that region would have a particular resonance among its population.[192]

Finally, with regard to the 1786 Tây Sơn invasion of the north, the *HLNTC*, reports that Lê Quý Đôn had predicted the Tây Sơn invasion of 1786 already in the mid-1770s, drawing on prophecies that he became aware of during his inspection tour of the south:

> At that time, the *bảnh nhơn* (enrolled man) Lê Quí Đôn was looking into and examining some prophecies concerning Tây Sơn territories, and then spoke with the lord saying: "The Tây Sơn have taken the territory of the son of heaven, and in 12 years their power will be such that no one will be able to overthrow them. The Great General of Thuận Hóa is loathe to raise his hand to resist them; I urge the lord to pay attention to this." But the lord felt that this advice was exaggerated and did not agree to do anything.[193]

Lê Quý Đôn's own *Phủ Biên Tạp Lục* does not make reference to this episode, so it is difficult to determine whether or not Lê Quý Đôn did actually report such a prediction to his superiors. Nevertheless, this episode reinforces the idea of the role that prophecy played in both the popular and elite consciousness during this time.

Even after 1786, prophecies continued to play an important role during this unstable time. In particular, Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh, the same Tây Sơn general who had used references to the prophecy regarding the fall of the Nguyễn in 1786, made strategic use of prophecies to advance his own political interests. According to some sources, Chỉnh is said to have derived confidence from an old saying that read "The tiger himself advances from the western mountains, the dragon arrives from the eastern sea."[194] According to Chỉnh's interpretation of this phrase, the tiger from the western mountains (tây sơn) was an obvious reference to the Tây Sơn armies, while the dragon from the eastern sea (đông hải) was a reference to Chỉnh himself, for he was a native of the region called Đông Hải. Moreover, a 1787 missionary letter noted

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[192] *PBTL* (1977), 334.
[193] *HLNTC* (1998),vol. 1, 102.
[194] *Lê Qúy Dật Sử*, 66.

about prophecy and Chỉnh's use thereof that:

> The pagans of this kingdom have prophecies that are called Sam Ki, as true and intelligible as those of Nostradamus. And these prophecies have announced, say the interpreters of the pagans, that the race of the Chua Trinh would be finished in this era. It is said that this gave great courage to Cong Chinh who here used the faith of the poor blind people who know nothing of the conduct of divine providence.[195]

Another letter of about the same time makes roughly the same observation.[196]

Phạm Đình Hổ's *Tang Thương Ngẫu Lục* also contained a tale connecting Chỉnh to predictions of the future, specifically suggesting that just as Chỉnh's rise had been foreordained, so to his demise had been foretold by omens. According to this tale, a local geomancer who passed by Chỉnh's home when he was born heard his cries and said to himself: "There is a person who will grow to be a scoundrel in a time of chaos. He will do harm to that under heaven." Later, when he had become older, Chỉnh was viewed by a physiognomist (*thầy tướng*) who examined his features and saw the *Thiên cẩu* (Dog Star) plunging to earth. This, he concluded meant that while Chỉnh would achieve a high rank, he would be unable to avoid a calamitous end.[197]

A final prediction from the Tây Sơn years, and one which apparently predicted the year of the Tây Sơn demise, is found in Phạm Thaí's famous poem, "Chiến Tụng Tây Hồ" – "Against the poem in Praise of West Lake." This poem was composed in reply to Nguyễn Huy Lượng's "Tụng Tây Hồ Phú" (Phú Poem in Praise of West Lake) as a critique of the Tây Sơn regime. Pham Thái's poem, which was apparently written in 1800 or 1801, included a reference to a prophecy current at the time: "Nhâm Tuất (1802) kia âu hon nát ra tro." The line, which is rather oblique, appears correctly to predict that the demise of the Tây Sơn would take place in the year *nhâm tuất* (1802).[198]

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[195] Jean-François Leroy to ?, 26 July, 1787. MEP 691, 829.
[196] Louis-François Le Breton to ?, 10 July, 1787. MEP 691, 829.
[197] *TTNL*, 105-106.
[198] see *Hợp Tuyển Thơ Văn Việt Nam: Thế Kỷ XVIII – Giữa Thế Kỷ XIX*(1963), 254.

A final manner in which the Vietnamese sought to discern the future was through the analysis of words and phrases. The literati, and possibly literate villagers, looked to individual words (Chinese characters), parsing them for hidden meanings or prophetic indications. Chinese characters lend themselves particularly well to a rather curious strain of analysis whereby the characters can be dissected into their component parts, and messages read therein. Since characters are usually made up of smaller parts, which themselves often have distinct meanings, these smaller parts can be "read" separately and in an order that suits the interpreter's needs.[199] A good example of this practice comes from the early Tây Sơn era, though taking place in the north, and was reported in the *Lịch Triều Tạp Ký*. The case in question describes a brief poem that was written as an oblique comment on the political situation of the time: "Thổ tư vân gian nguyệt, hoàng hoa nhật diệu hương." (The earth will transmit and speak a dishonest oath (against) the imperial flower which the sun makes beautifully fragrant.) The characters for "tổ" and "tư" form the character for brother-in-law, a reference to Hoàng Tố Lý, while the characters for "hoa" and "nhật" form the character for Việp, a reference to Hoàng Ngũ Phúc's noble title. The character "dê" – goat, was a reference to the zodiacal year in which both men were born. The entire phrase suggested that the two men were planning to act against the Trịnh ruler.[200]

Such forms of word-play, either acting as predictions or as discrete political criticisms continued and appear to have multiplied over the course of the Tây Sơn period. In particular, there were numerous attempts to discern the fate of the Tây Sơn leaders themselves, using the characters that made up their reign names. Thus, for example, the popular response to Nguyễn Nhạc's declaring himself the "Thái Đức" (泰 德) Emperor, was to examine those two characters for portents, and the analysis concluded that Nhạc's reign would be over in 14 years. "People respectfully pretended

[199] Maurice Durand and Nguyen Tran Huan, *An Introduction to Vietnamese Literature*, trans. David Hawke (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 73.
[200] Ngo Cao Lãng, *Lịch Triều Tạp Ký* (Miscellaneous Records of Past Dynasties), trans. Hoa Bằng and Hoàng Văn Lâu (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1995), 465.

to explain that the two characters for Thái Đức were 'Three people fight over water in the beginning, 14 years and they will be lost.' (ie. three people fight with one another for one land, in 14 years they will be lost)." And indeed, as Bùi Dương Lịch, the scholar who recorded this analysis noted, the reign of Thái Dức lasted for 14 years, from 1778 to 1793.[201] A similar approach was taken to predict the demise of the newly established Lê Emperor, Lê Chiếu Thông:

> Filial people broke up the two characters of Chiếu and Thông (to mean): "The sun near the knife exalts the mouth, cutting the familial cord of the second elder brother." After this the vua fled over to the northern country, and Nguyễn Chỉnh was killed, and all was correct as these words had spoken it.[202]

Later the same technique was applied to the characters for "Quang Trung" [光中] and "Cảnh Thịnh," [景盛] dissecting those characters as follows:

> The head of the father we take to serve as the feet of the son,
> In fourteen full years the final number will be reached.
> The father has a small head, the son small feet
> Reaching the year *nhâm tuất*, they will be no more.[203]

As predicted, the final year of the Tây Sơn dynasty arrived in 1802 – *nhâm tuất*.

Finally, popular sayings could also use Chinese characters slyly to hint at the fates of various individuals. For instance, a contemporary ditty ran:

> Inviting one another to carry the water for the boat,
> The Quang breaks, the Chỉnh is destroyed, and the
> Gánh immediately falls into the water.[204]

The "quang," a holding frame for shoulder-born water jars, referred to Quang Trung,

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[201] *Lê Qúy Dật Sử*, 36. 泰德 The characters suggest this complicated prediction. Thai includes the characters for THREE and for WATER; Đức includes the characters for 14 and for LOST

[202] ibid., 76.

[203] Phạm Văn Đang, 22-23.

[204] Phạm Văn Đang, 27. Indeed, the Chinese public continues to use the multiple homophones found in their language to make political statements. During the 1980s and 1990s, people would throw and break small bottles in public spaces as a subtle form of political protest, for the words for "Break Small Bottle" are homophones for "Deng Xiaoping" the then Chinese political leader.

and his own death. The "chỉnh," or "chĩnh," is a water vessel, and referred to Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh, who had earlier been defeated by the Tây Sơn, whom he had originally served. And the "gánh," a virtual homophone for the word "cảnh," referred to the last Tây Sơn Emperor, Cảnh Thịnh. In this way, the general populace could express their political opinions in oblique yet readily understood ways.

The widespread awareness of and use of prophecies and various indications of fate was an important element of the thought worlds of the Tây Sơn period. Although prophecies and omens were part of Vietnamese political culture at both popular and elite levels in periods of relative normalcy, they were particularly significant in times of turmoil, such as the Tây Sơn era. People sought to gain some control over their lives and future by attempting to discern the intentions of the fates. Whether or not predictions came to pass, or were invented after the fact is not as important as the fact that prophecies and predictions were a part of the confusing world of the last decades of the eighteenth century. Clearly prophecy played a powerful psychological role in the chaos of the Tây Sơn period. Not only did it give courage to, or raise the expectations of particular individuals, but it also gave the greater populace some means by which to interpret particular events, or come to some conclusion as to which forces to support. Moreover, during this period of great uncertainty prophecies and predictions might offer some hope of a predictable end in sight when all expectations of normalcy had vanished. Indeed, the confusions of this era are nowhere better reflected than in the final issue I wish to address concerning peasants in the Tây Sơn period, that of awaiting salvation.

Awaiting Salvation

Peasants in the Tây Sơn period, while looking for indications of the future in prophecies and signs, more concretely looked for salvation to the various contenders for power at this time. One of the central features of popular discourse throughout the Tây Sơn period appears to have been that of being rescued from oppression. This is

hardly surprising, and was a theme of many prior peasant uprisings. Perhaps the distinctive feature of the Tây Sơn period was the fact that Vietnamese populations during this period could look to a variety of serious contenders for political power. An unusual situation existed during the last three decades of the eighteenth century, in which the peasants (and others) had a choice of political forces to support. The Nguyễn and the Tây Sơn had to compete not only on the battlefields, but also in the eighteenth-century arena of public opinion. This is an unusual situation for peasants, and one I will consider here. While the Tây Sơn and Nguyễn political offerings might not have been all that different, from the peasant point of view the "other" – ie. the force that was not oppressing them at the moment – could be looked to for salvation, however illusory that might prove to be. Indeed, it is highly probable that the reputation the Tây Sơn developed at the popular level in the nineteenth century was partially a result of their being the "not-Nguyễn" – representing an idealized (however misremembered) era preceding the heavy corvee demands and other difficulties that sparked the incessant peasant uprisings of the first half of the nineteenth century.

The idea of populations awaiting liberation by some force or another appears to have developed as a theme that persisted throughout the Tây Sơn period, beginning already with the 1774 Trịnh invasion of Nguyễn territories. Thus, for example, Lê Qúy Đôn wrote in his *Phủ Biên Tạp Lục*, "The people in the *xứ* of Quảng-nam at that time had undergone much hardship. They were all awaiting the troops of the house of the king to go there to liberate and rescue them."[205] Here the reference to the troops of the king was describing the Lê/Trịnh soldiers. Yet, however much the peoples of Quảng Nam might have been seeking liberation in the mid-1770s, only a few years later these same people were again hoping to be rescued, this time from those who had ostensibly saved them in the first place. Particularly under the last *trấn thủ* (Governor-General) of the region of Thuận Hóa, life was difficult for the people. This Governor, Phạm Ngô Cầu, acted "cruelly, rudely and greedily, molesting the people and paralyzing the area into miserable poverty."[206] Consequently, "all the peasants of

[205] *PBTL* (1972), vol. 1, 134.
[206] Tạ Quang Phát, 18a.

these parts have developed an implacable hatred for all the Tonkinese without exception."[207] A missionary living in the Tonkinese controlled region reported in 1779 that "Cochinchina [here a reference to the upper part of the region then held by the Trịnh] is constantly hoping to see its king at the head of an army coming to deliver them from the harsh servitude of the Tonkinese."[208] Moreover, just as the people of Quảng Nam were hoping to be liberated from the Trịnh, others living closer to the Trịnh capitol expressed similar sentiment. As one European missionary wrote regarding popular attitudes towards an uprising developing near Thăng Long in 1779: "Everyone supports the rebels and very few are for the king. One would like to see them victorious in the hopes of finding under a new administration the end to an infinite number of evils to which they have been subjected for a number of years."[209] Clearly the desire for a new political administration was readily and loudly expressed by populations hoping for any sort of an improvement in their circumstances.

By 1786, when the Tây Sơn finally invaded Trịnh-held parts of the former Nguyễn territories, missionaries wrote of the hatred that the people felt toward the Trịnh, after having been oppressed by them for more than 12 years.[210] There are numerous accounts that speak of the people in this region capturing fleeing Trịnh soldiers and turning them over to the Tây Sơn forces who in at least one instance took 200 Trịnh troops and threw them into the ocean.[211] In other instances the local people were reported to be killing the Trịnh troops themselves.[212] The enthusiastic popular response to the Tây Sơn invasion in 1786 should be viewed in this context then, as the response of a people who had felt themselves occupied by what they considered "foreign" troops for more than a decade, and who had experienced considerable hardship during this time. The Tây Sơn represented salvation from these hardships, but equally importantly, may have been seen as fellow southerners,

[207] Jean Labartette to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 23 June, 1786. MEP 745, 176.
[208] Philippe Sérard to Jean Steiner, 3 May, 1779. MEP 700, 935.
[209] Philippe Sérard to ?, 12 May, 1779. MEP 700, 937.
[210] Jacques-Benjamin Longer to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 26 July, 1786, with a postscript dated May 3, 1787 in Cadière, "Documents Relatifs," 16.
[211] Jean-André Doussain to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 25 July, 1788, in ibid., 18.
[212] Tạ Quang Phát, 18a.

reconnecting those under Trịnh domination to the rest of the former Nguyễn south. This is not to argue that the peoples of Phú Xuân and the region to its north necessarily saw a strong political or cultural affinity for the troops riding out of the hills of Tây Sơn, but the more general affinity for peoples who were seen as "others" relative to the northern Trịnh.

When the Tây Sơn next attacked toward Thăng Long after their capture of Phú Xuân, they appealed to the memory of the Lê regime, as had been done by several northern uprisings of the middle of the eighteenth century. This constituted another instance of the peasants looking around for an imagined savior. Although the Lê had indeed overseen a period of prosperity and restored order in the fifteenth century, by the early sixteenth their rulers had become progressively more incompetent, which led first to the Mạc rebellion and then the emergence of the Trịnh and Nguyễn families. By the eighteenth century, as local northern rebellions and then the Tây Sơn hoisted banners calling for a restoration of the Lê, that imperial family was a shadow of its former self. Indeed, alongside folk memories of the glorious early Lê existed satirical criticisms of what the Lê rulers had become in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[213] What the people were rallying to was merely the promise of something better, a distant memory of the Lê in better times. It was not the Lê of the eighteenth century that the people hoped for, but the Lê of the fifteenth. Thus, while historians have focused on the idea that the eighteenth-century defenders of the Lê were promising an end to the domination of the Trịnh over the Lê, these same defenders were also making implicit promises to restore the idealized Lê rulers of the distant past.

Indeed, it is unlikely that initial acquiescence to Tây Sơn rule in the north reflected popular adulation for the Tây Sơn as such, but was instead perhaps a reaction to two things. First, life under the Trịnh rulership, combined with the hardships caused by several years of famines, had been difficult and perhaps any change was seen as having the potential to improve the situation. As one missionary

[213] Huỳnh Sanh Tông, "Folk History in Vietnam," *The Vietnam Forum*, No. 5, (1985): 70-71.

noted: "The people were very tired of the tyrannical domination of his [the Chúa's] family, and even more exhausted by the vexations of the soldiers who had made them suffer since the beginning of his reign."[214] Second, despite the initial fears about the impact of this invading army, the Tây Sơn troops had been enjoined by their commanders to respect the populations of the city and not to trouble them in any manner. That the southern forces largely obeyed these injunctions probably came as a great relief to the peoples of Thăng Long, and they consequently may have been grateful for this level of restraint. The Tây Sơn contented themselves with looting the not insubstantial holdings of the Trịnh palaces and armories, the contents of which probably assuaged the Tây Sơn troops' appetite for plunder, thus sparing the city's populations from undue difficulties. This forbearance changed substantially on their return trip, as there are numerous reports of looting and mistreatment of local populations as the Tây Sơn armies made their way back toward the south.[215] This may already have constituted the beginning of end of the very brief period of widespread Tây Sơn popularity in the north, for it did not take long for northern peoples to begin to complain about life under the control of the Tây Sơn.

According to missionary letters, as early as 1788 the populations of the north were beginning to detest the Tây Sơn and to wish to be rescued.[216] Another witness wrote in 1791, "There is nothing but taxes and corvees, which have thrown the dear people into a crisis, and which have given them the desire for deliverance."[217] For deliverance those in the center and north living under Tây Sơn rule looked south to the burgeoning strength of the Nguyễn forces. Because of the imposition of strict controls over the borders between Tây Sơn-controlled territories and Nguyễn-held areas, it was difficult for populations in the north to receive concrete information. They relied on speculation fueled by bits of news that might travel by boats coming

[214] Serard (sic - probably Philippe Sérard) to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 31 July, 1786 in Cadière, "Documents Relatifs," 11.

[215] See, eg. *Sử Ký Đại Nam Việt Quốc Triều*, 39, which described indiscriminate looting and burning by Tây Sơn troops, and noted that the two provinces hardest hit were those of Thanh Hoa and Nghệ An.

[216] "Extrait d'une lettre de Mgr. L'Eveque de Veren coadjuteur de Mgr. l'Eveque d'Adran en datte de 23 Juilliet, 1788." MEP 306, 1007.

[217] Philippe Sérard to Jean-Jacques Descouvrieres, 2 May, 1791. MEP 692, 279.

in a roundabout way via Macao. The information received was enough to make northern populations aware of the survival of the Nguyễn and their growing strength. Of course these people had no concrete information about the nature of Nguyễn rule to the far south, but they held out hope that the Nguyễn might represent a possible form of salvation.

The Nguyễn chronicles for the year 1791 also record (though hardly without bias) that "the people of Thuận [Hóa] and Quảng [Nam] had hated the cruel policies of the Tây Sơn for a long time, (and) each day they awaited the troops of the king, so each time they felt the blowing of the southern wind they all said that 'Our old lord is already arriving.'"[218] The *Tây Sơn Thuật Lược*, a nineteenth century, pro-Nguyễn history of the Tây Sơn similarly noted, "In the north, the peoples truly hated the Tây Sơn dynasty, and awaited the (arrival of) the Chúa. From the time that Gia-Định was pacified, every time that the winds blew, the people all said that this was the wind of Ông Chủng (Gia Long)."[219] In the 1790s, the arrival of the Nguyễn thus continued to be expected, even as the hopes of those living under Tây Sơn control were constantly being raised and dashed. Rumors would report the imminent arrival of the Nguyễn forces, for example in 1794, where there was a sense that the Nguyễn would arrival shortly, after their complete destruction of the Tây Sơn navy at anchor in Qui Nhơn the previous year.[220] But somehow the arrival of the Nguyễn was always forestalled by various factors, including the weather, and for a long time the timidity of Nguyễn Ánh, who had a knack for constantly pulling back from what appeared to be the brink of victory.

By the mid-1790s, northern populations began to speculate as to when, not if, the Nguyễn might arrive on their shores. A missionary letter of May 4th, 1792 referred to "The king of Lower Cochinchina, whom all of Tonkin awaits with the

[218] *Đại Nam Thực Lục*, vol. 2, 152: The reference to the wind is significant, a reminder that the rhythms of battle in this era were determined by the monsoon winds, which allowed the troops of one side or the other to launch battles against the other. Southern winds would enable the Nguyễn forces to attack Tây Sơn positions to the north, while Northern winds would serve the Tây Sơn navies in the same manner.
[219] *Tây Sơn Thuật Lược*, 18.
[220] Philippe Sérard to Claude-François L'Etondal, 20 Sept., 1794. MEP 701, 68.

utmost impatience."[221] Two more missionary letters of August 1794 reflected this feeling: "One continues to await the arrival of the legitimate seigneur of Cochinchina, but when will he come?" asked Pierre Eyot in a letter dated August 6, 1794;[222] a few weeks later, another missionary in the north, Charles La Mothe, noted that the recovery of the Kingdom by the dethroned king of Cochinchina was "that which everyone ardently hopes for and desires."[223] By the late 1790s, the situation had changed once again. Not only were northern populations speculating as to the assumed arrival of the Nguyễn ruler, but were beginning to make plans to rise up in support of a Nguyễn advance. Thus, for instance, a missionary wrote in 1797:

> Moreover, [the Tây Sơn] must fear the Tonkinese, who do not support their yoke, do not aid them and turn against them. They have already risen up a number of times, but without success . . . They await the king from Đồng Nai as their liberator . . . [224]

As the northern populations began to hear ever more rumors about the impending arrival of the Nguyễn in 1800 and 1801, they began to rise up in increasing numbers against the Tây Sơn. Probably because of conditions related to persecuting the war, the Tây Sơn rule had become particularly difficult to bear by this time. A missionary letter of 1801 summarized the situation quite well:

> As for the civilians, the greatest fermentation reigns among their spirits. All of the world, both Christian and pagan being crushed under the cruel servitude of the Tây Sơn Rebels, desires the arrival of the prince of Cochinchina with the greatest ardor; there is a confusion of noises of all types, so that one does not know what to believe, some are saying that there are some resistance groups being formed on all sides and ready to rise up against the Tây Sơn rebels at the first appearance of the legitimate prince . . [225]

In one case the leader of a planned rebellion against the Tây Sơn had apparently been able secretly to travel south, where he personally received documents from Nguyễn

[221] Philippe Sérard to Claude-François L'Etondal, 4 May, 1792. MEP 700, 1488.
[222] Pierre Eyot to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 6 August, 1794. MEP 692, 563.
[223] Charles La Mothe to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 25 August, 1794. MEP 692, 567.
[224] Pierre-Marie LeLabousse to ?, 24 April, 1800. MEP 746, 875.
[225] Pierre Eyot to Marchini, 23 June, 1801. MEP 701, 453.

Ánh authorizing his uprising and designed to help him in recruiting followers. This, like virtually all of these uprisings, was crushed by the Tây Sơn government. The failures of most of these uprisings can probably be attributed to a combination of poor organization, small numbers (rarely more than a few hundred), and the highly militarized condition of the Tây Sơn state, which allowed for rapid mobilization to suppress such uprisings. Nonetheless, these uprisings give some indication of the persistent and growing hostility toward the Tây Sơn regime combined with a belief that the Nguyễn forces would soon arrive.

Ironically, as the northern populations were hoping that they would be delivered from the Tây Sơn by the Nguyễn, those living under Nguyễn control in the far south were themselves hoping to be delivered from the very same Nguyễn regime. No less a figure than the Bishop of Adran, the staunch supporter of Nguyễn Ánh, wrote in 1791:

> [Nguyễn Ánh] has burdened his people with taxation and with works projects, and at the present time the poor people are tormented by famine to the point that they desire the arrival of the Tây Sơn.[226]

Two years later, in 1793, it was reported that "These last two years everyone has been taken for public works, and [people] are not occupied with anything else but searching for ways to stay alive, the misery having become extreme."[227] Several years later (1795), the situation in the south had still not improved, and the Tây Sơn continued to be viewed as a possible and preferable alternative to the difficult rule of the Nguyễn:

> That which is most unfortunate for the prince [Nguyễn Ánh] is that he has alienated the hearts of his subjects for some time by this conduct, which is full of pride, and some acts of folly, such as wishing to build a magnificent temple to Confucius, and to rebuild his city of Saygon, etc. These projects are ordered at a time in which the people are already so overwhelmed by [demands for] labor and contributions for the war that they are revolting to the people, who desire to see the rebels take them, hoping that they will

[226] Pigneau de Behaine to ?, 14 September, 1791. MEP 801, 417.
[227] Pierre Lavoué to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 1 August, 1793. MEP 746, 432.

finally relieve them of all these vexations.[228]

Clearly the hopes for salvation being entertained by the northern populations must be juxtaposed with the realities being endured by those already under Nguyễn authority. Consequently, when the northern peasant populations finally got their wish of being rescued from the Tây Sơn by the Nguyễn, still hoping to see their beloved Lê regime restored, they soon discovered that their hopes had been nothing but illusions. As de la Bissachère observed in the early nineteenth century, "The Tonkinese . . . waited impatiently for him [Ánh] to deliver them from the tyranny of the Tây Sơn rebels and to reestablish the former royal family on the throne, but these Tonkinese were cruelly deceived in their expectations, because no sooner had this prince conquered Tonkin, which had awaited him as its liberator, than he declared himself king and received the political investiture of the Chinese Emperor."[229] But already even before taking the throne for themselves in 1802, the Nguyễn forces routing the Tây Sơn armies in 1801-1802, were already creating difficulties for the northern populations and bringing into question their status as saviors of these people.

In the course of their northern campaigns the Nguyễn forced the people to make contributions of various items, not only practical things such as horses and saddles but ornate weapons as well. In some cases when villages did not have or could not procure the items demanded of them they were forced to contribute large sums of money instead to enable the Nguyễn officers to purchase these or similar items. "This," Bissachere noted, "was the beginning of the discontents against the new Government."[230] Then only a few years later he wrote that "the prince [Ánh] is greatly hated by the people, particularly since he named himself Emperor, due to the exorbitant corvées that he imposes to construct fortresses and to build cities . . ."[231] He concluded by summarizing the situation: "The Tonkinese appealed to the current king

[228] Pierre Lavoué to ? , 27 April, 1795. MEP 801, 573.
[229] Pierre-Jacques Lemonnier Bissachère, *La Relation sur le Tonkin et la Cochinchine* (1920), 126.
[230] ibid., 115.
[231] ibid., 127.

to assist them in destroying the Tây Sơn, but now that he has governed them for less than six years, they curse him daily because he has imposed corvées on them that are twice as onerous as those of the Tây Sơn; their hearts are disposed to revolt, but they are without the energy (to do so) and are lacking leaders capable of stirring them to action."[232]

Taken collectively, this evidence makes it quite clear that life was not necessarily any better or worse under any particular politico-military force during the Tây Sơn years. Each side placed great demands on those living under them to support rebuilding, fortification, resource extraction and military designs. To the people, the other side, whichever it might be, offered the possibility of salvation. Thus, for instance, at the same time that southern populations hoped to be rescued **by** the Tây Sơn, those living in the north hope to be rescued **from** them. Indeed, I would argue that the people were never entirely happy. They always collectively hoped that the next ruler, or some alternative ruler, would be better and perhaps less demanding. As the events of the Tây Sơn period made clear, the expected salvation never came, even when another political or military force was able to come to power. Those who had been under Trịnh domination and were then rescued by the Tây Sơn soon hoped for the Nguyễn to rescue them. Those who had been under the Nguyễn domination, after having been liberated from the Tây Sơn, soon longed for the return of the Tây Sơn. And those under the Trịnh, who were then liberated by the Tây Sơn, and then again liberated by the Nguyễn, soon longed to throw off the yoke of the Nguyễn. Clearly the demands of the state were particularly high during this period of warfare and reconstruction, and no side could afford to take sufficient measures to pacify their populations.

[232] ibid., 156.

Conclusion:

In this chapter I have only touched the surface of the complex relationships that existed between the Vietnamese peasantry and the leadership of the Tây Sơn movement. The populations are too large, the terrain too varied and the time period too long to enable me to provide a definitive description of peasant life during the Tây Sơn years. What I have hoped to do, however, is to show that prevailing descriptions of the Tây Sơn regime are often far too benign in assessing the nature of Tây Sơn rule. The too easy description of the Tây Sơn uprising as a "peasant movement" masks the far more complicated relationship that existed between the leaders of this movement, who were not truly peasants, and those whom they sought to bring into their armies and under their political authority. One cannot assume that the interests of the leaders of this movement were the same as those of the broad masses of the peasantry, and so interpretations that conflate the Tây Sơn brothers with the movement as a whole are extremely misleading.

There are notable instances of popular cooperation with and enthusiasm for the Tây Sơn movement and some of its objectives, but there are many more cases of local struggles against the demands of this new regime. It is also important to note that these acts of resistance or defiance should not be seen as representing any particular antipathy towards the Tây Sơn as such. Instead these should be considered acts of resistance against any increased impositions by the powers of the state, whatever the sources or claims of that power. In other words, it did not so much matter that it was the Tây Sơn who were the ones making these claims on the population, but rather that any prevailing political party was doing so. That this was the case is demonstrated by the fact that the general populations in this period alternatively complained loudly about the Nguyễn, the Trịnh, and the Tây Sơn. Moreover, no sooner had the people been "delivered" from the cruelties of one regime than they began to decry the excesses of their new overlords and to hope for salvation from yet another one of the military-political forces of their time.

In this context I raise the hypothesis that the glorification of the Tây Sơn that emerged in the nineteenth-century popular imagination was as much a product of antipathy toward the Nguyễn as an actual collective memory of the Tây Sơn. This nostalgia for a better time is a universal pattern in many societies of course. The point here is that we must be aware of such nostalgias and the ways in which they are created. The twentieth-century Vietnamese historians who have come to rely heavily on oral and other folk traditions regarding the Tây Sơn are, I believe, seeing a great deal of this type of nostalgia. In many respects the Tây Sơn appear to have been no better or worse than their predecessors or successors. From the perspective of the peasantry the Tây Sơn did not represent a profoundly new approach to governance or a change for the better in their lives. Perhaps the main thing that stands out about the Tây Sơn regime was that it rose and ruled during a period of almost continual warfare. It was because of the demands of warfare that life under the Tây Sơn may even have been worse than under the Trịnh/Lê and Nguyễn. To serve as a soldier in the Tây Sơn years was to face a much greater risk of seeing combat and being injured or killed. Moreover, the effects of warfare spilled over into the civilian society as well, as the lives of farmers were disrupted, fields were left untended or were destroyed by repeated military confrontations. Finally, adding to the miseries generated by long years of warfare were, especially in the north, weather patterns that produced a series of famines and lesser crop shortfalls, combined with insect infestations and livestock diseases. These cannot of course be blamed on the Tây Sơn, but nonetheless were a factor that shaped the lives of the peasantry and their response to the Tây Sơn regime.

Chapter Four

The Tây Sơn Movement and the Social Margins of Eighteenth-Century Việt Nam

As I argued in the previous chapter, the Tây Sơn movement and subsequent regime had an enormous impact on the Vietnamese peasantry, an impact that was frequently seen by the peasants as very negative. The peasants, in a generic sense as mainstream agriculturalists, were of course not the only group profoundly affected by the Tây Sơn. The movement and government also had an important impact on, and developed significant relationships with, groups living at the margins of eighteenth-century Vietnamese society. In this chapter I examine members of these groups that lived at the peripheries of Vietnamese society in this period – geographic as well as social and economic – and consider the ways in which they became embroiled in the Tây Sơn uprising. Although their numbers were sometimes relatively small, (though not in every case) these groups left important marks on the movement, both physical and psychological. There are of course many ways to classify what I call here the "social margins." The groups chosen for examination here are ones that have emerged in the textual documentation. There are others, no doubt, whose traces have perhaps been erased by time, so in examining the groups that I do here, I do not deny the existence of others on the margins, nor do I wish to suggest that there is not considerable overlap with the category of "peasants."

The particular groups I want to focus on here are the following: religious minorities, and specifically Vietnamese Christians, a relatively new social category, but nonetheless a significant and disruptive group; bandits in their various guises; pirates, distinct from bandits not merely because of their location on the seas and rivers, but in this case because of their origins in China; and finally ethnic and national minorities, including most prominently ethnic Chinese living in Việt Nam, but also members of groups living in the highlands, and sometimes across the borders coming from Siam, Cambodia and the Lao principalities. Each of these groups was profoundly affected by the events of the Tây Sơn period, and each in turn left its

mark on the Tây Sơn movement and regime as well as on the Tây Sơn's adversaries. An examination of these particular social groups will hopefully shed further light on aspects of the Tây Sơn movement that have either been ignored or willfully misrepresented in existing historiography.

These marginalized groups are ones that contemporary Vietnamese historians have frequently portrayed as having participated in a broad coalition in support of the Tây Sơn. Central to the Vietnamese Marxist historiography of the Tây Sơn is the notion that the movement's leaders had established a united front against the "feudal" state, a united front that included not only a cross-section of economic classes, but also members of various ethnic minority groups, including both highland groups and coastal ethnic Chinese and Chams. There is no doubt that various ethnic minority groups played an important role in the Tây Sơn armies, particularly in the early years of the movement. At the same time, however, closer examination reveals that there was far from uniform support for the Tây Sơn among these groups.

Indeed, Vietnamese historians have insufficiently problematized the relationship between the Tây Sơn and members of marginalized groups, even when these relationships were clearly fraught with tensions. There is little doubt that the Tây Sơn leadership was interested in the concerns of marginalized groups to the extent that advocating for these concerns would be a useful way to expand their following. This is quite different, however, from arguing that the Tây Sơn actively sought to implement the changes desired by these marginalized groups. It is convenient to believe, for instance, that ethnic minority groups – both from the highland and the lowland regions – were unflagging and enthusiastic supporters of the Tây Sơn. The reality is far more complicated, as the historical record shows. At times, some of these groups assisted the Tây Sơn. Just as frequently, however, members of various ethnic minority groups threw their support behind the Tây Sơn's rivals. Thus, it is impossible to generalize about the attitude of various groups at the social margins toward the Tây Sơn.

Furthermore, historians have not paid sufficient attention to the involvement

of bandit and pirate groups in supporting the military campaigns of the Tây Sơn. Not surprisingly, twentieth-century Vietnamese nationalist historians have sought to depict the Tây Sơn movement as a coalition of virtuous, if down-trodden, members of Vietnamese society, and not criminal elements who frequently supported the movement by preying on the very society the Tây Sơn were said to be aiding. To ignore the presence of these elements in the movement is grossly to misrepresent the complex dynamics of the Tây Sơn period. Bandits and pirates were essential elements of the Tây Sơn military strategy throughout the course of the movement, and their presence through manpower and local knowledge was frequently instrumental in Tây Sơn military successes in all parts of the country.

Finally, perhaps nowhere has the record of Tây Sơn relationships with eighteenth-century social margin groups been more distorted than with regard to Vietnamese Christians. Some Vietnamese historians have conveniently pointed to one or two letters by European missionaries praising the Tây Sơn regime for its open religious tolerance, and comparing it favorably with its predecessors.[1] The comments of Quách Tấn and Quách Giao (2000) are typical: "Christianity was not prohibited. In sum, under the Tây Sơn dynasty, the people were able to follow their religious beliefs freely."[2] Such descriptions have done a great disservice to our understanding of the complex interactions between the new regime and the growing community of Christians living in Việt Nam during this period. While there were times when the Tây Sơn were very clearly sympathetic to the Christians living under their control, there were also numerous instances of Tây Sơn crackdowns against Christians, efforts to hunt down the European missionaries, and outright proscriptions of the practice of Christianity. The erratic nature of Tây Sơn actions toward Christians suggests that they had no policy as such, but instead responded to changing circumstances. Crackdowns reflected political suspicions or sagging military fortunes, while

[1] See, eg. Hoa Bằng, *Quang Trung: Anh Hùng Dân Tộc 1788-1792* (Quang Trung: National Hero, 1788-1792) (Hà Nội: Tri Tân and Đông Dương, 1944; reprint, Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Hóa Thông Tin, 1998), 292.

[2] Quách Tấn and Quách Giao, *Nhà Tây Sơn* (The House of Tây Sơn) (Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh: Nhà Xuất Bản Trẻ, 2000), 148.

tolerance typically occurred in periods of relatively positive political developments or circumstances, or, ironically, during times of political crisis that precluded giving greater attention to social issues.

The particular involvement of peoples at the edges of Vietnamese society is not surprising during a time of conflict. Indeed, it is at times of social and political upheaval that the margins become much more heavily involved in the mainstream flow of events. There were numerous earlier cases in which popular movements came to rely on people at the social margins, as well as at the geographical margins that these groups sometimes occupied. It is thus important to bear in mind that the Tây Sơn movement did not mark the first time that ethnic minority groups became involved in lowland political upheaval. Indeed, the entire history of Việt Nam is replete with episodes involving alliances being formed between Vietnamese lowlanders and their highland counterparts. This is hardly surprising when one considers that many Vietnamese popular movements began with a retreat into peripheral regions, where they could gather strength, resources and followers before launching attacks against political centers. Most notably, Lê Lợi's fifteenth-century uprising against the Ming occupation involved a great deal of participation by a variety of minority groups and their chieftains. Later, the Mạc family, which had seized the throne from the Lê in the early fifteenth century and held Thăng Long for several decades, found refuge in the northern highland regions of Cao Bằng when they were driven from the capital. They probably found there numerous ethnic minority groups willing to give them assistance. Many northern uprisings of the eighteenth century also prominently involved various ethnic minority groups. Tây Sơn alliances with such groups thus represented the continuation of a long tradition. Furthermore, it also appears that the Tây Sơn did not break any new ground in terms of their relationships with these groups. These alliances were built on pragmatism and readily breached when circumstances changed.

The Tây Sơn and Religious Minorities: The Case of the Christians

> What a difference between his [Nhạc's] death and that of his younger brother! The one who never did anything against the Christians died as King in the midst of his glory; and the one who had persecuted them all of his life, and who had still sought their complete ruin, has died in the midst of ignominy, having lost the scepter and his Empire.[3]

Among the groups profoundly affected by the events of the Tây Sơn period were Vietnamese Christians, a relatively new segment of Vietnamese society. Their position at the social margins made Vietnamese Christians particularly vulnerable during this period of upheaval and warfare. Their connections to the small number of European missionaries present in Việt Nam at this time further added to their difficulties. The attitudes of both the Tây Sơn and the Nguyễn towards Vietnamese Christians, and Christianity more generally, vacillated wildly and often unpredictably during this period between tolerance and aggressive persecution. On the one hand, the Tây Sơn leadership tolerated Christians to the extent that they were not considered to be a threat to the new regime. On the other hand, and over the course of time, elements of the Tây Sơn leadership became increasingly suspicious, particularly of the European missionaries living in their territories as their European compatriots in the Nguyễn-held south appeared to be expanding their assistance to the southern forces.

For their part, neither Vietnamese Christians nor their European priests could quite make sense of the constantly changing policies toward Christianity. The letters of missionaries and Vietnamese Christians alike reveal the continually shifting feelings of those affected by changes in policy. As a consequence of these frequent changes, there was often great ambivalence among these groups about which side they should support during these conflicts. At times it appeared that the Tây Sơn were preferable to the Nguyễn, and at others the opposite appeared true. Above all, Christian observers of this period sought constantly to discern the long-term intentions toward Christianity of each side. In this objective they were frequently unsuccessful, for regardless of the particular policies or feelings of the Tây Sơn

[3] Pierre-Marie LeLabousse to Denis Boiret, 13 May, 1795. MEP 746, 473.

leadership regarding Christians, the attitudes of their appointed officials varied greatly. Some Tây Sơn officials were well disposed towards the missionaries and their converts, offering them protection in various guises, sometimes refusing to implement anti-Christian policies being issued from political centers, while others were relentless in their efforts to pursue the Christians. Those attempting to crack down on Christians frequently did so for financial or political reasons rather than philosophical ones. For instance, Tây Sơn officials continued a practice developed under the Trịnh, of holding Christians, or when possible missionaries, captive for ransom. Secondly, the Tây Sơn sought to use the Christians in territories under their control as conduits to the European mercenaries fighting for the Nguyễn in the hopes of perhaps luring them to the rebel side. Clearly Vietnamese Christians and their missionary coreligionists constituted both threat and opportunity.

Ultimately, it appears that doctrinal matters, despite the rhetoric of Tây Sơn edicts, were of far less concern to the Tây Sơn leadership during this period than were more practical considerations. It is thus extremely difficult to describe any particular trends in Tây Sơn policies toward Christians, except to note that animosity toward this group appears largely to have been a function of their perceived relationship with the European outsiders, and to a lesser extent their social disruptiveness. To understand the attitudes of the Tây Sơn movement toward the religion, as well as their relationship with the Vietnamese Christian community, requires an examination of both the formal proclamations of Tây Sơn rulers, as well as their actions and those of their officials. Equally important for comprehending the actions of the Tây Sơn toward Christians is an understanding of the history of state attitudes toward Christianity since its arrival in the sixteenth century, a brief survey of which I turn to next.

Christianity in Việt Nam Prior to the Tây Sơn Era

The first European missionary arrived in Việt Nam in 1533, but it was not

until 1596 that the first formal mission was established there, and only in 1615, with the expulsion of the Jesuits from Japan, did Christianity begin to gain a stronger foothold. From these very early days, the official Vietnamese attitude toward this new religion, and just as importantly its partisans, was one of some ambivalence. The existing Vietnamese religious structures – comprising a loose mixture of Buddhism, Đaoism, Confucianism, and "folk religion" – were quite open and not inherently hostile to the introduction of new forms of worship. As Buttinger has observed, "in religious matters too, the Vietnamese people had always been more open-minded, and their rulers more tolerant, than any of the nations and governments engaged in converting them to their own beliefs."[4]

The distinctiveness of Christianity, however, lay in its exclusivist nature. Some missionaries, and later indigenous preachers, insisted that devout Catholics not participate in practices that the church deemed pagan. Thus, when villages held their various festivals and requested contributions or participation, more devout Christian members frequently refused.[5] Clearly, the presence of Christians in these villages was a socially disruptive force. Debates raged within the missionary community about whether various traditional Vietnamese practices were to be considered civil or religious observances. More visibly, the Christians became embroiled in the question of proper attitudes toward their ancestors, for most of the missionaries considered the offerings and prostrations before ancestral altars to be false worship. Vietnamese Christians, and the European missionaries who served them, thus went through the same rites controversy that had created enormous problems for the Catholic mission in China in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

While Vietnamese Christians were one disruptive element produced by the advent of the new faith, those who were responsible for introducing this religion to Việt Nam were also viewed with considerable suspicion throughout this period. At

[4] Joseph Buttinger, *Vietnam: The Smaller Dragon* (New York: Praeger, 1958), 221.

[5] Descriptions of such tensions are found in many of the French missionary letters, eg. MEP 691, 694. Louis-François La Breton to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 25 June, 1786; MEP 693, 183-184. Philippe Sérard to Pierre-Antoine Blandin and Chaumont, 28 March, 1799.

times this suspicion manifested itself in outright attempts to capture or expel the European missionaries, while at other times an uneasy tolerance prevailed. During the seventeenth century, as missionary activity took root and increased dramatically, Vietnamese rulers began to view these men as potentially useful links to European trade and technology. The dominant feature of the seventeenth-century political landscape was the nearly 50-year war between the Trịnh and the Nguyễn. In the context of this war, the European missionaries were seen less as emissaries of a potentially disruptive foreign religion, than as conduits for advanced weapons technologies. The missionaries were keenly aware of the dual roles they played and took advantage of the situation. They exaggerated their own roles in and influence over the weapons trade, threatening that their expulsion would bring an end to the flow of weapons. The rulers, while clearly concerned about the moral and spiritual impact of the foreign religion, were more concerned, at least during this period, with keeping the weapons flowing:

> How close the French marriage between trade and religion was when France made her first efforts to enter Vietnam could be seen from an observation made in a contemporary letter from Hanoi. Its author was an agent of the local English factory, and he wrote his letter long before the French started their own unprosperous factory in Pho Hien in 1680. The puzzled Englishman remarked: "The French have made a house in town, but we cannot make out whether they are here to seek trade or to conduct religious propaganda."[6]

While missionaries, and particularly the French, had been able to use their apparent trade connections as leverage to remain in Việt Nam, their position became more tenuous as the Trịnh-Nguyễn wars came to a halt in 1672. Thereafter, it was considerably more difficult to justify their presence, as both northern and southern rulers were less willing to trade the potential of social and political disruption caused by the growing presence of Christianity for continuing access to European weapons technology. Already toward the end of the war, but particularly in its aftermath, the "Portuguese Religion" was proscribed in both Trịnh and Nguyễn territories, and both

[6] Buttinger, 218.

northern and southern rulers prohibited European missionaries from entering the country.[7]

Despite these formal prohibitions, Christianity was allowed to exist with relatively little official interference in the Nguyễn-controlled south for most of the first half of the eighteenth century, and European missionaries could be found at the courts in both Phú Xuân and Thăng Long during parts of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Vietnamese rulers in both parts of the country continued to appreciate the value of such men, even after the civil war had come to a halt, and were willing to overlook their religious affiliations because of a desire to make use of their talents. These men served as doctors, mathematicians, interpreters, and astronomers at the two courts, in much the same capacity as their earlier counterparts had at the Chinese court. The Portuguese Jesuit, Juan Loureiro, for instance, was in residence at the Nguyễn court from the 1740s until his departure in 1777 (with a two-year interlude from 1750-1752), and two other Jesuits, Johann Köffler and Xavier de Monteiro were also at the court for some time in the 1750s.[8]

In 1750, a renewed crackdown on Christianity was instituted by the powerful Nguyễn ruler, Võ Vương. It appears that this action was part of an attempt to stave off prophecies of the demise of Nguyễn rule through a return to greater political and cultural orthodoxy.[9] There were organized crackdowns against Christians in 1750, 1753 and 1767, the year of Võ Vương's death.[10] Yet even through this intense period of persecution, the Nguyễn ruler continued to permit Köffler and Monteiro to remain at his court, and Loureiro to return after just two years' absence, indicating the ongoing ambivalence of the ruler, as he sought to separate the missionaries as

[7] Christianity was repeatedly proscribed in the North, testifying to the tenacity of its adherents and the European missionaries. Edicts prohibiting the religion were issued in 1664, 1669, 1670, 1712, 1721, 1750, 1754, 1761, 1765, and 1776. See Alain Forest, *Les Missionaires Français Au Tonkin Et Au Siam, XVIIe-XVIIIe Siècles: Livre III, Organiser Une Église Convertir Les Infidèles* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998), 331.

[8] Lamb, 63.

[9] Leopold Cadière, "Le Changement de Costume Sous Vo-Vuong, ou une Crise Religieuse a Hué au XVIII Siècle," *Bulletin des Amis du Vieux Hue*, 4, (Oct-Dec, 1915): 417-424. See Chapter Three for a discussion of this episode.

[10] Account by Jean-Pierre-Joseph D'Arcet, 29 August, 1786, in *Nouvelles Lettres Edifiantes*, vol. 6, 493.

European men of science from their mission work. With the death of this Chúa, there appears to have been a further relaxation of Nguyễn official attitudes toward Christianity, which culminated in a 1774 decree permitting the free exercise of the religion, and issuing reprieves to those who had been previously jailed or otherwise punished for their faith.[11] Coming on the cusp of the first major Tây Sơn attacks against the Nguyễn, it is not clear whether officials even had time to act on the terms of this decree before the Nguyễn were driven out of Phú Xuân, but the edict nonetheless gives an indication of an improving environment for the religion.[12]

In the north, after the post-Trịnh-Nguyễn civil war proscriptions, there also appears to have been a gradual expansion of religious freedom from the mid-1720s into the early 1770s, particularly in the provinces of Nghệ An and Thanh Hóa.[13] With the death of Trịnh Dinh in 1767, the situation once again became uncertain, but his successor, Trịnh Sâm, initially continued the policy of tolerance. In 1771, the new Chúa even released two European missionaries who had been captured several years earlier. The release of the two men proved to be the high point of tolerance during the reign of Trịnh Sâm, however, for a growing crackdown developed that led to another round of arrests. Among those seized were a Spanish Dominican and a Vietnamese preacher, who were swiftly executed on November 7, 1773.[14] Their arrest and subsequent killing appears to have been initiated by the actions of individual members of the government and ruling family, rather than having been the consequence of any formal policy shift. The subsequent response of the Christian community to the executions, however (including their veneration of the two bodies), provoked an edict

[11] The text of this decree can be found in Leopold Cadière, "Documents Relatifs a L'Époque de Gia-Long," *Bulletin De L'École Française D'Extrême-Orient*, (1912): 3.

[12] The *Sử Ký Đại Nam Việt Quốc Triều* (An Historical Record of the National Courts of the Việt of Đại Nam) (Sài Gòn: Nhom Nghiên Cứu Sử Địa Việt Nam Xuất Bản, 1973), 8, suggests that the decree was issued after Huệ Vương had fled to Đồng Nai, and in response to pleas from a European missionary there. Since the edict was dated in April 1774, this seems unlikely, since the Chúa was still in Phú Xuân at that time.

[13] Alain Forest, *Les Missionaires Français au Tonkin et Au Siam. XVIIe-XVIII Siècles, Livre II Histoires du Tonkin* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998), 216.

[14] Bertrand Reydellet to MEP Directors, 11 July, 1774. MEP 700, 866.

by Sâm demanding the eradication of Christianity within two months.[15]

Even this sequence of events does not appear entirely to have driven the practice of Christianity underground. Some members of the ruling family were alleged to be Christians, including a sister of Trịnh Sâm and one of his brothers-in-law. And the leader of the 1774 Trịnh invasion of the south, the eunuch Hoàng Ngũ Phúc, was widely reputed to be a Christian himself, and tolerant of the faith.[16] Indeed, one missionary reported that quite a number of the major Trịnh figures associated with the invasion were Christians: "The first two mandarins of the court are Christians. The first conducted me here from the vessel under a good guard, with a minor mandarin and three soldiers, all Christians. They wanted me to take the position of doctor or painter, but I never wished to accept . . . After about fifteen days here, the second Mandarin of the court came twice to see me. He told me that he has two brothers who are preachers in Tonkin, the one in a Jesuit house, and the other in one of ours . . . There is great hope that the religion will fare well here if the Tonkinese dominate."[17] Yet the very next year, a missionary writing from the north opined that the religious situation there had become very bad and that it would be a major setback for Christianity were the Trịnh forces to be successful in conquering the Nguyễn.[18] A few years later, in 1779, the Trịnh ruler issued another edict calling for the immediate capture and execution of all European missionaries.[19]

Throughout this period, and in spite of frequent anti-Christian activity, the number of Vietnamese being baptized in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries grew enormously. A 1784 estimate placed the number of Christians in the north alone at between three and four hundred thousand.[20] This was a substantial number in a

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[15] Forest, 217.
[16] Jean Labartette to Denis Boiret, 21 July, 1775, in *Nouvelles Lettres Edifiantes*, vol. 6, 286-287.
[17] Jean Labartette to ?, 28 June, 1775. MEP 800, 1471,
[18] Bertrand Reydellet to Jean Steiner, 19 June, 1776. MEP 700, 703.
[19] Jean Labartette to ?, 17 July, 1779. MEP 745, 811.
[20] Charles La Mothe to Deson, 15 June, 1784. MEP 700, 1208.

population that at the time was roughly six million.[21] These estimates almost certainly reflected nominal adherents rather than true converts, however, who surely constituted only a fraction of that number (though it was this very small core of dedicated believers who were at the center of the social disruptions caused by the new religion.). Given the tiny number of European missionaries present in Việt Nam throughout this period, and the only slightly larger number of ordained indigenous clerics, it was far more difficult to sustain congregations than it was to baptize new converts.

Thus, at the time that the Tây Sơn movement was just commencing, the situation of Christianity in both Nguyễn and Trịnh territories remained in a state of some confusion, even as the numbers of Christians continued to grow. Formal state disapproval continued to compete with the appeal of the religion even among members of each court. I want now to turn to an examination of the dynamics that emerged between the Tây Sơn movement and later regime and Christianity and its practitioners in Việt Nam.

The Tây Sơn and Christianity

As we have already seen, Christianity had been a significant, if contentious, element of the Vietnamese social and political landscape for more than two centuries by the time the Tây Sơn rose up. It should come as no surprise then that Christianity continued to play an important role in Vietnamese society, a role that was perhaps even heightened during the Tây Sơn era. Indeed, there are numerous anecdotes that suggest that the Tây Sơn brothers came from a family with Christian connections, and that even the brothers themselves had been Christians at one time. One European priest wrote that their father was an apostate Christian and that Nguyễn Nhạc had

[21] Li Tana in *Nguyễn Cochinchina* (171) estimates a population of 5.6 million in the north for the year 1750. Anthony Reid gives an estimate for the North and Center of approximately seven million in 1800. Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, Volume One: The Lands Below the Winds* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 14.

been baptized as an infant. Another missionary reported that Nhạc had been given the Christian name of Paul, and was then referred to as Paul Nhạc, an improbable juxtaposition of Christian given name with Vietnamese given name:

> The chief of the rebels, called Tai Chon [Tây Sơn], resides in Kui Nhơn province in the middle of Cochinchine. He took the title of King. He is a Christian and he calls himself Paul Nhạc . . . He is, it is said, the son of a former sacristan at a church of this province.[22]

Clearly the tale of the alleged Christian background of the Tây Sơn brothers had spread, as evidenced in another letter in which the eldest brother was referred to as "that apostate Nhạc."[23] When the Tây Sơn leaders arrived in Thăng Long, moreover, one missionary wrote that "the news has been spreading for some time, that the two *đức ông* (virtuous brothers) are Christians, and that there are a number of Christians among their mandarins as well as their soldiers."[24] Finally, another theory regarding the development of their attitudes towards Christians was put forth by the Vietnamese Catholic, Philiphê Bỉnh:

> At that time they were in the forested region, and the two brothers Thái Đức and Quang Trung were brought up together, and their father was a Christian, but he could not instruct his sons (in that faith) because in the early evenings when the father and mother read the Bible and sang songs and called them, they would flee and not bear reading the Bible and singing with their father and mother, and when their mother and father tried to punish them, the brothers immediately took themselves away up into the forests and became robbers.[25]

It is difficult to verify any of these accounts, which may well have reflected wishful thinking among members of the missionary community in Việt Nam at this time, as they tried to remain optimistic about the long-term prospects for their religion under Tây Sơn control. Yet it is not impossible that the family of the Tây Sơn brothers had been reached by missionaries at some point in the 1740s or 1750s.

[22] Faulet to ?, 6 July, 1778. MEP 746, 1576.
[23] Philippe Sérard to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, August, 1787. MEP 691, 1044.
[24] Jean-François LeRoy to Claude-François L'Etondal, 6 December, 1786. MEP 700, 1308.
[25] Philiphê Bỉnh, *Truyện Anam Đàng Trao*, 657. Ms. Borgiana Tonchinese 2, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana.

A missionary passing near Qui Nhơn in 1778 met a woman whom he described as an aunt of the brothers and a devout Christian. She treated the missionaries who visited her with great hospitality, and made several monetary contributions to the mission.[26] Based on this report, we know that some members of their extended family had been converted, suggesting that reports of the brothers' connections to the faith may have had some basis in fact. It is questionable, however, whether such a connection had any measurable impact on their overall attitudes toward the religion. The attitude of the Tây Sơn leadership varied substantially both over the course of time and space, and it is impossible to correlate their alleged Christian background with any particular treatment of the religion.

The unpredictable nature of Tây Sơn attitudes manifested itself already during the very early days of the movement, as rebel treatment of Christian communities varied in an unsystematic fashion. Reports about Tây Sơn actions toward Christians revealed great disparities in treatment that again appear to have reflected the turmoil of the period more than any sort of systematic policy. In some places churches were looted by Tây Sơn troops and by armies allied with them, such as those of the ethnic Chinese generals.[27] The French missionary Halbout, living only six miles from Tourane (Đà Nẵng), reported, in 1775, that sixty homes of Christians had been burned by rebels in his small district.[28] A Spanish missionary, writing in 1774, reported that a group of 17 rebels showed up at his small rural church in mid-March, and took everything of value they found, including candles and an altar cloth.[29]

During this early period, moreover, a very important source of potential conflicts between Christians and the Tây Sơn already emerged, as was indicated by a Spanish missionary in the early 1770s. He noted that he and his fellow missionaries were reluctant to endorse the Tây Sơn, because they interpreted this movement as directed against a legitimate ruler:

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[26] Jacques Liot to ?, 1 May, 1778, in *Nouvelles Lettres Edifiantes*, Vol. 6, 307.

[27] Perez, 66, 77-79; 1774 letter describing both looting of Churches and promises of protection and freedom to preach.

[28] Letter by Halbout cited in M. Jean Labartette to Denis Boiret, 21 July, 1775. MEP 745, 751.

[29] Perez, 79.

> All of the missionaries were indebted for the good favors of the mandarins, but as the movement was fashioned against the king . . . we affected in public a total indifference, declaring that we were not dealing with these questions, counseling our Christians to be obedient to their sovereign. We said to them that in good conscience they must not rally to the insurrection, in spite of some of the political goals that were motivating this uprising. We thought thus to instill in the Christians obedience to their king and to avoid all susceptibility of prejudice against the mission.[30]

The missionary effort to promote this biblically-ordained notion of loyalty to civic rulers was almost certainly a source of tension in this period. Although Tây Sơn officials appear to have been satisfied with the pledges of missionary non-interference, the later missionary support for the man they repeatedly referred to as the "legitimate" ruler became a major irritant to the rebel regime.

Despite these tensions, the Tây Sơn also demonstrated some early good will toward the faith and its European missionaries. One nineteenth-century account, for instance, commented on the generally positive Tây Sơn treatment of Christians in this early period:

> With regard to matters of the faith, the situation was calm because the Tây Sơn troops were not concerned with matters of religion. Thái Đức's maternal aunt was a Christian and assisted in many ways to help the faith to prosper. Also, perhaps (he) recalled that his own mother had also been a Christian. For these reasons, all of the missionaries, whether from West or East, were able to go everywhere and do anything with no interference.[31]

Also, the Spanish missionary who reported that all of his possessions were looted by the rebels wrote that not long after this encounter he was visited by some Tây Sơn mandarins who sought his medical assistance and promised him protection and the freedom to preach and erect churches. They also offered him "large quantities of silver," which he declined. As he reported the incident:

> Numerous mandarin rebels came to visit me later, asking for medications, I am indebted to them for some good favors. They accorded me in particular the permission to preach the blessed Evangel publicly and to erect public

[30] ibid., 80.

[31] *Sử Ký Đại Nam Việt Quốc Triều*, 11.

> churches. They added that if there was any gentile who caused me any trouble, or who attacked a Christian, I had but to let them know, and they would drown him in the river as a punishment for his audacity. No one causes us any harm, and no one stole anything which was in our house or our church. Thirty armed soldiers looked after our safety day and night.[32]

In addition to asking for medications, the Tây Sơn also requested this missionary's services as doctor, a position that he declined. The request by the Tây Sơn officials, however, does point to their awareness of the potential usefulness of the Europeans, and helps to explain the good treatment sometimes offered them. Clearly the Tây Sơn leaders, like the Nguyễn and Trịnh before them, hoped to make use of the technological advantages that the Europeans might provide.

Although the Tây Sơn army's initial treatment of Christians was based on local circumstances and not dictated from the center, the movement's leaders did eventually issue several formal decrees regarding the religion. The first of which we know was a 1779 edict by Nguyễn Nhạc granting religious freedom to those living in his territories, a decree that was specifically aimed at Christians.[33] The impetus for this decree is not clear, though it is possible it came from a Christian official in the Tây Sơn camp. It is also possible, and indeed more likely, that it was an attempt by the Tây Sơn to win over the European missionaries then present in the country, in the hopes of building on such a relationship in the same way that the Nguyễn lords had done earlier at Phú Xuân, and were to do again in the 1780s and 1790s.

Despite this edict of tolerance, elements of the Tây Sơn leadership, and Nhạc in particular, continued to harbor suspicion of the Christian community, and it was not long before a series of events sparked another crackdown. First, in 1780 the Tây Sơn arrested Jean-Pierre-Joseph D'Arcet, the one French missionary who was active in Tây Sơn territory near Qui Nhơn during this period, along with a large number of his Christian followers.[34] Although he may have been seized because of his proselytizing in close proximity to Qui Nhơn, it is also possible that he was captured

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[32] ibid., 79.

[33] The text of this decree is found in MEP 800 (vol. 2), 1691.

[34] "Precis des nouvelles et de l'etat actuel des missions Etrangers," [1782]. MEP 306, 781.

because the Tây Sơn hoped to use him as an envoy to Europe.[35]

In any case, two years later Tây Sơn officials seized a number of Spanish priests in Cambodia and brought them back to Sài Gòn in cangues. Among these men was Ferdinand de Olmedilla. On being seized, he displayed a permit that Nhạc had earlier granted him to proselytize in Qui Nhơn, hoping that this would protect him. Nhạc, however, stating that the pass was not valid beyond the immediate area of Qui Nhơn, ordered him to be held and then returned to the area of the Tây Sơn capital. As the Spaniard was being taken back to the Tây Sơn capital by sea several of the accompanying ships were capsized in a storm. The Tây Sơn leader accused Olmedilla of having conjured the storm and immediately ordered his execution.[36]

Finally, and in a more general sense, change in official Tây Sơn policy in this period may also have been spurred by the activities of Pigneau de Béhaine, the French Bishop who had became a close confidant and indefatigable champion of the young Nguyễn Anh beginning in 1777. The increasingly visible role played by de Béhaine began to raise suspicions among the Tây Sơn leaders about all Europeans then living in Việt Nam. The automatic assumption was that Europeans, and missionaries in particular, might have ties to de Béhaine. Hereafter there appears to have been a resurgence of anti-Christian actions under the direction of Nhạc from his center at Qui Nhơn.

As Nhạc developed this new hard line position, his younger brother, Huệ, adopted a more moderate and pragmatic attitude towards the Christians. The brothers' divergent attitudes towards the Christians is illustrated in an anecdote reported by a French missionary:

> The young prince named Đức Êm [Nguyễn Huệ] passing through the place after having gone to visit the king, his brother, was astonished to see such a crowd, like a million, he said, the great and small informing him what it was about. The mandarin made it known to him that it was the order of the King

[35] Jean-Jacques Descourvieres (at Macao), 16 January, 1782. MEP 313, 622.

[36] Details of this episode can be found in Perez, 90-91; see also copy of a letter by Pigneau de Béhaine to Jean-Jacques Descourvieres, written from Bangkok, 5 October, 1783. MEP 800, 1784-1785; and Langenois to Jean-Jacques Descourvieres, 30 June, 1784. MEP 800, 1775.

> to seize the Preachers and all of the Christians. The prince, unhappy with this, sent a request that they be released and that the P. Emmanuel be sent to him. The judge responded that he could not, having received the order from the King to seize them. The prince then sent a second request that the P. be sent, and that he would take him under his own responsibility, but the mandarin still refused.
>
> The prince became furious, charging through the crowd and to the house of the judge, commanding his soldiers to make an appeal to all of the Mandarins and to take from them all of their goods and at the same time to take the missionaries from the cangue, whom he then conducted to an audience with the King, where he presented them in great anger saying to him: "What is your majesty doing? We have war on all sides, we are reuniting everyone in order to do this, and you are making to seize all of the Christians. If all the Christians turn against us, what will we do? How will we be able to resist them?" To all of this, the King did not know how to respond but that all was interdicted, and then with the coming of evening, he said: "I did not know anything of this; do what you want." To which the Đức Êm boldly told him, "if it is entirely up to my own wishes, then I will command that they all be released." "Do it then," replied the king . . . [and] the prince ordered the release of all the Christians. And those who wished to be enrolled as soldiers, he offered them all freedom, by means of a ransom of one "livre de cuivre (copper coin)." The King left the audience with the P. Emmanuel, giving him permission to leave and lodge where he liked. This is an astonishing thing, as the prince had always been seen as a sworn enemy of the Missionaries and the Religion.[37]

This episode makes clear the ongoing tension in Tây Sơn treatment of Christians, for whatever their personal feelings about Christians, the Tây Sơn brothers could not escape the real presence of these peoples in their territories. Consequently, it is not surprising to find that numerous Christians were later seen in armies marching to the north in 1786. As one missionary reported in that year: "a great many of these rebels are Christians, or at least they have been baptized: many of them went to offer confessions with Father Khiêm, the curé at the capitol."[38] Another reported that of the Cochinchinese troops temporarily stationed near his small village, a large

[37] "Journal de la Procure de Macao en 1784." MEP 306, 928-929. [paragraph division added for clarity.]
[38] M. Jean-François Le Roy to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 6 December, 1786, in Cadière, "Documents Relatifs," 7.

number were Christians.[39] The presence of Christians in the Tây Sơn armies, perhaps in numbers disproportionate to their representation in the overall population, is an indication of the significance of this group. Most had probably been drafted into the rebel forces as other members of Vietnamese society were at the time. Some were no doubt singled out for service in the Tây Sơn army *because* they were Christians, as will be shown below. Whatever the reasons, it is clear that Christians were a significant and visible element of Vietnamese society during the Tây Sơn period, and one that often could not be ignored.

Indeed, the Tây Sơn leaders and their local officials constantly explored different ways to deal with the Christians and their conspicuous presence, which was frequently perceived as socially threatening and disruptive. One method developed by the Tây Sơn to address the issue of Christians was to agree to certain accommodations regarding their religious practices in exchange for fixed payments. The practice of making payments in exchange for certain civil liberties was not a concept that originated with the Tây Sơn. Chinese civil law, for example, contains an entire schedule of payments whereby punishments could be redeemed by payment of fixed sums.[40] Moreover, it is clear that some Trịnh provincial officials had earlier followed this practice, and that the Nguyễn leaders in the south similarly collected such "fines" during the Tây Sơn years.

This practice of charging money for religious freedom was useful for a variety of reasons. First, it allowed political leaders to identify Christians more easily, for when money was collected in any systematic fashion, registers of local Christians had to be compiled. Indeed, the only French missionary active in the Tây Sơn controlled territory around Qui Nhơn, reported in a letter that Nhạc had ordered on November 2, 1785, that all Christians should be registered and that this registry be sent to the court, so that all those listed there might be "employed as slaves in the service of the

[39] Le Roi to ?, 26 July, 1787. MEP 691, 825.

[40] See, for example, Derek Bodde and Clarence Morris, *Law in Imperial China* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1967), 78-80.

king and his officers."[41] Secondly, the collection of money from Christians was a potential means of defusing local resentment toward Christianity, and thus reducing social tensions. By imposing this apparent "fine" on Christians, governments could demonstrate that being a Christian was not acceptable within the social order, and thus discourage further or other forms of heterodoxy. Finally, of course, it was a very useful way to collect additional revenues, although it is likely that those who benefited the most from this approach were local officials who controlled the collection of these sums, rather than the coffers of the central state.

Christians were particularly vulnerable to this form of extortion, for it would appear that they did not enjoy the same level of protection as others in Vietnamese society. Being a religious minority, they did not have the same recourse to official assistance as others might, for their primary objective was to avoid the attention of the officialdom that frequently banned their religion. Consequently, they were regularly at the mercy of avaricious officials and soldiers as well as bandits.[42] As with the other regimes that practiced this technique, the collection of monies was frequently ad hoc, often being a function of a local official's avarice. In some instance collection of this money was formalized, while in many other cases it took the form of private exactions made by local officials. Indeed as one missionary noted, "it is less against the enemies of the religion, than against the lovers of money that we must guard ourselves."[43] Another reported in 1786 about Nhạc, that "it is very likely that the Tyrant acts more out of avarice than out of hatred for our blessed religion.[44] In many cases, while making the demanded payment might temporarily resolve the problem, it was no guarantee that there might not be future exactions. In

[41] Reported in an undated and anonymous letter, probably of 1787. MEP 691, 1051.

[42] Although it was most frequently officials who had to be paid off, sometimes it was sufficient to bribe the troops sent to carry out anti-Christian orders. See, eg. ["Relation de la persécution excitée dans la Tong-king et une partie de la Cochinchine, au mois d'août 1798, rédigée d'après les lettres écrites par les missionaries de ces deux missions en décembre 1798 et juin 1799,"] in *Nouvelles Lettres Edifiantes*, vol. 8, 71. Hereafter "Relation de la persécution."

[43] "Extrait du journal rédigé par Mgr. l'evêque de Ceram, vicaire apostolique du Tong-king occidental, depuis le mois de juin 1784 jusqu'au mois de mai 1785," in *Nouvelles Lettres Edifiantes*, vol. 6, 384.

[44] Jacques-Benjamin Longer to Dufresse, 1 May, 1786. MEP 801, 116.

addition, having paid off one official at one level of government did not prevent officials at higher levels from making similar demands.[45] Finally, since these arrangements were so frequently ad-hoc, if an official was transferred from his post, his successor would not necessarily be bound by the terms of the existing agreement and could demand further payments.[46]

Christians were also vulnerable because they often faced financial hardships and thus were unable to pay the "fines" being demanded of them. As one missionary noted:

> To better appreciate how much our Christians have suffered from these vexations, you should know that they are for the most part poor laborers, fishermen and artisans who make their living by their daily labors, and who are moreover, subject to excessive taxes and corvee (demands), and that a great number of them often lack the basic necessities.[47]

As this observation suggests, Christians often came from more marginal socioeconomic groups that lived from day to day and were thus particularly jeopardized by the cash demands of the Tây Sơn officials. Interestingly, in some cases Christians were actually given a choice: trample on a crucifix as an indication of their abjuration of the faith, or pay the state or some official for religious freedom. Although there were many reports of crucifixes being trampled, to the great dismay of the missionaries reporting such incidents, a majority in a Christian community frequently agreed to buy their religious freedom through the payment of 10 "livres" of copper instead, despite the financial consequences.[48]

The notion that payment might be made to avoid having to perform certain ceremonies, or to make contributions to collective rituals was not restricted to the Tây Sơn, nor to members of smaller villages. In the late 1780s, shortly after he had returned to Gia Định from exile in Siam, Nguyễn Ánh himself made similar

[45] See, for example, "Relation de la persécution," in *Nouvelles Lettres Edifiantes*, vol. 8, 36, which describes the various layers of officials who could demand payments from Christians.

[46] See for example, Charles-François Langlois to Chaumont, 8 June, 1799, (MEP 693, 192) which describes just such a situation.

[47] "Relation de la persécution," in *Nouvelles Lettres Edifiantes*, vol. 8, 40.

[48] Jacques-Benjamin Longer to Dufresse, 1 May, 1786. MEP 801, 116.

arrangements for his own mandarins. Given the ongoing presence of Pigneau de Behaine in the king's entourage, it is perhaps not surprising that some of the king's own officials were converted to Christianity.[49] Some of these men, like their co-religionists in Tây Sơn territory, refused to perform some of the Confucian rituals, most notably that of prostrating themselves before the altars of the royal ancestors. Although the King had granted religious freedom in the area under his control, "when he salutes his altar he wishes everyone, be they Christian or be they pagans, to do as he did." However, "subsequently, the Christian mandarins responded that they could not do it, and then he gave them an exemption so that every time they could each pay (instead) a fine of 15 ligatures."[50]

Clearly at this level, such dispensations created problems, and the Nguyễn ruler's own attitude toward Christianity changed considerably into the latter 1790s, as he turned greater attention to Buddhist and Confucian rituals, even as he kept Pigneau de Behaine at his court. By 1796, a French missionary noted that Christians in Nguyễn territory were being persecuted by a range of groups: the king, his mandarins, women of the court, Buddhist Monks, and even Europeans "who do not have regard for their compatriots and do not respect them."[51] This case suggests that whatever lenient feelings Nguyễn Ánh had initially had toward Christianity in the late 1780s as he was reestablishing himself in the south, evaporated as he gained strength and sought to reintroduce more orthodox notions of kingship and proper rule.[52]

While the imposition of these sorts of "fines" or "taxes" to allow Christians to continue to follow their religion was one means of extracting money from these communities, another less subtle method was outright kidnapping for ransom. One missionary who described the process in 1783, wrote that a provincial governor was

[49] Indeed, the crown prince Cảnh, who traveled to Europe with Behaine, was himself heavily indoctrinated in the faith, though ultimately with limited results.
[50] Pocard(?) to ?, 30 May, 1789. MEP 746, 243.
[51] Pierre-Marie LeLabousse to Denis Boiret, 12 July, 1796. MEP 746, 580-581.
[52] For a detailed description of the tensions that emerged at the Nguyễn court in the early and mid-1790s over the matter of Christianity, see *Sử Ký Đại Nam Việt Quốc Triều*, 60-69.

using a group of bandits as his agents, trying to extort payments from Christians in exchange for free practice of their religion. When payments were not forthcoming, attempts were made to seize Christians to hold them as hostages.[53] More typically, government officials would try to seize a European missionary, or if that was not possible, a local Vietnamese preacher, and then hold this person ransom. These officials hoped that the local Christian community would collect the money among themselves in order to ransom back their spiritual leaders. The Vietnamese Christians were frequently divided on whether or not to pay the sums demanded of them, particularly when these demands clearly originated with local officials rather than from the capital. They recognized quite clearly that meeting ransom demands would only encourage such demands in the future, and perhaps increase the likelihood of Christians and missionaries being kidnapped for ransom.

Indeed, Vietnamese Christians, most typically indigenous priests or lay leaders, were frequently viewed as targets because of their connections to the European missionaries, who were commonly assumed to be wealthy men. Had these men not come from far away lands, whose large trading ships regularly showed up with rich cargoes along the Vietnamese coast? It was assumed that the missionaries had money they could use to ransom the Christians, or that by the same logic, Christians would be able to ransom the missionaries using this apparent source of wealth. The missionaries repeatedly bemoaned the fact that the Vietnamese believed them to be very wealthy and consequently viewed them as prime targets for extortion or outright theft.[54]

In order to place these practices into some context, I want next to return to a chronological examination of changing Tây Sơn attitudes toward Christians in the period beginning in 1786, which as we have already seen, marked an important turning point in the history of the movement. The post-1785 treatment of Christians,

[53] Philippe Sérard to ?, June 1783, in *Nouvelles Lettres Edifiantes*, vol. 6, 337-338.
[54] See, eg. Pierre-Marie LeLabousse to Denis Boiret, 20 June, 1792. MEP 746, 371.; Pocard? to ?, 30 May, 1789. MEP 746, 242.

as will quickly become apparent, had more and more to do with the role of missionary involvement on behalf of the Nguyễn forces, a matter that will be treated separately. It will become clear that there was obvious overlap between Tây Sơn treatment of Vietnamese Christians and Tây Sơn treatment of European missionaries, and this should be borne in mind even as I separate the two groups for reasons of analysis.

Tây Sơn-Christian Relations in the Post-1785 period: South

The period beginning in 1786 saw some important changes in the attitude of the Tây Sơn leadership towards Christianity, particularly in the southern territories under their control.[55] The chief reason for this appears to have been the growing role that the Bishop of Adran, Pigneau de Béhaine was playing on behalf of the Nguyễn forces. Although he had already been prominently involved in the Nguyễn campaigns since the late 1770s, in 1785 de Béhaine took on an even more conspicuous task when he served as an escort for son of Nguyễn Ánh, Prince Cảnh, as he traveled to Europe to appeal for assistance from the French monarchy. The exotic prince was a sensation in the court at Versailles, and the French ruler Louis XVI agreed to a treaty that exchanged French military assistance for Vietnamese trade and territorial concessions. The treaty was never enacted because its execution was placed in the hands of a French official at Goa who deemed it to be of little use, and in any case the onset of the French Revolution brought the prospect of formal French involvement to a halt. Nonetheless, the mere fact of this mission had made clear the degree of European missionary involvement on behalf of the Nguyễn cause, an involvement of which the Tây Sơn were only too aware. A French missionary writing from the north reported in August of 1786 that everyone there knew of the mission that the Bishop was carrying out for the Nguyễn.[56]

Under these circumstances, it is not surprising to find that the following year

[55] In speaking of the South here, I am referring to the territories under the authority of Thái Đức and his successors, stretching from just south of the Hải Vân pass down to Gia Định (a territory that shrank in size as the Nguyễn gradually recaptured more and more territory up the coast).

[56] Jacques-Benjamin Longer to Claude-François L'Etondal, 9 August, 1786. MEP 801, 131.

Nhạc published a decree banning the religion:

> We wish now to exterminate from our state a European religion that has become widespread. This is a sect that acknowledges neither father nor king; which gives unto men I do not know what sorts of poisons in order to make them follow it; which is without respect for our laws, without veneration for our tutelary spirits; which passes the nights in prayer and reads books, and without any sort of shame about finding gathered together man and women; idlers and loafers, they do not take any sort of actions in order to gain for themselves goods and inheritances; finally, they do not blush when they are punished.
>
> It has reached the point that we must make it widely known that this sect is ridiculous and pernicious. A woman, with two infants, in order to be able to listen to these enchanters, dares to be separated from her husband and to trouble his repose . . . For these reasons and others known to us, we order the destruction of all of their communal houses, that an exact enumeration of all of those who are engaged in this religion be carried out. Those who are in the state of transporting weapons will be enrolled in our service . . . .
>
> I enjoin you, our mandarins and officers that you remain carefully on your guard, that all of these things will be punctually carried out, and also to make a precise inquiry to seize and bring to our capital all of the European masters, that they may be punished for these reasons. These are Our wishes.[57]

This decree is a useful summary of the standard Vietnamese arguments against Christianity, portraying, as it does, the decision to ban the religion as stemming from the disruptive social impact of Christianity. The religion is viewed as challenging the established Confucian familial and political obligations, for it "acknowledges neither father nor king." Being at the heart of the Confucian-ordained submissions to superiors, deference to one's father and the ruler (another father figure) were fundamental to social order, and religions that challenged this were viewed as a serious threat. The decree also noted that Christianity causes a woman "to be separated from her husband and to trouble his repose." This too is a challenge to the

[57] The decree is dated the 9th year of *Thái Đức*, the 4th day of the 10th month; the full text in French can be found in MEP 691, 1035.

standard Confucian deference of wife to husband, and yet another attack on the basic and conventional social relationships. Finally, in terms of their social challenge, adherents of Christianity are also viewed with suspicion because they act in ways that do not appear to conform to social norms: they do not pursue wealth, they do not discriminate between men and women, and they do not appear chastened by punishments.

Christians are also singled out in this decree because they are "without veneration for our tutelary deities." This was perhaps the most common and visible source of social tension found in regions where Christians lived. Their unwillingness to make their expected contributions to village expenses involved with rituals relating to tutelary genies would clearly mark them as outsiders and social, if not political, dissidents. Vietnamese Christians had been told by the missionaries that rituals commemorating or venerating local tutelary genies were pagan practices to which they were not permitted to contribute money. Consequently, many villages found themselves profoundly divided. In some instances non-Christian villagers took the matters to court, attempting to force Christian villagers to pay their share of the community expenses for these ceremonies.[58] In other instances, villages literally split apart, with one group moving en masse to another area to establish a new settlement. Sometimes accommodations could be reached, in which Christians would contribute to the well-being of the community in some other form, but this was not a frequent conclusion.

Finally, in addition to its direct attack on the apparent social disruptiveness of Christianity, the decree also hinted at the political disruptiveness of Christians and their missionary patrons, in the phrase "For these reasons and others known to us." Indeed, although buried in the edict in this vague mention, it was the apparent missionary connection and the sense that Christians were a politically disloyal element that was perhaps the most important reason for anti-Christian activities. In order to keep tabs on this group, the edict ordered the enumeration of the Christians,

[58] See, eg. Louis-François Le Breton to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 24 June, 1786, in *Nouvelles Lettres Edifiantes*, vol. 6, 460-461.

a census to be carried out by all village leaders in all the districts under Tây Sơn control. Some time after this census had been completed, Nhạc issued a second edict that again required all Christians to pay ten pieces of copper, though it is not clear whether this payment would allow them to continue the practice of their religion.[59] The counting of Christians was a useful means by which to keep track of this apparently unpredictable and potentially disloyal element of the population under his control, and it was a technique that was also employed in the 1790s in the north.

The 1787 edict appears to have marked the beginning of a growing anti-Christian sentiment on the part of the eldest Tây Sơn brother. Nhạc's antipathy towards the Christians grew more pronounced in subsequent years, exacerbated chiefly by the growing European support for his immediate rival, Nguyễn Ánh. When a Nguyễn fleet was able to sail into Thái Đức's harbor at Thi Nại in the summer of 1792 and burn his entire navy at anchor, Nhạc's anger was further inflamed. According to some accounts, he swore vengeance for this act, vowing that if he were successful in achieving victory over the Nguyễn, he would see to the complete destruction of Christianity in his territory.[60] Not surprisingly, when Nhạc died the following year (allegedly consumed by his anger), the missionaries interpreted his death as an act of divine retribution. As one French missionary noted of Nhạc's attitude toward Christians in the country: "the one [Nhạc] who had persecuted them all of his life, and who had still sought their complete ruin, has died in the midst of ignominy, having lost the scepter and his Empire."[61]

Indeed, after Nhạc's death in 1793, the situation for Christianity apparently improved in the Tây Sơn-controlled territory in the south. A missionary who visited Nguyễn-held parts of the south noted that the Tây Sơn "whether for political (reasons) or by being persuaded that the persecutors of our blessed religion usually come to a bad end, have shown themselves to be favorable to the religion."[62] More

[59] LeLabousse to ?. 13 October, 1790. MEP 746, 296.
[60] See, eg. *Sử Ký Đại Nam Việt Quốc Triều*, 71.
[61] Pierre-Marie LeLabousse to Denis Boiret, 13 May, 1795. MEP 746, 473.
[62] Pierre Lavoué to Alary, Chaumont and Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 1795? (received in London, 6 Aug., 1796) MEP 746, 525-6.

remarkably, he offered an anecdote suggesting that the Tây Sơn also played the game of seeing the political fates of Vietnamese regimes as dictated not so much by "*mệnh trời*" – the fate of heaven, in the abstract sense – but by punishments delivered by "Heaven" in the Christian sense:

> In the previous year, one of their first mandarins publicly declared that among all the religions, he did not know of any that was as beautiful and as reasonable as the religion of the Lord of Heaven, and he added that the former kings of Cochinchina had been punished by Heaven, and been deprived of their kingdom because they had persecuted it.[63]

The situation in the south thus shifted through periods of formal proscription of the faith, spurred chiefly by the apparent missionary support for the Nguyễn, to times of greater tolerance, reflecting the attitudes of local officials, who probably gained increasing amounts of autonomy in the wake of Nhạc's death in 1793 and the rise of his underage son. As this situation was unfolding in the southern reaches of Tây Sơn-controlled territory, an even more complex series of policies and policy reversals was taking place in the north. There the vicissitudes of political factionalism and shifting military tides in the war with the Nguyễn profoundly affected the nature of attitudes and state actions vis-à-vis both Vietnamese Christians and European missionaries.

Tây Sơn-Christian Relations in the Post-1785 period: North

After the death of Trịnh Sâm in 1782, the official attitude toward Christianity in the north appears to have become less hostile, and numerous missionary letters from that region reported that the situation for Vietnamese Christians had improved considerably.[64] In 1784 one missionary even reported that he had been able to enter Thăng Long itself shortly after Easter, suggesting that the situation continued to

[63] ibid., 526.

[64] Louis-François Le Breton to Frizier, 24 July, 1782. MEP 700, 1107-1108. Philippe Sérard to ?, 1782. MEP 700, 1126.

improve at that time.[65] This apparently increasing tolerance may have been the by-product of expanding political chaos in the north, which allowed little time for pursuing broader social policies directed against Christians. In fact, throughout this period, many missionaries reported from various places, that in the times of greatest upheaval and popular distress, they were freest to preach and proselytize, as the authorities were preoccupied with more pressing matters.[66]

With the arrival of the Tây Sơn in the north beginning in 1786, the situation appears largely to have continued to improve, particularly from the late 1780s to the mid-1790s. A 1789 letter, for example, noted that in the brief period when Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh was in control (late 1786 to late 1787), the situation for Christians was considerably improved, with much greater tolerance than under the Trịnh: "Everyone is very differently disposed towards us than in the preceding years."[67] This situation appears to have continued as testified to by other letters written from Tonkin. A 1790 missive observed:

> We are very free in regard to the exercise of our religion, and the Cochinchinese whom I have encountered many times en route, do not do me any harm. If their reign continues, perhaps the religion can be exercised with much more freedom than in the times of the nhà Trịnh.[68]

After assuming the throne as the Emperor Quang Trung in 1789, Nguyễn Huệ also was well-disposed toward the Christians under his immediate control, or perhaps more precisely, he was relatively indifferent toward the presence of Christians in his domain. He apparently believed that they were not disruptive or, to the extent that they mattered, were a minor issue during a period in which far more serious matters required his government's immediate attention.

Moreover, Quang Trung, like his predecessors and contemporaries, was prepared to make use of European missionaries for their scientific knowledge when it

[65] "Extrait du journal rédigé par Mgr. l'evêque de Ceram, vicaire apostolique du Tong-king occidental, depuis le mois de juin 1784 jusqu'au mois de mai 1785," in *Nouvelles Lettres Edifiantes*, vol. 6, 389.
[66] Pigneau d'Behaine to Jean Steiner, 13 August, 1776. MEP 800, 1530; Jean Labartette to ?, 28 June, 1775. MEP 800, 1471.
[67] Philippe Sérard to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 12 July, 1789. MEP 692, 137.
[68] Pierre Eyot to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 24 May, 1790. MEP 692, 208.

suited him. When Quang Trung's senior wife fell ill in 1791, he turned to the European missionaries, specifically the Frenchman François-Joseph Girard, hoping that European medicine could save her. Delays by Quang Trung's suspicious court officials prevented Girard from administering any medications and the woman died. Despite this, the Tây Sơn Emperor welcomed the him at the court in Phú Xuân, and apparently further relaxed his stance toward Christianity.[69] This prompted a missionary to report in the summer of 1791 that "all of our dear confederates in northern Cochinchina are in good health, and our blessed religion is completely unpersecuted. I have been told that it is active and with a greater liberty than ever before. Truly, if the tyrant who reigns in our provinces remains ignorant of all that is happening in Đồng nai, then we will be able to show ourselves with great confidence. He does not have any hatred toward our blessed religion, and has in fact numerous times testified that he holds it in esteem."[70] Even though it is clear that the Tây Sơn Emperor was not ignorant about what was happening in the Nguyễn camp, this information does not appear to have concerned Quang Trung as it did his elder brother. In any case, as long as Quang Trung held out the hope that he could win the missionaries and/or Christians to his side, he continued his policy of tolerance.

Moreover, it appears that this relaxed policy toward the Christians continued for some time even after the death of Quang Trung in the late summer of 1792. La Mothe wrote to Boiret in June of 1793 that there was much greater religious freedom than before under the Trịnh and Lê and a general tolerance[71] and Pierre Eyot noted at the same time that "since Tonkin has been under the domination of the Cochinchinese, there is no talk of persecuting the religion . . ."[72] One missionary, writing in 1794, compared the religious situation in Tonkin favorably to that in his native France, then in the throes of the French Revolution. He wrote that the two

[69] *Sử Ký Đại Nam Việt Quốc Triều*, 56. He also developed plans to send François-Joseph Girard as an envoy to European traders either in Macao or in Manila to urge them to trade in Tây Sơn-controlled territories.

[70] Jacques-Benjamin Longer to Claude-François L'Etondal, 17 July, 1791. MEP 700, 1473.

[71] Charles La Mothe to Denis Boiret, 19 June, 1793. MEP 692, 450.

[72] Pierre Eyot to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 19 June, 1793. MEP 692, 444.

situations of civil war were similar, but for the fact that "our rebels do not touch the religion at all and on the contrary, they have given more freedom than it has ever had before."[73] Others writing in 1794 also observed that "the religion is still tranquil in Tonkin, and while there are always particular persecutions, these are not as harmful as the continual wars,"[74] and finally, "We enjoy a peace and a tranquility that is truly great in terms of that which concerns religion, and we celebrate the solemn feasts with the permission of the governor of the province where I now am (Xứ Nam)."[75]

This religious peace was not to last, however, and by 1794 there were already indications that elements of the Tây Sơn leadership were growing increasingly suspicious of the Europeans in their midst. A major Nguyễn offensive in that year stirred up some Tây Sơn leaders, for "the viceroy of upper Cochinchina who saw some French officers at the head of the troops of his enemies and who was defeated by them is in a terrible rage against us and our Christians, and has made great threats."[76] The religious calm, already precarious since the previous year, was then dramatically shattered with the publication of two edicts in early 1795.[77] While both were in the name of the young Tây Sơn Emperor, Cảnh Thịnh, the missionary letters all attributed them to the regent and his anger at the assistance that Europeans were providing to Nguyễn Ánh in the south combined with his implacable hatred of the faith.[78] Philiphê Bình, writing in the 1820s, described the impetus for these decrees as being fear of losing the country to the Europeans, rather than any particular hostility toward Christianity.[79]

These edicts also included calls to restore or revive local traditions, both Buddhist and Confucian, in an effort to extirpate the apparent contamination of

[73] Philippe Sérard to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 5 June, 1793/May 28, 1794. MEP 692, 517.
[74] de Gortyne to Denis Boiret, 22 April, 1794. MEP 692, 540.
[75] Pierre Eyot to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 6 August, 1794. MEP 692, 560.
[76] Charles La Mothe to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 25 August, 1794. MEP 692, 569-570.
[77] According to Charles La Mothe in a letter of 31 March, 1795 (MEP 692, 625), the edict was posted in Thăng Long on the 26th of February of that year, and that it had been published more than a month earlier already in Cochinchina (ie. that part of Cochinchina under the control of the Tây Sơn).
[78] See, *inter alia*, Philiphê Bình, *Nhất Trình Kim Thư Khất Chính Chúa Giáo*, ms. Borgiana Tonchinese 7, 5. Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana.
[79] Bình, *Truyện Anam*, vol. 1, 305.

Vietnamese society by the foreign religion. Thus, the edicts called for a restoration of adherence to Confucian precepts and a revitalization of the state's commitment to maintaining proper Confucian social structures.[80] They also appear to have encouraged a renewed state commitment to Buddhism, marking a considerable departure from long-standing anti-Buddhist sentiment among the Tây Sơn leaders. As a missionary letter of about this same period reported:

> [F]our days ago there was an order from the king to bring together all of the first-rank bonzes of Tonquin in order the help the said king through their prayers and their prestige in opposing the progress that we [the missionaries] are supposed to have made against the spirit of the people in gaining their hearts for the king of *đồng nai*.[81]

This comment makes clear the reason that most anti-Christian sentiment appears to have developed in the north in the 1790s – fear that the Christians, whether missionaries or natives, were becoming Nguyễn partisans in the ongoing contest with the Tây Sơn. The Tây Sơn were clearly aware of the presence of missionaries in the Nguyễn camp, and they, quite logically, assumed that this meant that the Europeans should all be considered Nguyễn partisans and thus a threat.

Once issued, the edicts were carried out with varying degrees of intensity. According to one letter, the Viceroy, on hearing of the edict, had given his own secret orders for the carrying out of the Imperial decree:

> Secret Orders to all the civil and military officials: the Christian religion has for many centuries now spread errors and abused the people in the kingdom, to the point that literate people of good sense are being affected: but because they have acted silently and in secret, somewhat like those two famous rebel chiefs N and N, who thought to seize the Kingdom in centuries past, we have only now turned our attention to this object, and so we now proscribe this religion for the good of peace, and order all of the officials, each in their own domain, to search out, chase and seize in all places those who profess this prohibited religion, as well as all of their religious effects, their temples, their houses, and bring them to us that we may carry out justice and that we may use these said temples in order to repair and construct more troop

[80] This edict can be found in MEP 701, 98-99.

[81] Pierre-Jacques Lemonnier Bissachere to Claude-François L'Etondal, late February, 1795. MEP 701, 84.

barracks.

> If there is anyone who is in need of assistance in order to carry out these orders, they can have recourse to the Governor of the Province who will take and furnish them with troops according to their needs, and above all to assist in blocking them in a way that they cannot escape. This is a matter of great importance, be on your guard, for if there is anyone who aids these guilty ones and allows them to continue to harm the people, he will be as culpable as they are and will be severely punished.[82]

The episode of the 1795 anti-Christian edicts is quite interesting for the way in which it revealed major schisms within the Tây Sơn leadership on the question of Christianity. While the regent Bùi Đắc Tuyên had apparently manipulated his charge, the young Cảnh Thịnh Emperor, into issuing the anti-Christian edicts, he had apparently also developed a coup plot to kill the three sons of Quang Trung and replace them with his own son. This plot was revealed, and among others, Vũ Văn Dũng and Trần Văn Kỷ, participated in a counter-coup, that captured and summarily executed Tuyên. With the death of Tuyên, the edicts were revoked, though it is not clear whether specifically because of their anti-Christian content, or merely the fact that they had been manufactured by the now disgraced Tuyên. As one letter noted, "An edict was published that destroyed all that the viceroy had done during the three months in which he was in charge." The letter went on to note that the missionaries had been told that if the anti-Christian edict was found to be the work of Cảnh Thịnh and his counsel it would stand, but if, as was widely suspected, it was the work of Tuyên, it would be revoked.[83]

The divisions within the Tây Sơn leadership about how to treat Christians continued to the end of the Tây Sơn reign. In some cases this division simply reflected the views of certain leaders that cracking down on Christians would alienate yet another segment of an already disaffected population. In other cases the officials were themselves Christians, and thus looking out for their co-religionists. Letters written during this period spoke of some high-ranking Tây Sơn officials who were

[82] Charles La Mothe to Claude-François L'Etondal, 31 March, 1795. MEP 692, 626.
[83] Le Pavec to his parents, 5 July, 1795. MEP 692, 638.

Christians and accordingly are very sympathetic to the situation of the missionaries. Thus, for example, even in the midst of the 1795 crackdown on Christians, one missionary reported that in August of that year, only six months after the edicts were issued, he was called into the fortified compound of the first governor of the "province Royalle" to celebrate mass. He wrote of the governor that:

> He treated me with all distinction and he brought me before all of his subaltern mandarins and told them that he would cut off the head of any one who would trouble me, or who would verbally insult the women or girls who had come to my mass; there were nearly 1,000 Christians – men and women during three days, and twice that number of pagans who had come to watch . . .[84]

Then in September, another missionary was permitted to travel to Thăng Long itself to take part in a religious meeting. His visit was regarded as highly unusual by residents of the capitol, for it had been a considerable time since the last European had set foot inside its walls. Moreover, he reported that the mandarins were beginning to return churches and money that had been seized by these officials during the brief period of formal persecution.[85] In 1796, another Tây Sơn high official allegedly declared Christianity to be a noble religion, and argued that the reason the Nguyễn had lost their kingdom in the first place, was because of their persecutions of Christians in the south.[86] By early 1797, Bissachere reported that "as to religion we have more peace and freedom than ever." De Gortyne echoed this sentiment in a letter of late January, as did Philippe Sérard in March, La Mothe in June, Guerard in July and Pierre Eyot in August.[87] Pierre Eyot had even written in late March that the

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[84] Pierre-Jacques Lemonnier Bissachere to Claude-François L'Etondal, 20 August, 1795. MEP 701, 132.; see also Pierre-Jacques Lemonnier Bissachere to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 25 August, 1795. MEP 692, 690-691.

[85] Le Pavec to ?, 22 September, 1795. MEP 701, 148-149.

[86] Pierre Lavoué to Alary, Chaumont and Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 1795? (rec. in London, 6 August, 1796). MEP 746, 525.

[87] de Gortyne to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 29 January, 1797. MEP 692, 773; Philippe Sérard to Denis Boiret, 29 March, 1797. MEP 692, 802; La Mothe to Denis Boiret, 30 June, 1797. MEP 692, 859; Guerard to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 17 July, 1797. MEP 692, 856; Pierre Eyot to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 15 August, 1797. MEP 692, 890.

mandarins were allowing Christian services to take place in the capitol itself.[88] Thus a variety of European missionaries living in various parts of the northern Tây Sơn realms through most of 1797 testified to continued religious freedom.[89]

This freedom continued until late in the following year, when a new attack on Christianity manifested itself in an edict dated the seventeenth of August, 1798. It stated in part:

> The Portuguese religion is full of superstitions that do nothing but deceive the people and disturb public order; it has been proscribed for a long time already, but without success. The king, himself proposes to reestablish order and to renovate the face of the state, believing that it will succeed in ruining entirely a religion that is so odious; he orders, as a consequence the destructions of all the churches, all the homes of preachers and the seizure of all that is found (therein).[90]

This edict may have been part of an attempt to re-energize the Tây Sơn regime as Nguyễn Anh seemed to be threatening their southern stronghold at Qui Nhơn. It clearly also reflected increasing Tây Sơn suspicion not merely of the missionaries, but now of Christianized Vietnamese as well. Apparently some Christians joined in a 1798 anti-Tây Sơn uprising led by a "Magicien" who claimed for himself the title of King. While the missionary reporting this incident, Pierre Eyot, noted that evidence showed that Christians were not leading the movement, suspicion remained.[91] The zenith of this persecution was reached the following month, when a Vietnamese Christian, Immanuel Triệu, was executed along with six thieves on the seventeenth of September. This marked the first public execution of a Christian since the death of the Spanish Dominican, Fernand Olmedilla in 1782. Moreover, the crackdown on Christianity was accompanied by an order to make an inventory of all the existing churches and "houses of God." This order was directed to each parish (chrétienté),

[88] Pierre Eyot to Claude-François L'Etondal, 25 March, 1797. MEP 701, 202.

[89] While it is not precisely clear where these missionaries were in 1797, a 1794 list gives some indication of their whereabouts: Le Pavec was in Xứ Đoài, La Mothe in Kẻ Sở and Kẻ Vồi, Pierre Eyot in Thanh Liêm, de Gortyne in Bố Chính, Guerard was in the remaining region. [see Pierre Eyot to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 6 August, 1794. MEP 692, 560.]

[90] (Author unknown, possibly de Gortyne), 3 June, 1799. MEP 700, 345-352.

[91] Pierre Eyot to Claude-François L'Etondal, 10 April, 1798. MEP 701, 290.

but was followed up by visits from mandarins who checked the mandated catalogues. This order was apparently the prelude to a campaign to destroy the existing churches, but as was often the case this drastic action could be forestalled by paying a bribe. The amount was fixed in at least one region at 5,000 ligatures.[92]

Yet even the 1798 edict, coming at a time when the Tây Sơn position was weakening, did not unite the Tây Sơn mandarinate against Christianity. Responding to the new decree, the Viceroy at the Imperial City (presumably Phú Xuân), wrote to the king questioning the merits of launching a new round of attacks on Christians. He observed that he had not had any problems with Christians in the past, and wrote that he could not now find them guilty of any particular crimes. Moreover, he noted, there were more dangerous enemies requiring the attention of the Tây Sơn leadership. According to the same source, the Viceroy's appeal had little impact on the various provincial governors who went ahead and published the edict.[93] In another instance, the chief of police in the royal city, a Christian, was accused of having forewarned a priest of his impending arrest, allowing the man to flee. The police chief was consequently arrested and stripped of his rank.[94] Despite this suspicion, the pressure on Vietnamese Christians appears to have abated, as Pierre Eyot reported in April of 1800: "the Christians are less troubled, it is true, than at the beginning of the persecution."[95]

By 1801, the situation remained stable as the missionaries and Vietnamese Christians found themselves under less, not more pressure, despite, or perhaps because of the increasing intensity of the Nguyễn threat. The Tây Sơn government was by then in a fight for its very survival, and could no longer be bothered with using its resources to track down the European missionaries.[96] This was not true throughout the Tây Sơn areas, however, and again depended on the sentiments of local and

[92] Pierre Eyot to Claude-François L'Etondal, 3 June, 1799. MEP 693, 142.
[93] Langlois to Denis Boiret, 22 January, 1799. MEP 693, 94.
[94] Pierre Eyot to Claude-François L'Etondal, 3 June, 1799. MEP 693, 144.
[95] Pierre Eyot to Claude-François L'Etondal, 28 April, 1798. MEP 701, 379.
[96] see for example Pierre-Jacques Lemonnier Bissachere to Claude-François L'Etondal, 6 May, 1801. MEP 701, 416.

provincial leaders. For example in Xứ Nghệ (Nghệ An), there was a renewed crackdown on Christians and missionaries because some Christians had apparently formed an anti-Tây Sơn movement.[97] The region of Xứ Nghệ appears to have been the center of anti-Tây Sơn activity as well as a center of Christian activity, and so the crackdown against Christians there very clearly had more to do with political than religious considerations.[98]

The Tây Sơn and the European Missionaries

While the Tây Sơn might have been concerned about the social or political implications of having a population of Christianized Vietnamese in their realm, they had rather different concerns about the European missionaries in their midst. Not unlike previous generations of ruling powers in Đại Việt, the Tây Sơn saw these missionaries not only as bringers of a religious message, but also as representatives of foreign states. In addition, these missionaries were seen as potential sources of European technologies, knowledge and military tactics. As was noted earlier, the missionaries had already been viewed in this manner since the seventeenth century, and had served at Vietnamese courts off and on during the ensuing decades. Since the Tây Sơn period, one hundred years after the end of the Trịnh-Nguyễn civil wars, represented an era of heavy militarization and warfare, it is hardly surprising that all sides in the conflict would once again look to the Europeans for military assistance and scientific advice.

Like their Nguyễn and Trịnh predecessors, the Tây Sơn leaders, whatever their particular policies toward Christianity, also hosted European missionaries at their own courts. Already in the early 1770s, the Tây Sơn had requested that a Spanish missionary serve as a doctor in their ranks. Then in 1778, when Charles Chapman visited the Tây Sơn court at Qui Nhơn, he reported that Nhạc requested "having

[97] Philippe Sérard to Claude-François L'Etondal, 13 June, 1801. MEP 701, 445.
[98] Pierre Eyot to Claude-François L'Etondal, 19 June, 1801. MEP 701, 449.

some person sent to him capable of instructing his subjects in the military science."[99] Around the same time,in the early 1780s, Nhạc was able to recruit two Spanish Dominicans to serve for several years as mathematician and astronomer at his court at Qui Nhơn. Sometime later, from early March of 1791 possibly until 1794, Quang Trung and his successor had a French missionary, Girard at their own court at Phú Xuân.[100]

Although the Tây Sơn did seek the experience of Europeans, they did not actively attempt to gain European military supplies before the late 1780s, when the Nguyễn began to pose a more substantial challenge. By that time the military situation had changed considerably. The Nguyễn forces had returned from exile in Siam, and had firmly established themselves near Sài Gòn. Moreover, the Nguyễn had become the beneficiaries of European military assistance, however limited, and this was probably an additional spur to Tây Sơn efforts to seek their own European military advisors. But the situation was even more complicated than that. The Tây Sơn did not merely wish to offset the presence of Europeans on the Nguyễn side with European advisors on their own. They also sought to find ways to lure the Nguyễn advisors to their own side. In 1795, for example, Charles La Mothe cited the following speech by a man he called the Tây Sơn "Viceroy" concerning the recent publication of two edicts proscribing Christianity and reinforcing local traditions:

> I have sufficiently said to our masters of the religion that if they deliver to me Mr. Olivier and his confederates of lower Cochinchina, that I will leave them in peace, but that without this I will take them and destroy all of their churches in conformance with the edict . . . . The previous king had always banned the Religion, but these (the present ones) on the contrary have allowed its observance without saying word, and here we have Mr. Olivier presiding over all of the works in lower Cochinchina, inventing machines of

[99] Chapman, 100.

[100] It is difficult to determine, precisely when Girard left the Tây Sơn court. In a 1794 letter he writes that the Tây Sơn had wanted to send him to Macao as a trade envoy the previous year (1793), suggesting he was still at Phú Xuân at that time (Girard to Denis Boiret, January 7, 1794. MEP 692, 399; See also Girard to Claude-François L'Etondal, March 23, 1791 (MEP 801, 349-352) in which Girard notes his presence at the Tây Sơn court and sends a long list of items he needs if he is credibly to play his role as doctor and astronomer to the court.

> war, and the masters of the Religion appealing to Europeans for help in making war on a king who is so benevolent and so tolerant towards them: the Christians are ingrates.[101]

This letter indicated two aspects of Tây Sơn attitudes towards the missionaries. The first was their sense that the Europeans had sufficient influence on their countrymen to convince Mr. Olivier to change allegiance to the Tây Sơn camp. Olivier de Puynamel (1768-1799), known in the Vietnamese chronicles as Ông Tín, gained a considerable reputation in this period for his knowledge of military tactics and weaponry, a reputation which had obviously reached the Tây Sơn in the north as well. Among other things, he suggested using hot air balloons to drop explosives and incendiary devices on a Tây Sơn citadel in the early 1790s.[102] Langlois writing in 1795 noted that "the tyrants wish to take at least one or two Europeans to send them to Cochinchina to engage Mr. Olivier no longer to give aid to the King of Cochinchina or to Manila to request of the Viceroy to send [someone?] to take this Mr. Olivier if this is in his power."[103] Jean-François Le Roy, also in the summer of 1795 reported: "The governor, or viceroy wanted to have one or two European preachers to go, it is said, to Đồng Nai to chase off Mr. Olivier, who is called Ông Tín, and to implore the Europeans to no longer give such strong assistance to the Chúa Nguyễn."[104]

The second element of Tây Sơn thinking regarding the missionaries was role that the missionaries (as distinct from the European military advisors) in the south, played in securing European assistance for the Nguyễn. The Tây Sơn, not surprisingly, believed that the missionaries living in their territories would have the same sympathies as their southern counterparts and might well be active spies for the Nguyễn. Thus, if the Tây Sơn regime was unable to convince the European missionaries in their domains to lure mercenaries from the Nguyễn side, then they would punish these same Europeans for the fact that their countrymen (as the Tây

[101] Charles La Mothe to Claude-François L'Etondal, 31 March, 1795. MEP 692, 626.
[102] Nguyễn Triệu, "Ông Tín (1768-1799)," *Tri Tân*, #23, Nov. 14, 1941, 11.
[103] Charles-François Langlois to Denis Boiret, 20 July, 1795. MEP 692, 652.
[104] Jean-François Le Roy to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 3 August, 1795 (MEP 692).

Sơn viewed it), were assisting the enemy. According to one missionary, for example, Nhạc's crackdown on Christianity in 1785 was driven by his anger at not being able to convince European missionaries to procure copper for him from Europe.[105] A 1786 letter, written from Tây Sơn-held territory, noted that "We fear only one thing. That is to have our heads chopped off, not out of hatred of our blessed religion, but out of hatred of Europeans who wish to reestablish the king of Cochinchina on his throne."[106] One letter went so far as to report that the Tây Sơn suspected the missionaries of sending money to assist the Nguyễn, a charge laughingly dismissed because the missionaries themselves were desperately poor.[107] The same writer reported the capture of a Christian carrying letters written in "European characters," which aroused the fury of the officials, who suspect that these are secret communications with the enemy.[108] Langlois also noted that "It is above all to the European missionaries that they [Tây Sơn mandarins] look, because they believe that we have contact with the king of Lower Cochinchina and that we are secretly furnishing him with money . . . ."[109]

As the Nguyễn continue to gain in strength and as the war dragged on, suspicion of the Europeans living in Tây Sơn territory grew as the Nguyễn repeatedly threatened to launch a decisive attack on the Tây Sơn court at Phú Xuân. This suspicion was heightened particularly as the Nguyễn developed the ability secretly to send missions to the north. De Gortyne reported in early 1797 that ". . . the spies of the King of Cochinchina, who are arrested from time to time, revive the suspicions which one has against us."[110] The Tây Sơn leadership suspected that the missionaries were in contact with these Nguyễn spies, and also believed that the Nguyễn were directing missionaries into Tây Sơn-controlled regions under the guise of religious activities.[111] Some spies arrested near Huế declared that they had been sent by the

[105] Jacques-Benjamin Longer to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 26 July, 1786 and 3 May, 1787. MEP 746, 197.
[106] Jacques-Benjamin Longer to Dufresse, 1 May, 1786. MEP 801, 117.
[107] La Pavec to his parents, 5 July, 1795. MEP 692, 634.
[108] ibid, 635.
[109] Charles-François Langlois to Denis Boiret, 20 July, 1795. MEP 692, 652.
[110] de Gortyne to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 29 January, 1797. MEP 692, 773.
[111] See for example Jean-François LeRoy to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 12 July, 1793. MEP 692, 478.

Nguyễn to persuade the Europeans living under the Tây Sơn to remove themselves to Nguyễn territory, and again, while their claim was deemed to be false, suspicion against the Europeans only increased.[112] Moreover, after the 1798 anti-Christian edict, most missionaries reported that they were almost continually being hunted by Tây Sơn spies, and that they had to remain in hiding, unable to move freely at daytime, and holding services only in great secrecy.

Of the various groups living at the social margins in Tây Sơn-era Việt Nam, Vietnamese Christians, and to some extent European missionaries, were perhaps the most vulnerable. Not only did they espouse a religious tradition that in many regards challenged fundamental elements of widely promulgated philosophical precepts, but they were also apparently connected to the Europeans in ways that threatened the Tây Sơn regime. Given these circumstances, it is not surprising that Christians faced various forms of repression under the Tây Sơn, as had been the case under the Trịnh and Nguyễn. At the same time, there were also numerous periods of general tolerance by that same regime and its officials, reflecting the complex political and personal dynamics of this era. Sometimes persecuting Christians was seen as rooting out potentially subversive and dangerous social elements, while at other times such policies were viewed as either too divisive or not worth pursuing.

The conventional interpretation by Vietnamese nationalist historians has portrayed the Tây Sơn regime as singularly tolerant of Christianity, comparing it favorably to the regimes that preceded it. In fact, as I have shown, one cannot make such generalizations about this complex period. The Tây Sơn regime's actions and attitudes toward Christians were very similar to those of their predecessors. Tolerance and suppression were, as always, guided by political and other pragmatic considerations far more than by philosophical considerations. Moreover, the actions of the regime with regard to Christians were often more a function of local officials who demonstrated their avarice, indifference, or sometimes even sponsorship of

[112] de Gortyne to Claude-François L'Etondal, 8 July, 1800. MEP 701, 386.

Christianity than of formalized central policies.

Bandits, Pirates, and Vagabonds

> We are infested with a plague of bandits and pirates who pillage and ravage everything. The canton where I am, at the entrance to Cambodia, is infested with them . . .[113]

Just as Vietnamese Christians came to play a significant role in the Tây Sơn years, so too did other groups at the social margins, perhaps none more dramatically than bandits and pirates. Vietnamese nationalist historians have been quick to praise the Tây Sơn for their commitment to attacking official corruption, alleviating poverty, defending the nation and (re)unifying the two parts of "the nation." In addition, these historians write of the Tây Sơn as having forged a coalition across class lines to pursue these noble objectives. When this coalition is mentioned it usually describes lowland peasants, ethnic minorities, wealthy merchants, and local religious figures.[114] Rarely is mention made of bandits, vagabonds and pirates, groups that also constituted very important parts of the Tây Sơn movement. The Vietnamese historians would no doubt consider as anathema the idea that the Tây Sơn would be affiliated with such social elements, for fear that this might somehow besmirch the Tây Sơn reputation as noble figures with high-minded social and political objectives. More specifically, these historians have criticized the nineteenth-century Nguyễn historians precisely for classifying the Tây Sơn as "rebels" or "bandits."[115] The Nguyễn use of the terminology no doubt stemmed in part from the early Tây Sơn practice of seizing goods from the wealthy for redistribution among their followers and the local poor. Indeed, these Nguyễn characterizations of the Tây Sơn are contemporary to the movement itself. In 1791, for example, Nguyễn Ánh noted of the

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[113] Pierre-Marie LeLabousse to Denis Boiret, 20 June, 1792. MEP 746, 371.

[114] See, eg. Uy Ban Khoa Học Xã Hội, *Lịch Sử Việt Nam, Tập II* (History of Viet Nam, Vol. II) (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1976), 338.

[115] Văn Tân, "Quốc Sử Quán Triều Nguyễn Đối Với Khởi Nghĩa Tây Sơn" (The Nguyễn Dynasty History Board and the Tây Sơn Righteous Uprising). *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử* No. 65, (August 1964): 14-15.

Tây-Sơn that they were "rebellious subjects of my Kingdom – united with other brigands in order to steal from my people . . . ."[116]

My own initial impulse was to accept the criticism of the modern Vietnamese historians and to view the Nguyễn characterizations as reflecting a particular ideological perspective. Closer examination of the historical record, however, and in particular the testimony of contemporary European observers, suggests that such socially marginalized groups as bandits, vagabonds and pirates indeed played highly significant roles in this period. While the Tây Sơn leaders themselves had political aspirations that transcended mere banditry, their movement was often and dramatically enlarged by the participation of bandit groups. The Tây Sơn appear to have accepted, and at times even welcomed, the involvement of bandit groups, for they were almost always in need of additional troops to fill the ranks of their armies. While affiliating themselves with bandit groups was not always ideal in terms of their relationship with the majority of rural peasants, there were many instances in which the Tây Sơn appear to have viewed these affiliations as beneficial.

Given the enormous degree of social and economic dislocation in this period, it is hardly surprising that banditry was endemic to much of the country in the half century from 1750 to 1802. The widespread banditry seen in this period was no doubt related to what is sometimes referred to as "vagabondage" – the movement of peoples away from their farms and homes during times of crisis (war, drought, flooding, famine . . .). Large numbers of Vietnamese were on the move throughout this period, creating unrest and uncertainty. The movement of peoples away from their homes had been a concern in the north already in the 1770s, and was only exacerbated by the enormous famines and floods of the mid-1780s. Not surprisingly, in times of great shortfall banditry reached epidemic proportions as people driven to desperation sought to find ways to survive. The decision to switch to banditry was no doubt further encouraged by the fact that government relief efforts were often subverted by avaricious or simply incompetent officials and the tendency of the wealthy to

[116] Pierre-Yves Manguin, *Les Nguyễn, Macau et le Portugal: Aspects politiques et commerciaux d'une relation privilégiée en Mer de Chine 1773-1802* (Paris: École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1984), 90.

barricade themselves inside their compounds to ward off the demands of the local poor or officials deputed to force from them contributions of food.[117] For example, during the 1786 famines, one provincial governor ordered a search of all homes to redistribute rice to those who needed it most, but the officials sent to perform this task were either inept or corrupt, and it was reported that they could easily be bought off by the rich.[118]

The impact of famine and the failed response on the part of the state contributed enormously to the dramatic problems of rural vagabondage in that region, which helped fuel peasant uprisings from the 1720s into the 1760s. People on the move are, in many ways, antithetical to the interests of the agrarian state. Such states want populations to remain in their home villages, where they can be counted, taxed, subjected to state labor projects, and generally kept under surveillance. Once people leave their villages, they became unproductive and at the same time constitute a ready source of labor for groups, like bandits, operating on the economic margins. Thus, the same factors that produced vagabondage also, and not incidentally, contributed to rising levels of banditry. The two fueled one another, creating a cycle that became increasingly difficult for the state to break. As Michael Adas has observed:

> Though many bandits were professional criminals, some of whom inherited their way of life from their fathers as one would a trade, others became brigands to escape the hardships of peasant life. The numbers of the latter swelled in periods of political strife, when many agriculturalists' households found mere survival difficult. In Java and Burma, as in China and Vietnam, the growth of banditry beyond its normal endemic proportions was one of the key signs of dynastic decline. Peasant refugees from drought, famine, and excessive taxation often joined established bandit gangs.[119]

Similarly, Masaya Shiraishi, in his important study, "State, Villagers, and Vagabonds: Vietnamese Rural Society and the Phan Bá Vành Rebellion," pointed out that "It is

[117] Bishop of Ceram, "Journal de ce qui s'est passé de plus remarquable dans la mission du Tong-king, depuis le mois de mai 1785 jusqu'a mois de juin 1786," MEP 691, 668.

[118] Philippe Sérard to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 31 July, 1786. MEP 691, 734.

[119] Michael Adas, "From Avoidance to Confrontation: Peasant Protest in Precolonial and Colonial Southeast Asia," in Colonialism and Culture, ed. Nicholas Dirks (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1992), 108-109.

noteworthy that official chronicles often describe in the same passage the twin phenomena of the movement of people away from their native villages, and of the rampancy of banditry. This movement of peoples was an outcome of the general poverty of rural society, and at the same time it provided a reservoir for banditry."[120] While Shiraishi's study examined an early nineteenth-century episode, the situation of population movement and dispersal was perhaps even more acute in the latter half of the eighteenth century.

As Shiraishi noted, outlaws and banditry had always been a feature of the precolonial landscape in Việt Nam, and, not surprisingly, such groups proliferated in regions where government control was weakest – including, he pointed out, the region of the south-central coast where the Tây Sơn emerged.[121] Outlaws and bandits were a reality of rural life – at times a burden to populations on which they preyed, but at others an outlet for socio-economic tensions in the countryside. Consequently, Shiraishi argued "the relations of villagers (and more especially of village notables) with bandits, thieves, and vagabonds were ambivalent, just as their relations with the state were ambivalent. In some cases villagers rejected and fought the bandits, but in others they tried to negotiate and coexist with them. In either case, their aim was the same: to protect themselves and survive in a turbulent society."[122] Moreover, as Michael Adas has observed, "though banditry was very often a career chosen by local bullies and ne'er-do-wells and constituted a source of peasant oppression, it was also a means through which peasants could escape intolerable elite demands and, if they were competent and fortunate, rise to positions of wealth and influence."[123]

For the common person then, the Tây Sơn movement, and the disorder to which it contributed, might have either presented great opportunity or alternatively constituted grave peril. For those living on the edge of subsistence the shift to

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[120] Masaya Shiraishi, "State, Villagers, and Vagabonds: Vietnamese Rural Society and the Phan Bá Vành Rebellion," in *History and Peasant Consciousness in Southeast Asia*, ed. Andrew Turton and Shigeharu Tanabe (Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 1984), 352.

[121] Shiraishi, 352.

[122] Shiraishi, 361.

[123] Adas, "From Avoidance to Confrontation," 108.

banditry was perhaps an easier thing in a period when official order was irregular at best. For those not tempted by such opportunities, however, the rise of banditry merely meant a corresponding increase in their own vulnerability. Consider the following description, by a Jesuit missionary, of a bandit episode directed against a northern Christian village in 1785:

> On the 8th of March, two of his servants were seized along with four Christians in another part of his district, by a group of bandits who had burned the church, his residence and eight other houses, and that when the residents of this place managed to seize two of these malefactors, their companions in brigandry returned two days later, numbering around four hundred men, determined to rescue these prisoners; they pillaged and sacked the village, and took away the rice, the furniture, the clothing, the animals, the domestic fowl, and generally everything that these poor people possessed.[124]

According to eyewitnesses, the more daring bandits who were active in this period would even attack by day, or burn entire villages after sacking them. In some areas, including the south in the 1770s, bandit attacks had become so frequent that some peasants were forced to abandon their cultivated fields in order to flee these attacks.[125] Writing in 1775, the French missionary, Jean LaBartette, noted that there were large numbers of bandits in the region where he lived and "each band has ordinarily between thirty and forty men, among whom there is not a single one not ready to murder or kill the others."[126] Local communities would frequently come together in mutual defense against such bandit groups, which were rampant not only in the south, but especially in the north in 1786, a year of near anarchy in many parts of that region.[127] The problems with banditry continued to linger not only in the north, but in the south as well. A 1792 letter by a European observer in lower Cochinchina reported that "The number of thieves and brigands is incredible at this moment. The

[124] "Extrait du journal rédigé par Mgr. l'evêque de Ceram, vicaire apostolique du Tonking occidental, depuis le mois de juin 1784 jusqu'au mois de mai 1785," in *Nouvelles Lettres Edifiantes*, vol. 6, 392-393.

[125] Perez, 71.

[126] Jean LaBartette to ? 21 July, 1775. MEP 800, 1474.

[127] Jean-François LeRoy to Claude-François L'Etondal, 6 December, 1786. MEP 700, 1309.

province where I am is inundated [with them]."[128] There was clearly then a tension within rural society with regard to banditry. For some it was a means of supporting oneself or one's family during troubled times, or perhaps represented the opportunism of those at the social margins. For others, the many victims of these bandits, the rise of lawlessness represented yet another threat to their perilous existence.

The relationship between bandits and the Vietnamese state, or claimants to the throne, has long been a complex one, for the state frequently did not pursue or attempt to suppress bandits as one might expect. Sometimes the state did act to eradicate particular bandits, depending on circumstances and their crimes. There was, for example, a notorious bandit chief in the north in the early 1780s, whose crimes included counterfeiting money as well as letters and edicts from the king, in addition to attacking various villages. The state condemned him to death in absentia, but through his constant movement and assistance from villagers who warned him of impending arrests, he was able to avoid justice for an extended period of time. He was finally captured and executed by being placed into a container, which was weighted and then thrown into a river.[129] This case was probably exceptional, however, particularly during this period of rising political turmoil. It was usually far simpler for the state to coopt bandits or rebels than it was to suppress them, and so it was this latter pattern that was more frequently followed.

The idea of enrolling bandits in official armies has a long tradition, and probably existed in any country where popular uprisings were common. Moreover, there are many cases in which rebels or bandits were already previously-demobilized soldiers, making their transition back the regular army a relatively simple matter. As Elizabeth Perry has pointed out for the Chinese case, "Government cooptation of bandit chiefs was frequent in traditional China. 'Pacification,' complete with official

[128] Pierre-Marie LeLabousse to ?, 22 February, 1792. MEP 746, 360.

[129] "Extrait du journal rédigé par Mgr. l'evêque de Ceram, vicaire apostolique du Tonking occidental, depuis le mois de juin 1784 jusqu'au mois de mai 1785," in *Nouvelles Lettres Edifiantes*, vol. 6, 393-395.

position, was such a common government tactic that more than a few bandit leaders saw their outlaw career as a quick means of attaining bureaucratic rank."[130] One need only look at the relationship that developed between the Trịnh and the Tây Sơn to see how this dynamic functioned in Việt Nam.

When the Trịnh first attacked toward the south in 1774, they did so on the pretext of suppressing the Tây Sơn rebels, and referred to the eldest Tây Sơn brother as "that crazy Biện Nhạc."[131] When circumstances changed and the Trịnh forces became bogged down in the south, the northern attitude changed considerably. The northern commanders decided that it would be prudent to reach an accommodation with the rebel armies, rather than attempting to sustain a campaign that had encountered considerable difficulties. Consequently, the Trịnh officials reached a compromise with the Tây Sơn leaders, agreeing to enroll them into the ranks of the northern army. Now, whatever their private feelings about the Tây Sơn and their status, the Trịnh officially recognized Nguyễn Nhạc first as a "general" and later as a "provincial governor" and "Grand Duke." This suggests that the line between rebel and official was often a very fine one, dictated more by circumstance than by policy.

As the example of the Trịnh-Tây Sơn interaction suggests, the practice of coopting bandits was not unknown, and probably not uncommon in Việt Nam. In 1783, for example, a few years after the Trịnh had turned the Tây Sơn from rebels into soldiers, a missionary in Trịnh territory reported that:

> In the province where I am and in which there are a great number of Christians, we have been given [as the new governor] a chief of thieves, who keeps in his pay a group of five hundred brigands taken from the dregs of the society, and solely occupied with pillaging and stealing.[132]

In another instance, a missionary noted that a bandit chief had approached a

[130] Perry (1980), 72. See also George Dutton, "The Fat Sheep with the Precious Wool: Bandit Kidnapping of Foreigners in 1920s China," unpublished paper, 1992, 9.

[131] See for example the summary of the Trịnh general's decree to the Nguyễn populations recorded in the *Đại Nam Thực Lục Tiền Biên*, vol. 1, 247. "Biện" refers to Nhạc's official position as a minor Nguyễn functionary. The reference to Nhạc is found in a letter by the same Trịnh general to the Nguyễn and recorded in the *Phủ Biên Tạp Lục*, (1977), 312.

[132] Philippe Sérard to ?, June 1783, in *Nouvelles Lettres Edifiantes*, vol. 6, 337.

provincial governor requesting an official order to seize a local European missionary. While the requested order was not forthcoming, the incident suggests the close relationship that existed between the government official and the bandit leader.[133] Indeed, the same account, speaking in more general terms, noted that "there reigns here an unbridled cupidity that produces and sustains without cease an infinite multitude of brigands, emboldened by the assurance of impunity and often [guided] by the example of those who call themselves here mandarins . . ."[134] A similar situation was described three years later in 1786, in the aftermath of the Tây Sơn departure from the north, when a missionary noted that there was:

> An adventurer, formerly a Chief of Thieves, whom the Chúa had elevated to a grand Mandarinate, and to which he had attached one of his brothers as a joint commander of his troop of bandits, metamorphosed all of a sudden into a defender of the nation.[135]

The Tây Sơn period seems a perfect example of the long-standing and ambivalent relationship that existed between the state, the village and the rural banditry. When one examines the relationship between the Tây Sơn and such marginal social groups as bandits and thieves, one sees periods of cooperation followed by periods of open hostility. The Tây Sơn leaders' attitude toward such social elements appears to have been chiefly guided by expedience. Thus, during the early days of the Tây Sơn movement, its leaders appear regularly to have drawn support from, or at least established alliances with, bandit groups operating in the highland regions. One account suggests that Nhạc brought together 23 or 24 bandits to help serve as the core of his movement.[136] Other sources give us the names of two bandit leaders who also joined the Tây Sơn movement in its very early days – Nhưng Húy and Tứ

[133] "Extrait du journal rédigé par Mgr. l'evêque de Ceram, vicaire apostolique du Tonking occidental, depuis le mois de juin 1784 jusqu'au mois de mai 1785," in *Nouvelles Lettres Edifiantes*, vol. 6, 385.
[134] "Extrait du journal rédigé par Mgr. l'evêque de Ceram, vicaire apostolique du Tonking occidental, depuis le mois de juin 1784 jusqu'au mois de mai 1785," in ibid., 384.
[135] "Journal de ce qui s'est passé de plus remarquable dans la mission du Tong-king, depuis le mois de julliet 1786 jusqu'a mois de julliet 1787," MEP 690, 900.
[136] Perez, 68.

Linh.[137] The Nguyễn chronicles further record the name of another early Tây Sơn supporter, Nguyễn Thung, who is described as a "village bully" or "local ruffian" [*thổ hào* – 土豪], a description which may also suggest someone with bandit connections.[138] Finally, a folk tradition records that the noted Tây Sơn general, Võ Văn Dũng, had been a notorious bandit chieftain forced into a life of crime by the cruel administration of Trương Phúc Loan prior to his recruitment by the rebel leaders. Nguyễn Huệ allegedly engaged in a wrestling match with Dũng, which the Tây Sơn leader won, and which convinced the bandit chief to throw in his lot with the Tây Sơn movement.[139]

Bandit groups would have been particularly useful to the Tây Sơn in their early campaigns to seize wealth from local economic elites including the wealthy and unpopular landlords, both of which would have been the traditional targets of these bandits in many instances. Indeed, during the early years of the movement, many of the European observers reported that they had difficulty distinguishing between the Tây Sơn forces and the numerous bandits that were evident in the south during this period. Vietnamese rural populations appear to have had similar difficulties, for one early account reports that the Tây Sơn troops had to "announce that they were not bandits," suggesting that their appearance, or actions, or both, were not particularly different from those of known bandit groups.[140]

Whatever the nature of Tây Sơn relationships with bandits in the south during the early years of the movement, such connections were dramatically increased as the Tây Sơn moved into the north in and after 1786. A French missionary observer, for example, described the relationship that developed already in 1786 between Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh and northern bandits:

> They received, with open arms, bandits, thieves, and those men who did not dare any longer to exercise their brigandage, and they sent them to force the villages to furnish them with rice, with silver, with wood, with straw, etc.,

[137] Tạ Chí Đại Trường, 55.
[138] Tạ Quang Phát, 2a.
[139] *Những Mẩu Chuyện*, 35-37.
[140] ibid., 74.

> anything of which they had need. For one Cochinchinese, one could count sometimes twenty or thirty of such Tonkinese brigands, who not content with their compensation, still lived up to their names, spreading terror among the peoples to extort large sums of money.[141]

In the north, such alliances with bandits would have been very useful for the Tây Sơn leadership, allowing it to connect itself to the region in a way that might otherwise have been difficult. Since the Tây Sơn forces, with the exception of Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh, had no experience in or information about the north, it would be logical for them to enroll outlaw elements with their unparalleled knowledge of local terrain and conditions. Moreover, given their mobility and unofficial status, such elements of northern society were probably far more likely to join the Tây Sơn armies willingly. Peasants, except under the most dire circumstances, would have been highly unlikely to leave their fields and join a campaign of the type the Tây Sơn were organizing. Bandits and thieves, on the other hand, were not tied to fields and not concerned about jeopardizing their status in villages or their relationships with local officials. They were, moreover, well aware of the opportunities for personal financial gain that the Tây Sơn campaigns offered, and would appear to have been ideal candidates for joining the Tây Sơn armies. Consequently, the description of thirty bandits for one Cochinchinese soldier, while certainly inflated, probably suggested a certain reality.

The Tây Sơn leaders' lack of information about the north, and indeed their naiveté about bandit issues there is revealed in a brief (possibly apocryphal) account from the *Hoàng Lê Nhất Thống Chí*, of the contact that occurred between Nguyễn Nhạc and a group of clever northern bandits. According to this tale, the Tây Sơn leader met a group of people along the road who lamented to him that they had just lost all their possessions to the notorious Nghệ An robber, Chưởng Tiến. Nhạc questioned the men about where the robbers had fled and after being told, sent his troops into the woods after them. No sooner had the Tây Sơn troops been lured into the woods, than they were ambushed by robbers who took out their swords and

[141] Eveque de Ceram, "Journal de ce qui s'est passé de plus remarquable dans la mission du Tong-king, depuis le mois de julliet 1786 jusqu'a mois de julliet 1787," MEP 690, 900.

announced themselves the followers of Chưởng Tiến, who had come there to cut off the heads of some "lông đỏ" (red fur) people.[142] They pounced on the Tây Sơn troops killing several and forcing the rest to flee. Nhạc was greatly intimidated, and thereafter the Tây Sơn troops were too frightened to sleep in any of the people's homes, choosing rather to sleep outside in the middle of the paddy rice fields.[143] Given such an experience, it would not be surprising to see the Tây Sơn seeking alliances with bandit leaders, rather than seeking to challenge them on their own terrain.

Accounts from the far north of the country, in Cao Bằng province, also suggest that the Tây Sơn sometimes even placed local thugs into positions of power. The *Cao Bằng Thực Lục*, written shortly after the final defeat of the Tây Sơn, described what appears to have been a conscious effort on the part of the Tây Sơn to recruit their officials from the dregs of local society. The same source also questioned the choices the Tây Sơn leadership made for the highest administrative positions in that province, calling them men of no talent and with notable designs on other people's goods and women.[144] It is logical to assume that this account was seeking to discredit the Tây Sơn, but at the same time it was apparently written by someone local to that area and was not necessarily produced merely as an anti-Tây Sơn record. The pattern of enlisting local outlaws is in keeping with what we know the Tây Sơn were doing elsewhere, and furthermore, given the apparent shortage of qualified northern scholar officials (many of whom refused to serve the Tây Sơn), it makes sense that the Tây Sơn would have been forced to turn to less qualified and perhaps locally unpopular figures.

While the Tây Sơn leaders formally enrolled bandits in their forces, established alliances with bandit groups, or even employed local hooligans as officials, the rebel

[142] The Tây Sơn were, in numerous accounts, referred to in this manner. It is still not clear what was meant by the phrase.
[143] *HLNTC* (1998), vol. 1, 148-149.
[144] *Cao Bằng Thực Lục* (Veritable Records of Cao Bằng) DC. 92, 4, 7. Bình Định Provincial Library, Qui Nhơn, Việt Nam.

leaders were well aware that they were walking a fine line between encouraging bandits and alienating the peasantry. Consequently, one finds that at times the Tây Sơn did actually take steps to suppress rather than facilitate banditry. In 1776, for example, Nguyễn Nhạc sent a message to the Trịnh, in which he announced that one of his intentions was to suppress bandits that were operating in the Quảng Ngãi region:

> . . . bands of robbers in that region are turning into flocks. The people in those three prefectures are all being harassed. As soon as I heard this news, I provisionally brought my troops there in order to capture those robbers, because I wished for the people there to be at peace.[145]

Of course it is difficult to determine whether the Tây Sơn leader actually followed through on this initiative, or whether instead this message reflected his sense of what he thought the Trịnh wished to hear. As a military representative of the Trịnh, he would almost certainly be expected to maintain the peace, including carrying out attacks to suppress banditry.

Ten years later, as the Tây Sơn troops marched north, their leaders put them to work suppressing banditry and brigandage.[146] There are numerous descriptions of the Tây Sơn cracking down on banditry, including the use of summary justice and executions of bandits (or those merely accused of being bandits) as well as others found harassing local populations. On arriving in Thăng Long, they were apparently careful to spare the homes of Lê loyalists, concentrating their energies on pillaging the abandoned palaces of the Trịnh lords. They also opened storehouses in the capitol and distributed goods found therein to the general population. The seals carried by the Tây Sơn commanders bore the phrase "Phụng thiên phạt tội" – obey heaven and punish criminals.[147] All this suggests that Tây Sơn commanders had taken steps to control their troops and to portray themselves as defenders of justice. Later still, in

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[145] *Đại Việt Sử Ký Tục Biên* (A Continuation of the Historical Records of Đại Việt). Translated by Ngô Thế Long and Nguyễn Kim Hưng, Edited by Nguyễn Đổng Chi. Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1991), 418.

[146] Philippe Sérard to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 31 July, 1786, in Cadière, "Documents Relatifs," 10.

[147] *Lê Quý Dật Sử*, 69.

the early 1790s, the Tây Sơn Emperor, Quang Trung issued a decree calling on people to return to their villages and to resume cultivating their lands. Apparently at that point the economic costs of untethered and essentially unproductive populations had become too much for the Tây Sơn leader to accept. In a further effort to restore stability, Quang Trung also called for each canton (*tổng*) to contribute one night watchman to patrol the villages to keep bandits and thieves at bay.[148] In addition, new police measures were established to curb crimes. And some villages, particularly in the north took their own measures to protect themselves.

The surviving evidence, however, reveals that bandits were frequently able to escape what judicial institutions existed in this period of upheaval. The Tây Sơn crackdowns on banditry that were seen in the first part of their campaign to the north in 1786, appear to have been more a perfunctory deference to popular frustration than a long-term policy. In many later instances, officials would seize bandits more as a means of extorting payoffs, than as a systematic attempt to curb their excesses. As one missionary noted in the late 1790s:

> All of the mandarins look for ways to enrich themselves at the expense of the poor people. Justice is sold based on the weight of gold, with the scales always favoring the side that offers the most cash. The country is full of bandits, thieves and rogues, and when the mandarins are able to seize them they are always released for a cash payment, unlike the poor people who are punished, and the wealthy who do not fear either being robbed or being killed.[149]

This approach was not unlike that frequently adopted toward Christians, who, as we have seen, were often seized and then released in exchange for payments of various amounts to the official in question. While officials appear to have benefited considerably from such actions during the Tây Sơn period, this approach to justice was not unique to the Tây Sơn or to officials of their regime. Similar acts of releasing bandits in exchange for payments, or holding Christians for ransom, can be seen in the north prior to the Tây Sơn arrival.

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[148] *Tây Sơn Thuật Lục*, 14-15.

[149] Le Pavec to his parents, 3 July, 1799. MEP 693, 211.

If it was easy for bandits to be enrolled as soldiers, it was just as easy for soldiers to act like bandits. Indeed, in circumstances of such great turmoil and warfare, it would be quite surprising to see armies the size of those the Tây Sơn controlled, not acting like pestilential hordes. Many elements in the Tây Sơn army, including, presumably, regular soldiers were involved in extensive looting and plundering in the north during their retreat from the 1786 attack on Thăng Long and several subsequent Tây Sơn attacks in 1787 and 1788.[150] Thus, perhaps there is not that much difference between bandits and soldiers. Particularly in the eyes of the population being preyed upon, such distinctions were entirely irrelevant. Descriptions of the extensive looting carried out by some Tây Sơn troops during their sojourn to the north, suggest that perhaps there was no ready way to distinguish between the "righteous troops" of the Tây Sơn and their less purely motivated counterparts. Indeed, for all the nationalist historians' descriptions of the Tây Sơn as pursing a noble mission, there are countless descriptions of their troops looting, burning and pillaging on every military campaign they carried out, particularly in the north. Such activities, regardless of which elements of the Tây Sơn forces were involved, sound far more like banditry than like rebellion. Given the mix of elements in the Tây Sơn armies, this is an unsurprising reality.

Finally, it appears that whether the Tây Sơn policy was to coopt or to crack down on banditry, the mere fact that it remained a regime in transition and at war meant that instability remained a fact of life that continued to encourage the rise of banditry. The ongoing hardships imposed by the Tây Sơn regime in terms of corvee labor and tax demands also probably contributed to the decision to turn to banditry. Thus, for example, one European missionary wrote early in 1797 that "The corvees are always exorbitant and the warriors of the mountains, which are better yet called brigands, because they live by nothing else but exactions and brigandage, contribute not a little to increasing the misery."[151] And only a few months later, another wrote of

[150] Jean-François Le Roy to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 6 December, 1786, in Cadière, "Documents Relatifs," 8.

[151] Charles-François Langlois to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 17 January, 1797. MEP 692, 754.

villages attacking one another, with pillaging and looting going back and forth.[152] This suggests that banditry was sometimes combined with spontaneous acts of pillage, or rather that while some people were engaged in banditry on at least a semi-permanent basis, others responded to opportunity or desperation, and might not readily be classified as "bandits." Clearly banditry remained a major issue throughout the Tây Sơn years. Moreover, the constantly shifting alliances being established with outlaw elements of Vietnamese society suggest that the Tây Sơn leaders continually weighed changing circumstances in their decision-making. Thus, their actions must be seen not to indicate policy shifts, but rather pragmatic response to local exigencies. Where at one point they apparently considered that establishing themselves as restorers of order in a region long beset by chaos outweighed the benefits to be gained from strengthening alliances with local bandit leaders, at other times the formula was reversed.

Tây Sơn relations with Pirates

As we have seen, the Tây Sơn frequently made common cause with bandit groups for a number of reasons: to take advantage of people with considerable local knowledge and contacts; to avoid the greater difficulties involved with suppressing them; to expand their ranks with willing soldiers. In addition to these sorts of arrangements with local, terrestrial groups, the Tây Sơn also developed very important relationships with coastal and water-based groups – specifically ethnic Chinese pirates. The Tây Sơn government developed an extensive and elaborate relationship with ethnic Chinese pirates operating in various parts of the South China Sea. Although the groups in question were centered in the Tonkin Gulf, their influence and connections more generally extended along many of the coastal areas of the country, and apparently as far north as the central Chinese coast. The best existing study of this episode is found in Dian Murray's *Pirates of the South China Coast, 1790-1810*,

[152] Pierre Eyot to Claude-François L'Etondal, 25 March, 1797. MEP 701, 203.

which describes in considerable detail the manner in which the Tây Sơn government integrated various pirate groups into the ranks of their militaries. This relationship between the Tây Sơn and coastal pirates was to become a central feature of rebel naval strategy and indeed of their economy in the period from 1786, when the Tây Sơn first moved north, until the very last year of the regime in 1802.

The protected coastal region surrounding the Tonkin gulf, and stretching from Canton and Macao toward Hainan island and then south along the Vietnamese coast was ideal territory for piracy. The seas were relatively calm and protected from the deeper waters outside of the continental shelf. There were, in addition, countless small bays and islands that served as perfect hiding places for those seeking to avoid contact with authorities and to which quick retreat could be made. Indeed, these islands were sometimes labeled as "iles de Pirates" in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century European maps.[153] Finally, this region was one with very high volumes of commercial shipping. Both indigenous and growing numbers of European trading ships, with every imaginable sort of cargo, constituted prime targets for piracy at all levels. Particularly after 1760, when the Chinese government mandated that all European trade be funneled through the single port at Canton, there was an intensely concentrated corridor of commercial activity that intersected with prime conditions for piracy.[154]

In addition to being ideal pirate territory with respect to geography and commerce, this coastal region was also one well-suited to producing people ready to turn to piracy. There was already a large community of people who either lived on boats or made their living on boats, meaning that the transition to piracy – either as a career, or merely a temporary way to supplement one's income – was a relatively simple one. Secondly, economic pressures in this region were considerable and many people, including fishermen, lived on the edge of survival. As Murray points out,

[153] See, eg. the map entitled "Inde en deca et au dela du Gange," by Conrad Malte-Brun, *Atlas Complet* (Paris, 1812).

[154] Jonathan Spence, *In Search of Modern China*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990), 121.

"Unable to discharge their financial obligations, fishermen were often compelled to supplement their incomes through sideline activities such as small-scale trade. Yet even then the result was a livelihood so miserable that, for many, a successful piratical foray was the sole hope for a better life."[155] Or as the Tây Sơn Emperor rendered it in his first proclamation appealing for pirate assistance:

> All of the people of the ten ranks are this year hiding in places by the edges of the sea, gathering together their bands, and taking the job of looting in order to make a living. They do this because they have gotten into this position unwillingly, or because they were hungry or cold and forced into it, or because oppression drove them away, and only then did they arrive at the point where they relied on this place of waves and wind and had no means of escape.[156]

These fisherman could and did regularly make the transition between fishing and piracy, in the same way that their inland counterparts could make the shift between farming and banditry. The conditions, were thus ripe for producing and sustaining pirates. By the time the Tây Sơn troops were arriving in the north in 1786, piracy was already well-established in the Gulf of Tonkin region, and Chinese pirates were taking advantage of the protection offered by Vietnamese coastal regions south of the Chinese border. In particular, their chief refuge was Jiang-ping in An Quang province, just inside the Vietnamese border of that time. Located on a shallow river and virtually cut off from the interior by difficult terrain, it was an ideal retreat for coastal pirates.[157]

How did the Tây Sơn relationship with these pirates develop? The lynchpin of Tây Sơn connections to and recruitment of pirates was one Chen Tian-bao, whom the

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[155] Dian Murray, *Pirates of the South China Coast, 1790-1810* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 17.

[156] Nguyễn Lộc, ed., *Văn Học Tây Sơn* (Tây Sơn Literature) (Qui Nhơn: Sở Văn Hóa và Thông Tin Nghĩa Bình, 1988), 99.

[157] Murray, 18-19. The territorial divisions in this border region were particularly murky during this period, and some border officials had official capacities in both Vietnamese and Chinese administrative structures. See, eg. de Gortyne to Denis Boiret, 21 October, 1792. MEP 692, 375.

Tây Sơn allegedly captured in 1783.[158] He was named a *tổng binh* (brigade commander), and a companion, Liang Gui-xing, was given the title of *Hiệp Đức Hầu* (Total Virtuous Marquis). According to Murray, the two men fought in the Tây Sơn advance to the north that captured Phú Xuân and later Thăng Long in 1786. Thereafter, as Murray writes, they became a central pillar of the Tây Sơn regime's military structure, especially after 1788. Having given Chen the title of *Đức Hầu*, the Tây Sơn also granted him the authority to recruit additional pirates to the rebel cause, and to grant these new recruits military positions.[159] Chen apparently did so with great enthusiasm, and brought in large numbers of pirates to serve the Tây Sơn, beginning in 1788 and continuing into the 1790s. Chinese pirates were subsequently very much involved in all of the major Tây Sơn military campaigns of the 1790s.

The use of titles was an important element of the Tây Sơn-pirate relationship and pirates were given numerous and elaborate titles and ranks in the Tây Sơn military, serving the rebel government until its final days. Murray noted that "The association with the Tay-son gave pirate leaders other means of incorporating outsiders into their organizations. The ability to confer status through the granting of titles that were recognized by the government was an important recruiting tool . . ."[160] Men who were once simply pirates of no rank or status, were now being recognized as commanders, generals, military governors, marquis and even "kings." Thus, for instance, one pirate leader was named the *đông hải vương* (King of the Eastern Seas), while another was named the *bình ba vương* (King who pacifies the Waves).[161] So just as the Tây Sơn themselves had relied on titles and formal positions in making their own claims to political power in their movement, they used the conferring of titles as a means of legitimating these pirates. This legitimation was important for the pirates vis-a-vis one another and the Chinese regime, but it was also important to the Tây

[158] ibid., 35. She claims that Chen was fishing in the area around Hanoi at this time. If true, it is difficult to determine how the Tây Sơn, still restricted to the territory south of Phú Xuân, would have been able to seize him in that year, unless he had somehow drifted far to the south.
[159] ibid., 36.
[160] ibid., 51.
[161] ibid., 54. Vương may be better translated as "prince" in this context, though the term is quite fluid.

Sơn leaders, for it provided a gloss of propriety to a relationship that might have been viewed by their Confucian officials as inappropriate. The edicts the Tây Sơn leaders issued to these pirates suggest that the Vietnamese regime sought to portray their relationship with these groups as a perfectly standard one rather than an extraordinary type of connection.

While Chen was the chief Tây Sơn intermediary in their interactions with the pirates, the Tây Sơn leaders themselves sometimes became directly involved in the recruitment of pirates. This involvement took the form of a series of edicts designed to win over the pirates to their cause. It is not clear precisely how these edicts were used, but it is likely that copies were given to Chen and others to aid them in their recruitment efforts. Unsurprisingly, these edicts were replete with the rhetorical flourishes typical of formal government documents. The form of these documents, crafted by the noted Tây Sơn official Ngô Thì Nhậm, was also clearly designed to assuage the consciences of the Confucian officials taking part in these recruitment efforts among groups that the state more typically sought to suppress. Thus, the first of these edicts began:

> I have heard it said that the great wind does not blow throughout the morning, and the great rain does not last throughout the entire day. The road of heaven is like this. Therefore people who were good as children cannot be cruel throughout their entire lives. In ages past there were people who first acted as thieves, and later became noted generals, and this was in fact because they dared to mend their errors, were brave, and performed virtuous deeds. They thoroughly understood things of ritual, and understood that some ways must be abandoned and some followed, and they knew how to choose those things which must be done. Thus their names and ages were placed into the history books and their labors recorded in the ledgers of public service.[162]

The Tây Sơn were clearly seeking to cajole pirates into serving their regime, using flowery language that sought to excuse their criminal activities, and suggesting that their service might constitute not simply an opportunity to turn over a new leaf, but a chance to make a name for themselves.

[162] Nguyễn Lộc, 99.

The ongoing Tây Sơn interest in recruiting pirates is reflected in the fact that two additional edicts were issued in an effort to win over more such men. These later edicts suggest that the Tây Sơn leadership was not yet satisfied with the numbers of pirates drawn in by their earlier decree, and the pirates were exhorted to reconsider their apparent reluctance to join the Tây Sơn.[163] True to the rhetoric of their Confucian elite authors, these edicts portray the option of joining the Tây Sơn as turning one's back on a life of crime and piracy while moving toward noble government service. Indeed, as we have seen, these pirates were being granted titles and positions within the Tây Sơn administration. It would clearly be a distortion to suggest, however, that this constituted a renunciation of their former employments. While the scholar who wrote these edicts on behalf of the Tây Sơn ruler perhaps wished to believe that the Tây Sơn were seeking to convert these "misguided" pirates, the reality was very different. The pirates were being recruited precisely because of their background, their ability to provide the Vietnamese regime with booty, and their fighting ability. It is possible that by the time these edicts were being issued – probably the mid-1790s – the Tây Sơn were increasingly looking to these pirates for their skills in naval warfare rather than their looting ability, but even this seems doubtful when one considers reports by missionaries of pirates continuing their looting and plunder into the last years of the 1790s.[164]

Clearly their relationship with these pirate groups served many functions for the Tây Sơn throughout this period. In the first place, it enabled them dramatically to expand their naval strength, giving them additional capacity to patrol the coastal waters from the Chinese border down the coast as far as Qui Nhơn. This was particularly crucial after 1792, when the major part of the Tây Sơn fleet was burned at anchor in Thi Nại by an attacking Nguyễn force. Pirate patrols gave the Tây Sơn a means by which to curtail the movement of Nguyễn spies into Tây Sơn-held territories, and at the same time to prevent northerners from traveling south to join

[163] See "A Second Edict Summoning Pirates," in *Hàn Các Anh Hoa*, VT.17, of the National University of Hà Nội History Faculty, translated by Trần Lê Hữu, 17ff.
[164] ibid., 18ff.

the Nguyễn. They also helped the Tây Sơn to hinder the movement of supplies from Chinese ports to support the Nguyễn military efforts. Furthermore, these patrols impeded the movement of Europeans in and out of the country during this period.[165] This latter service was particularly significant both because of the actual presence of French advisors in the Nguyễn ranks, a presence the Tây Sơn did not wish to see expanded, and because of the perceived threat that European missionaries posed. This latter group was frequently seen, particularly in the 1790s, as a potential source of information for the Nguyễn, and efforts were made to block their movement, either south toward Gia Định, or north toward Macao, where information might be passed to Nguyễn representatives.

It would be an overstatement, however, to suggest that these pirates approached their mission with any sort of political calculus in mind. Rather, they interdicted sea traffic of virtually every type moving to, from and along coastal areas of Việt Nam, including fellow Chinese merchants, Nguyễn spies, missionaries coming from Macao, and European vessels of all nationalities – Portuguese, French, English, and Dutch. For the Tây Sơn the fear induced by the ubiquitous presence of these pirate vessels was a valuable layer of security for their regime. The pirates could not entirely halt the movement of various vessels into Tây Sơn-controlled areas, but they could substantially regulate it. This had important repercussions within Việt Nam too, for these pirates, who patrolled down the coast as far as Qui Nhơn, made it very difficult for contact to take place between different regions.[166] This served Tây Sơn purposes, particularly with regard to the movement of people or information between territories under their control and those to the south then in Nguyễn hands.[167]

Valuable for their ability to interdict the movement of various types of peoples, the pirates were also very useful to the Tây Sơn regime financially. In exchange for providing safe havens for these pirate groups in the many hidden bays of

[165] See, eg. Philippe Sérard to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 1 March, 1792 (MEP 692, 365) commenting on the fact that the pirates made communication up and down the coast nearly impossible.
[166] *Lê Quý Dật Sử*, 105.
[167] Many missionaries commented on the great difficult in exchanging information with their confederates in the south. See, *inter alia*. Philippe Sérard to Denis Boiret, 6 June, 1793. MEP 692, 426bis.

the Tonkin Gulf, the Tây Sơn were to receive a certain percentage of the booty captured by their ships. Given the riches that were passing through these waters, this operation was of considerable benefit to both sides. Murray reports that the pirates would (at least in theory) turn over their booty to the Tây Sơn, who would turn around and sell it in Việt Nam, and then give between 20 and 40% of the profits back to the pirates.[168] She also notes that not only did the Tây Sơn rely on pirate initiative in this regard, but that they specifically ordered pirates to go on raiding missions to Guangdong and other Chinese coastal provinces. The pirates did not merely seize goods, but vessels as well. Thus, for instance, in 1790, the pirates, operating under Tây Sơn protection, captured four Chinese ships, which were then taken to the Tây Sơn at Phú Xuân, to be entered into the ranks of the Tây Sơn navy.[169] In other cases, the Tây Sơn regime itself supplied vessels to the pirates, and encouraged those in charge of these ships to recruit more men into their ranks.[170]

While sometimes the Tây Sơn-sponsored pirates merely seized goods or ransomed ships, at other times they seized passengers, both Vietnamese and European. One Frenchmen, Savard, was apparently captured by a pirate vessel, with a mixed Chinese and Vietnamese crew, and then spent the next several years held captive on an island, while periodically being also employed on a pirate vessel.[171] At other times, and perhaps depending on the degree of resistance they encountered, pirates might even massacre the crews of ships they encountered. For instance, a French missionary described a Chinese pirate attack by more than a dozen ships on a small English vessel, resulting in the capture and subsequent murder of the eight English sailors. The same expedition also captured two Portuguese men on a nearby island, whom a small group of Vietnamese Christians attempted to rescue. The rescue failed, as the pirate leader refused to surrender the two men, preferring to bring them to the Tây Sơn capitol at Phú Xuân, no doubt in hopes of a reward for their capture.[172]

[168] Murray, 41.
[169] Philippe Sérard to Claude-François L'Etondal, 23 July, 1790. MEP 700, 1415.
[170] Murray, 41.
[171] Pierre-Jacques Lemonnier Bissachere, 20 December, 1798. MEP 693, 85-86.
[172] Philippe Sérard to Claude-François L'Etondal, 30 March, 1797. MEP 701, 211-214.

Finally, the pirate crews were not entirely composed of men. We know of two Vietnamese women who joined the Chinese coastal pirates who had been operating in Vietnamese waters. Both women had the misfortune of belonging to crews captured and subsequently jailed by Chinese authorities. In the summer of 1794, Lê Quýnh, a Lê loyalist in Chinese exile, was in a Chinese jail for refusing to cut his hair in the Qing-mandated style, when he met the first of these women. Her surname was Nguyễn and according to Quýnh she had joined the Quảng Đông-based pirates before being captured.[173] Three years later, and still in prison, Quýnh met a second woman who was related to one of the pirate gangs, and thus thrown into his jail.[174] Although we know nothing more about either woman, each was helpful to Qúynh in providing him with news of the political and military situation in his homeland.

After the death of Quang Trung (known to the the pirate as "The Big Boss of Yueh Nam") in 1792, Tây Sơn prospects began to look less promising, and yet the Chinese pirates continued to serve them in many capacities. In 1794 Chen was named a military governor, *đô đốc*, giving him, in theory, even greater authority, though this title was more typically granted to those with responsibilities for particular provinces. A few years later, in 1797, the pirate adjuncts to the Tây Sơn military were organized into an even more systematic structure, under the overall command of Chen. The main pirate leaders were all given the title of "General of the Black Vessels" – *ô tàu tổng binh* – each reporting directly to Chen.[175] Indeed, the title *tổng binh* appears to have been the primary designation for the pirate chiefs who agreed to ally themselves with the Tây Sơn, while their underlings were designated as "Thiện tầu." [ship's master - 禪][176] Pirate vessels took part in several naval campaigns against the southern forces in 1797, ranging as far south as Qui Nhơn. In 1798 pirate vessels engaged Nguyễn forces in Khanh Hóa, and then in 1799 they served in the defense of

[173] Lê Qúynh, *Bắc Hành Tùng Ký* (A Record of Traveling along to the North), trans. Hoàng Xuân Hãn (Huế: Nhà Xuất Bản Thuận Hóa, 1993), 63.
[174] ibid., 64.
[175] ibid., 39.
[176] *Nguyễn Thị Tây Sơn Ký*, DC 112, 45; see also *Lê Quý Dật Sử*, 105.

Qui Nhơn against a particularly determined Nguyễn attack. The Tây Sơn defeat there, despite pirate support, "combined with the earlier setback at Khanh Hoa, considerably weakened the power of the pirates and led to numerous defections."[177] Despite this defeat and the subsequent defections, pirates continued to fight on behalf of the Tây Sơn to the very end of the regime in 1802. Numerous pirate vessels were involved in the 1800 Tây Sơn counterattack and subsequent siege of Qui Nhơn, and they continued to be involved in defense of the Tây Sơn state even as the Nguyễn moved inexorably up the coast toward Thăng Long. In 1802, even though Chen had surrendered to Chinese authorities a year earlier, 200 more pirate ships were committed to the Tây Sơn coastal defense, an effort that ultimately proved unsuccessful.[178]

Just as the coastal pirates eagerly allied with the Tây Sơn because it provided them immunity from capture by Chinese troops, the same Tây Sơn involvement made the Qing government reluctant to pursue pirates for fear of alienating the powerful Vietnamese regime. Numerous Vietnamese accounts of this period attribute the Chinese reluctance to the danger posed by the heavily militarized Tây Sơn government.[179] Despite this reluctance, the Chinese government was greatly disturbed at the Tây Sơn harboring of these pirate groups, and did make occasional efforts to pursue the pirates. In May of 1797 a missionary wrote that the Chinese had sent one hundred ships in an attempt to suppress the Tây Sơn-sponsored coastal pirates but that the Pirates had easily escaped, heading inland on various rivers in the northern part of Việt Nam.[180] Two months later the same missionary offered a fuller description of the sequence of events that revealed both the futility of the Chinese attempts to suppress the pirates and the Tây Sơn role in hindering the Chinese efforts:

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[177] Murray, 39.

[178] ibid., 39-40; 47-48.

[179] *Nguyễn Thị Tây Sơn Ký* 阮氏西山記 (The Record of the Tây Sơn of the Nguyễn Clan) ms. A.3138, 36a. Viện Hán Nôm, Hà Nội. See also *Nam Sử* 南史 (History of the South), VHv. 2743, 59a. Viện Hán Nôm, Hà Nội; *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện*, vol. 2, 528.

[180] Philippe Sérard to Claude-François L'Etondal, 14, May 1797. MEP 701, 228.

> Your Chinese came with a flotilla in order to seize the pirates, but I believe that they were not able to take a very large number of their vessels. The Tonkinese mandarins helped them escape and then deceived the Chinese with flattering words, without however, allowing them to enter the grand river that leads to the Royal city; after having waited some time to see if they [the Tây Sơn] would deliver the pirates to them, they retreated. As for the pirates, they then advanced along the coast to Phú Xuân in concert because the king had summoned them.[181]

Despite their ongoing sponsorship of the Chinese pirates, the Tây Sơn government did make a few attempts to assuage Chinese concerns by declaring crackdowns on the pirates. While the Vietnamese were clearly not intimidated by the threat of Chinese naval action, they did value the good relationship they had developed with the Qing court, and wanted to present at least an appearance of cooperation. Nonetheless, these apparent attempts by the Vietnamese to suppress pirate activity in fact did little to interfere with the operations of their allies. After such a "crackdown," the pirates would largely be free to operate as they had before. The Chinese were not able to bring the pirate situation under control until well after the Tây Sơn regime had been driven from power. It was only in 1810 that the majority of the Chinese pirates were eliminated, and even then the effort required joint action by the Chinese, the Portuguese at Macao, and the new Nguyễn regime.[182]

Finally, it should be noted that while the Tây Sơn were the most visible Vietnamese sponsors of piracy during this period they were not the only ones to take advantage of their services. In at least one case, in late 1786, the Trịnh employed pirates when the briefly restored Trịnh lord found himself under attack by Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh. Lacking a military structure of his own, Trịnh Bồng was able to escape with the assistance of a pirate chief and several boats.[183] The Nguyễn also, to a greater extent than the Trịnh, were ready to take advantage of the opportunities that lay in building connections to established pirates. Most notably, Nguyễn Ánh relied on

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[181] Philippe Sérard to Claude-François L'Etondal, 26 July, 1797. MEP 701, 255.

[182] Manguin, 104.

[183] "Journal de ce qui s'est passé de plus remarquable dans la mission du Tong-king, depuis le mois de julliet 1786 jusqu'a mois de julliet 1787," MEP 690, 902.

pirates in his efforts to regain control of Gia Định after his exile in Bangkok from 1785 to 1787. He established contact with an ethnic Chinese member of the "Heaven and Earth Societies," Hà Hỷ Văn. Văn and his gang provided assistance for the Nguyễn efforts and then went on to organize other pirate groups on behalf of the Nguyễn. According to the Nguyễn accounts, Văn offered to surrender to the Nguyễn leader in 1786, while his ships were stationed at the southern island of Côn Lôn. Given that Nguyễn Ánh was completely powerless at this point, it is much more logical to assume that Văn was offering his services, and that Nguyễn Ánh readily accepted the offer.

Văn was named a sea patrol military camp commander (*tuần hải đô doanh*), and several of his lieutenants were given titles as well. Văn served the Nguyễn in a variety of capacities. He traveled north in 1789 going to the northern coast to spy on the Tây Sơn situation, and then went on to recruit other pirates to join the Nguyễn forces, bringing 23 more boats to the southern cause. He participated in the 1792 Nguyễn campaign that destroyed the Tây Sơn navy at Thi Nại, and continued to fight for the Nguyễn until his death in 1801. For his efforts, Hà Hỷ Văn was rewarded, after the fact, by his inclusion in the nineteenth century Nguyễn official biographies, the *Đại Nam Chính Biên Liệt Truyện*.[184] The case of Hà Hỷ Văn, while not the only instance of Nguyễn collaboration with pirates, suggests how pervasive the use of mercenaries was in this period, reflecting pragmatism rather than any sort of political or nationalistic agenda.[185]

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[184] *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện*, vol. 2, 471-472. This volume also includes very brief sketches of some of his followers, one of whom continued to served the Nguyễn into the 1820s.

[185] While the Nguyễn, like the Tây Sơn, thus relied on ethnic Chinese pirates, they had considerably more strained relationships with Thai and Malay pirates operating in the Gulf of Siam. In 1792, an envoy from the Lê court in exile had been sent to make contact with the Nguyễn, and while traveling in the Gulf of Siam was captured by Malay or Javanese pirates. The envoy was not released until the Nguyễn leader agreed to pay the demanded ransom. A few years later, in 1796, a coastal pirate whom the Vietnamese records call Đồ Bà, was operating off the coast near Hà Tiên, creating difficulty for Nguyễn trade in that area, and generally controlling the seas in that region. It required a sizable Nguyễn attack to suppress Đồ Bà, an attack that led to the seizure of ten pirate ships, one captain, 80 pirates and countless guns. [See Manguin, 96; also *Đại Nam Thực Lục*, vol. 2, 148, 162.]

It is clear that bandits, pirates and mercenaries played extremely important roles throughout the Tây Sơn period. Indeed some elements, such as the ethnic Chinese pirates, were absolutely indispensable parts of the Tây Sơn military might. Thus interpretations of the Tây Sơn movement that attempt to portray it as a nationalist crusade peopled by noble peasants fighting for national unity or in defense of the nation against outsiders, grossly misstate the realities of this period. The Tây Sơn routinely employed or made alliances with bandits, thieves, vagabonds, and pirates in a pragmatic attempt to bolster their armed forces. Indeed, it would be more surprising to find them not taking advantage of the opportunities presented by such social groups. These relationships of course cut both ways, benefitting not only the Tây Sơn but also those with whom they allied themselves. The complex nature of the relationship is neatly encapsulated in a sobriquet that was applied to the Tây Sơn Emperor, Quang Trung in this period – "rebel protector of pirates."[186] In other words, the rebel leader connected himself to the Chinese pirates as their protector, just as these same pirates were, through their control of the seas, protecting the Tây Sơn leader and his regime.

While twentieth-century Vietnamese historians have been highly critical of the nineteenth-century Nguyễn historical records for referring to the Tây Sơn as "bandits," the Nguyễn accounts were quite accurate in characterizing elements of the movement, if not the movement's leaders themselves. To conclude, then, that bandits and pirates played significant roles in the Tây Sơn movement is not to discredit the movement, as was the Nguyễn intention. Rather, it is an effort more honestly to depict the complex composition of the movement, which reflected the heterogeneity of Vietnamese society during this period. The Tây Sơn, like their Nguyễn rivals, were above all pragmatists who thought not in terms of social background in recruiting for their armies, but rather in terms of sheer numbers, and experience. A thief or pirate was, to the Tây Sơn recruiter, not a criminal, but a person with some fighting experience, probably carrying his own arms, and ready to challenge authority. These

[186] Manguin, 100.

were useful traits in a times such as this, and it was for these reasons that these men were brought into the movement.

Tây Sơn Relations with Ethnic Minorities

Just as the Tây Sơn had readily made arrangements and alliances with Chinese pirates to help support their political and military aspirations, they also established alliances with a great many other so-called ethnic groups. In Chapter Two I demonstrated some of the ways in which the Tây Sơn leadership established linkages to various ethnic minority groups as a means of legitimizing their political claims. They also, however, drew on these groups in a more substantive fashion for assistance in their military campaigns. Thus, in the early days of the movement, it appears that Tây Sơn armies already had substantial components drawn from ethnic minority groups.[187]

The category "ethnic minority" may seen anachronistic here, and yet it is clear that there was some sense of separateness that existed already in the Tây Sơn period. In some cases, the separation was more related to geographical location than to concrete cultural or social differences. Both Vietnamese and European observers of this period speak of "barbarians" (*man* or *mọi*) in reference to people living in the highland regions. There was a clear sense that this was a distinct category of people (if somewhat undifferentiated within the category), separate from the lowland Vietnamese. There were also two groups of lowland ethnic groups, also clearly identified as such in contemporary sources. The first of these was the ethnic Chinese, who were recognized as a distinct category that reflected their origins, their communities, and their largely segregated areas of habitation. That ethnic Chinese were singled out is best evidenced in their being enumerated as a distinct category in population counts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The second group was the Chams, who while living in lowland regions side by side with the Vietnamese,

[187] Perez, 74.

were also distinguished by their political connections at this time to surviving Cham principalities as well as by their distinctive culture and religious practices. These three categories of people, whom I call "ethnic minorities," were parts of the margins of Vietnamese society during the Tây Sơn years. They were outnumbered by Vietnamese and were also marginalized by either their location (as in the highland groups) or their ethnicity and lack of political clout (the Chinese and the Chams). I want now to turn to consider the nature of the Tây Sơn relationships with these three groups: the ethnic Chinese, the Chams, and the upland minority groups.

The Ethnic Chinese

Most prominent among the ethnic groups involved in the Tây Sơn wars were the ethnic Chinese. We have already seen the very important role that Chinese pirates played in the Tây Sơn period, but domestic ethnic Chinese also played major parts in the Tây Sơn drama as well. Ethnic Chinese already living in Việt Nam, a group that by the late eighteenth century numbered as many as 30,000, also played a prominent part in the events of this period.[188] The ethnic Chinese had already began to settle in Việt Nam in the middle of the seventeenth century in the aftermath of the Manchu overthrow of the Ming dynasty. Refugees from the Manchu advance, including a large number of soldiers, fled the southern parts of China and eventually settled in the coastal areas of southern Việt Nam. Nguyễn rulers granted them formal permission to remain in Việt Nam and also gave them a considerable amount of political autonomy, partly because these rulers viewed the ethnic Chinese as useful for settling

[188] Studies of the history of ethnic Chinese in Việt Nam are surprisingly still quite limited. Useful reference may be made to the following: Li Tana. *Nguyễn Cochinchina: Southern Vietnam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, (Ithaca, NY.: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 1988); Chen Chingho, *Historical Notes on Hoi An*, (Carbondale: Center for Vietnamese Studies, Southern Illinois University, Monograph Series IV, 1973); Nguyễn Thế Anh, "L'Immigration Chinoise et la Colonisation du Delta Du Mékong," *The Vietnam Review*, Autumn-Winter 1996, vol. 1, 154-177. Yang cites the 30,000 figure from Koffler. For a good overview of the ethnic Chinese and their economic and political role under the Nguyễn, see Yang, 165-174; see also Nguyễn Thế Anh, "L'Immigration Chinoise et la Colonisation du Delta Du Mékong," *The Vietnam Review*, Autumn-Winter 1996, vol. 1, 154-177.

underpopulated regions. Many of these immigrants settled in and around the trading center at Hội An, while others moved further south into the sparsely settled Biên Hòa and Mỹ Thọ areas of the Mekong Delta, and finally some settled at the remote fishing port of Hà Tiên, straddling the Việt-Khmer border region.

A second group of ethnic Chinese also began to immigrate to Việt Nam somewhat later, and for different reasons. This latter group came to Việt Nam as part of the growing coastal trade between south China and Việt Nam – settling particularly Hội An, but also spreading along the central coastal area. Unlike the earlier group of Chinese settlers, whose members were beginning to assimilate to their new home and were integrating themselves more fully into Vietnamese society, these more recent arrivals were still very closely connected to their south China roots through regular trade and through their contacts with clans and various secret societies. Consequently, the newer ethnic Chinese arrivals came to play particularly important commercial roles in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with their already existing contacts with merchant interests in the ports of South China. Eventually, it appears that these same ethnic Chinese merchants became increasingly frustrated by the decline in foreign trade that marked the middle of the eighteenth century, as well as by the restrictive trading regulations imposed by the Nguyễn regime. The outbreak of the Tây Sơn movement may have been viewed by these merchants as an opportunity to change the political order and perhaps stimulate a trade revival. Although establishing the precise motivations of these merchants is virtually impossible, we do know that they supplied both money and manpower to the Tây Sơn movement in its early years.[189] One 1775 observer even reported that the majority of the rebel army' troops was ethnic Chinese.[190]

Most prominent among these early supporters of the movement were two Chinese merchants,Tập Đình and Lý Tài, apparently residents of the coastal trading city of Hội An. These men entered the ranks of rebel officers very early in the course

[189] See Nguyen Thanh-Nha, *Tableau economique du Vietnam Aux XVIIe et XVIIIe Siecles* (Paris: Éditions Cujas, 1970), 148-149, 183-186.
[190] Jean La Bartette to Denis Boiret, 28 June, 1775. MEP 800 (vol. 2), 1471.

of the Tây Sơn uprising.[191] They were placed in charge of their own armies, which were comprised entirely of ethnic Chinese soldiers.[192] Tập Đình was placed in charge of the Trung-nghĩa (Loyal and Righteous) Army and Lý Tài in command of the the Hòa-nghĩa (Peaceful and Righteous) Army. Since these troops were composed entirely of ethnic Chinese troops, it is possible that the two merchants had gathered their troops along secret society or merchant guild lines. By the late seventeenth century, secret societies had begun to emerge as significant commercial and political forces in south China. In the middle of the eighteenth century such organizations had already begun to establish themselves in parts of Southeast Asia.[193] It would not be surprising then to find such "brotherhoods" of ethnic Chinese appearing in Việt Nam in the second half of the eighteenth century. We also know that the ethnic Chinese who settled in Việt Nam and other parts of Southeast Asia often did so in family or clan groups, structures central to secret society organizations.[194] There is, unfortunately, very little evidence about the nature of these armies, or their composition, so possible connections to secret societies or other preexisting organizations must remain speculative.

What is clear is that alliances with ethnic Chinese merchants figured prominently during the early years of the Tây Sơn movement, and ethnic Chinese soldiers appear to have played an instrumental, possibly dominant, role in the first four years of the movement. And while their motivation may have been chiefly economic, it is possible that there were political considerations as well. One writer claims that "in the province of Cham (Quang Nam) the rebels made an agreement with

[191] *Nguyễn Thị Tây Sơn Ký*, DC. 112, 2.

[192] The idea of individuals being placed in charge of "private" armies was not atypical for this period. The Nguyễn anti-Tây Sơn force was also comprised of a coalition of semi-autonomous armies led by prominent military figures, rather than a single, integrated force.

[193] See for instance Mary Somers Heidhues, "Chinese Organizations in West Borneo and Bangka: *Kongsi* and *Hui*," 68-88 in David Ownby and Mary Somers Heidhues, eds. *"Secret Societies" Reconsidered: Perspectives on the Social History of Modern South China and Southeast Asia* (Armonk, NY: ME Sharp, 1993).

[194] Yang (199) gives a map of Chinese settlements in Việt Nam in 1770, showing, for example, that the large majority of ethnic Chinese were concentrated by place of origin – with Fujianese settled in the Hội An-Đà Nẵng region, and Cantonese settled in the southern Gia Định-Hà Tiên area.

the Chinese, promising that if they gave their support in this enterprise, to liberate their populations from the tyranny that they suffered to that time and to name one of their mandarins as the King of Cochinchina."[195]

However promising the initial contacts between the Tây Sơn and the Chinese merchant groups, this alliance soon ran into problems, challenging modern views of the Tây Sơn as a harmonious ethnic coalition. First of all, despite the alliance that the Tây Sơn had developed with ethnic Chinese forces, this did not prevent some Tây Sơn troops from carrying out attacks apparently directed at communities of ethnic Chinese. It appears that Tây Sơn forces carried out massacres of ethnic Chinese living in Tourane and Hội An in the mid-1770s. A Spanish missionary reported that at Tourane, "a number of Chinese were run through with swords; a number of others, in flight, were drowned in the river which ran near the city."[196] Somewhat later, in 1782, when the Tây Sơn forces entered Cambodia, "they went out to search for the Chinese who had fled from Cochinchina [and] they exterminated them without any other reason than for having embraced the party of the king."[197] It is clear from such episodes that the Tây Sơn at times singled out the ethnic Chinese.

Secondly, although some ethnic Chinese stepped forward to assist the Tây Sơn in the early days of the movement, others raised competing claims to power during the same period. Toward the end of 1775, for example, two men, Tôn-thất Quyền and Tôn-thất Xuân, raised troops in Quảng Nam, taking another man by the name of Trương Phúc Tá to serve as their strategist (*mưu chủ*). Their uprising was bankrolled by a Chinese merchant by the surname of Tất and their forces soon seized the two prefectures of Thăng and Điện. Thereafter they attracted the attention of the Tây Sơn, and Nguyễn Nhạc spent two months in battle with these armies before finally getting the upper hand when Quyền and Xuân's troops ran out of supplies.[198] This episode

[195] Perez, 68; Unfortunately the precise source of this information is not revealed.

[196] see for example, de Jumilla letter in Perez, 80. Though the city is not named explicitly, the context suggests Tourane (Đà Nẵng). See also letter by F. Castuera in Perez, 91. The date for this letter is unclear, but the context suggests 1782.

[197] Perez, 91. Letter by Father Ginestar.

[198] Tạ Quang Phát, 8b.

makes clear that the coastal ethnic Chinese merchant class was not uniform in its support for the Tây Sơn. This is not unexpected, particularly during these early years of the movement, when even those merchants who sought change would not necessarily have viewed the Tây Sơn as the only possible agents of that change.

Moreover, at about the same time that this ethnic Chinese merchant was supporting an uprising that challenged Tây Sơn aspirations, Nguyễn Nhạc's alliances with both of his Chinese generals, Tập Đình and Lý Tài, collapsed. In part this may be blamed on the fact that the ethnic Chinese armies often did more to alienate the populace than inspire it. According to some accounts the armies of the two ethnic Chinese commanders, Tập Đình and Lý Tài, were responsible for harassing the populations and for molesting girls and women.[199] In a 1775 letter the French missionary Halbout noted that "the rebels . . . are for the most part Chinese, and they have committed a thousand abominations, such as eating human flesh, saying that this is tastier than other meats."[200] Such a statement, however far-fetched its claims, is interesting because it may well have represented existing local suspicions of the ethnic Chinese. Moreover, there are other accounts that describe the Tây Sơn forcing highland minority troops to disguise themselves as Chinese in order to intimidate their enemies, also suggesting a local fear of the ethnic Chinese.[201]

Whether it was their misdeeds or perhaps their own political or military ambitions that alienated Nhạc from his ethnic Chinese commanders, is not entirely clear. What is known is that at some point in 1775, Nhạc plotted to have Tập Đình killed. When word of Nhạc's intentions reached Tập Đình, he fled to south China where he was later killed in the course of another uprising.[202] A short time later Lý Tài, perhaps seeing better opportunities with the Nguyễn, fled south and became king-maker at Đồng Nai. Some years after the schism with the two ethnic Chinese commanders came the nadir of Tây Sơn relations with ethnic Chinese communities

[199] Phạm Văn Đang, 22.
[200] Halbout to MEP Director, July, 1775 in *Nouvelles Lettres Edifiantes*, vol. 6, 283.
[201] Tạ Quang Phát, 4a; See also *Hoàng Triều Sự Tích*, 皇朝事跡 (Tales of the Affairs of the Imperial Court), A. 1086, 3b. Viện Hán Nôm, Hà Nội.
[202] *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện*, vol. 2, 495.

living in Việt Nam when the Tây Sơn carried out a horrific massacre of ethnic Chinese in Sài Gòn in 1783. According to reports, Tây Sơn forces pillaged and burned the shops of ethnic Chinese merchants and then killed more than 10,000 ethnic Chinese living in the city. The *Đại Nam Thực Lục* recorded the event as follows:

> [Nhạc] immediately ordered the capture of the more than 10,000 Chinese in Gia-định, regardless of whether they were soldiers, civilians or business people. They were then all killed and the corpses were thrown into the river. For more than one month, no one dared to eat shrimp or to drink water from that river.[203]

There is considerable debate over the Tây Sơn rationale in carrying out such a gruesome attack. Vietnamese sources from the nineteenth century note that one of Nhạc's chief lieutenants had been killed by Lý Tài's ethnic Chinese *Hòa-nghĩa* troops, and that the massacre of the ethnic Chinese constituted a specific act of revenge for this killing.[204] It is also possible that the attack was driven by financial, rather than a personal reasons, being an attempt to destroy the commercial monopoly that the Chinese had developed in that city.[205] The idea that the attack might have been commercially, rather than ethnically motivated, is supported by another source, which noted that not only ethnic Chinese, but Portuguese traders as well, were killed and had their goods seized.[206] One final theory is that Tây Sơn antipathy toward the ethnic Chinese was largely the result of the growing tendency of the ethnic Chinese to side with the Nguyễn during their struggles with the Tây Sơn.[207] Most likely, the Tây Sơn actions were driven by a combination of these factors, possibly inspired by local

[203] *Đại Nam Thực Lục*, vol. 2, chpt. 1, 40; the event is mentioned in numerous other accounts: for example, Tạ Quang Phát, 10b; *Nguyễn Thị Tây Sơn Kí*, A.3138 of the Viện Hán Nôm, 7a. The foreign missionaries also reported it: see, eg. a letter by Fr. Castuera, July 7, 1787, Perez, 86, although he put the number of dead at only 4,000. Barrow's rather inexact account of this period cites the even larger number of 20,000 (Barrow, 250).

[204] *Đại Nam Thực Lục*, 88.; see also *Nguyễn Thị Tây Sơn Kí*, (A.3138), 11a; *Sử Ký Đại Nam Việt Quốc Triều*, 25-26.

[205] Lê Thành Khôi, 314.

[206] Halbout to Macao, 13 July, 1782. MEP 800, 1720.

[207] Nguyễn Thế Anh, "L'Immigration Chinoise et la Colonisation du Delta Du Mékong," *The Vietnam Review*, Autumn-Winter 1996, vol. 1, 161. This of course raises something of a "chicken and egg" dilemma, for it is not clear whether the massacre was in response to ethnic Chinese desertions, or whether it accelerated them.

suspicions of or resentments toward this group. Whatever the real reason(s) behind the Tây Sơn massacre, few Vietnamese nationalist or Marxist historians include discussions of the Sài Gòn killings in their narrative accounts of the Tây Sơn movement for it complicates their portrayal of the Tây Sơn as virtuous leaders of an ethnically harmonious movement.

Despite the obvious difficulties in the Tây Sơn relations with ethnic Chinese, it cannot be argued that the Tây Sơn had become irrevocably oriented against the domestic ethnic Chinese or the Chinese generally, or indeed that an implacable hatred of the Tây Sơn emerged among all Chinese. For instance, one year after the massacre in Sài Gòn, Chinese merchant ships were once again arriving to trade in its ports.[208] Moreover, ethnic Chinese were reported still to be found in the ranks of the Tây Sơn as late as 1790, and of course the Tây Sơn relationship with Chinese coastal pirates remained a cornerstone of their military strategy to the very last days of their reign.[209] All of this suggests that the Tây Sơn did not continue to pursue a consistent anti-Chinese policy and underscores the notion that the Tây Sơn leadership was ultimately more concerned with opportunistic responses to circumstances than with thoughtful implementation of any particular political or social agenda. Moreover, at least in retrospect ethnic Chinese merchants looked fondly at the Tây Sơn administration that they witnessed. In 1821, some Chinese merchants allegedly told a visiting British emissary that the Tây Sơn regime was superior to that which succeeded it: "I was in fact assured by Chinese merchants with whom I conversed at Hue, and who had lived in the country during the rule of both, that the Tay-Son governed the country with more equity and moderation than either the present king or his father [ie. Minh Mạng or Gia Long]."[210] Although this may only have reflected the stability around the Tây Sơn political center near Phú Xuân, it nonetheless indicates that Tây Sơn anti-Chinese sentiment clearly moderated over time, even if most of the ethnic Chinese

[208] Andre Tôn to ?, 1 July, 1784, in *Nouvelles Lettres Edifiantes*, vol. 6, 438.
[209] Charles La Mothe to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 20 January, 1790. MEP 692, 158.
[210] Cited in Jean Chesneaux, *Contribution à l'histoire de la nation Vietnamienne* (Paris: Editions Sociales, 1955), 66.

had already thrown their support to the Nguyễn side.

While the Tây Sơn were able to include ethnic Chinese forces in their ranks at least initially, the Nguyễn also quickly included large numbers of ethnic Chinese in their own campaigns. Among the strongest supporters of the early Nguyễn crusade against the Tây Sơn was the ethnic Chinese chieftain of Hà Tiên, Mạc Thiên Tứ (1706-1780). When the Nguyễn fled to the far south to escape Tây Sơn attacks on Phú Xuân, Tứ organized troops to come to the assistance of the fleeing Chúa. The Mạc family owed much to the Nguyễn, including both their political titles and their largely unimpeded authority in the border region with Cambodia, so their willingness to assist the refugee Nguyễn rulers is not surprising. One of Tứ's sons, Mạc Tử Sanh, led one of the armies supporting the Nguyễn in their effort. In 1778, after the Nguyễn Chúa was killed, Mạc Thiên Tứ fled to Siam where he sought to engage the assistance of the Siamese king. After two years in Siam, Tứ – along with two more of his sons and many of his followers – was killed by the Siamese ruler on suspicion that he was planning to overthrow the Thai throne. It is not clear whether this accusation was manufactured by other Nguyễn supporters, suspicious of Tứ's loyalties, or by a Cambodian agent.[211] The dynamics of this relationship were clearly complicated by uncertainties over the political situation of the time. Nonetheless, the early Mạc family support for the Nguyễn makes clear that both the Tây Sơn and the Nguyễn were relying strongly on ethnic Chinese groups for their potential support both in terms of troops and in terms of financial assistance.

In addition to the support of the Mạc family, other ethnic Chinese groups in the far south also increasingly joined the Nguyễn. This is not surprising, given that the Nguyễn controlled the Gia Định area with its substantial Chinese population. Moreover, after the Tây Sơn massacre in the same area any remaining ethnic Chinese support for the Tây Sơn was further reduced, and the most influential ethnic Chinese communities in the south appear to have thrown their support behind the Nguyễn and were suitably rewarded with greater political responsibilities and greater

[211] The *Đại Nam Thực Lục*, vol. 2, 35, places blame on a Cambodian.

acknowledgement of their social status. Consequently, many ethnic Chinese apparently entered the ranks of the Nguyễn armies in the south.[212] Finally, once the Sài Gòn region, with its vitally important trading status was permanently restored to the Nguyễn camp after 1787, the ethnic Chinese further solidified their support for the Nguyễn and the Tây Sơn stood little chance of regaining their one-time allies.

Lowland and Highland Ethnic Minorities: Chams and others

The ethnic Chinese were not the only minority group that became involved in the Tây Sơn movement. As was described in the previous chapter, the Tây Sơn, early in their uprising, relied on the southern Cham community both for military support and for the more abstract support of signs and symbols. Tây Sơn reliance on the Chams made a lot of sense from a geographical perspective. The coastal region just to the east of where the movement had its origins was the strong-hold of what remained of the former empire of Champa. It held a large concentration of Cham peoples as well as having a countryside dotted with reminders of the earlier might of the Cham civilization. By inducing the Cham princess, Thi Hoả, to join their movement, the Tây Sơn leaders were able to influence a substantial number of Chams to follow them. Moreover, as was noted earlier, for the Chams the Tây Sơn may have represented an opportunity to restore some of their former political strength, while for the Tây Sơn the Chams and their semi-autonomous political centers, constituted something of an alternative site of political power to be drawn upon in the struggle with the Nguyễn.

Despite the early Cham support for the Tây Sơn, it appears that the Tây Sơn were more inclined to use the Cham than to view them as partners in their movement. Nhạc, as we saw in Chapter Two, chose an ancient Cham citadel as his imperial capitol, and then forcibly seized the imperial regalia of a Cham prince in an effort to add to his own political grandeur. This latter action, in particular, may have served as

[212] For more on this see Nguyễn Thế Anh, "L'Immigration Chinoise et la Colonisation du Delta du Mékong," *The Vietnam Review* 1 (Autumn-Winter 1996): 154-177. See also *Sử Ký Đại Nam Việt Quốc Triều*, 25.

an indication to Cham populations of the true nature of their relationship with the Tây Sơn. Despite such tensions, the *Đại Nam Nhất Thống Chí* suggests that at least some elements of the Cham community continued to support the Tây Sơn into the mid-1790s:

> In the year *mậu thân* (1788), the Great Ancestor High Emperor retook Gia Định, and many times he summoned [the Cham leader Tá], but Tá was frightened because of his crimes and did not dare to come out, and our troops went forth to attack that territory many times but were defeated. Then in the year 1794 the *tù trưởng* [tribal chief] of Thuận Thành, Nguyễn Văn Hào showed the route for troops to travel along to capture [Tá]. Tá was killed. Immediately the title of King of Thuận Thành was abolished, and Hào was named as the *chưởng cơ lãnh chánh* [Primary Leading Captain] of the trấn of Thuận Thành; Nguyễn Văn Chấn was also appointed as *chưởng cơ* [captain] to serve as his assistant, and they were ordered to gather together the peoples and every year to submit taxes; and they would be attached to the Bình Thuận military camp.[213]

As this description suggests, the Tây Sơn were involved in a competition with their Nguyễn adversaries for the loyalties of the Cham community. By 1790 important Cham political figures were beginning to throw their support behind the Nguyễn and to challenge the Tây Sơn. When the Nguyễn retook Bình Thuận, a Cham leader led his troops to join the Nguyễn in attacking the Tây Sơn, in exchange for which the Nguyễn recognized his authority over the local Cham populations.[214] A 1793 letter commenting on the situation in the south, noted that Cham and "Moi" (highland) troops had changed their allegiance to the Nguyễn and were rising up against the Tây Sơn.[215] Despite this apparent capitulation, unrest remained in the Cham territories. Moreover, with the Tây Sơn still in control of the former Cham seats of power near Qui Nhơn, they continued to draw a certain prestige from this position, which the Nguyễn could not easily overcome.

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[213] Quốc Sử Quán Triều Nguyễn. *Đại Nam Nhất Thống Chí* (The Unification Records of Đại Nam), ed. Đào Duy Anh, trans. Phạm Trọng Điềm (Huế: Nhà Xuất Bản Thuận Hóa, 1996), vol. 3, 143-144.

[214] Bửu Cầm, "Một Đoạn Lịch Sử Chiêm-Thành" (An Article on the History of Champa). *Văn Hóa Nguyệt San* 36 (November 1958): 1247.

[215] Pierre-Marie Le Labousse to ?, 1793. MEP 746, 452.

Along with the Chams, there were numerous other indigenous ethnic groups located in the highland regions who also became embroiled in the Tây Sơn wars. These groups had come into increasing contact with the coastal Vietnamese state through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[216] Nguyễn Nhạc, through his early days as a betel nut trader had had extensive contacts with various ethnic groups in the highland plateaus to the west of Tây Sơn. When the Tây Sơn brothers established their early base on the An Khê plateau, these existing contacts proved useful in attracting followers and gaining access to resources. With this region as a base, the early Tây Sơn movement relied heavily on various groups living in the highland regions. It was not merely proximity that appears to have stirred support for the Tây Sơn mission among these groups, but also their shared and growing antagonism toward the Nguyễn regime.

As revenues from commerce declined over the course of the mid-eighteenth century, the Nguyễn and their local and regional officials appear to have increasingly turned their attention to revenue extraction from peoples living at the political periphery of Nguyễn control. These groups controlled a wide range of highly valuable commodities that the Vietnamese stated needed to support its commercial export economy, from fragrant woods to various mineral and animal resources. Thus there was substantial economic interaction between the upland peoples (or at least some of them) and their coastal counterparts. This interaction was initially focused on trade of these goods, but it developed a growing tax dimension as well, and Li Tana reports that by the late 1760s upland people were contributing nearly 50% of the secondary tax revenues (non-land and capitation taxes) collected annually by the Nguyễn regime.[217] Consequently, the southern regime was imposing trade tariffs and other taxes on these groups who had traditionally been exempt, either de jure or de facto, from such impositions by the Vietnamese state. It is hardly surprising that these

[216] Not all of these groups had always been residents of the highlands. Some had moved into these more remote regions in response to pressure from Vietnamese migrants moving south in the course of the Nguyễn geographic and demographic expansion. (Li, 34-35).
[217] Li, 136.

groups would support a movement that had the potential to reverse these growing pressures. These groups appear to have constituted a central part of the Tây Sơn army, even as the movement expanded into the north in 1786. The Tây Sơn armies of that period were an ethnically diverse force, as reported by one European eyewitness to the rebel army movements of this period:

> Their soldiers, in part composed of Muong, Man-di, and other barbarians from Cao-mien (Cambodia?), Cambien, Siame, etc. have pillaged the two sides of the river, kidnapped the women and children and committed a great number of evils.[218]

In addition to being able to win over Chams to their cause beginning in the early 1790s, the Nguyễn continued to expand their alliance to include other ethnic groups as well. Thus, for example, in 1793, "the Man tribal chiefs at Đồng-hương in the prefecture of Bình-khang went to the place of refuge to pay a visit on the king; they were granted clothing, and were given positions to follow the small group leader Nguyễn Văn Quế to return to the highland area, and they met with the Man people in order to set up a fort to act as a defense."[219] An 1801 report noted that a Mường army of perhaps 500 to 600 people was offering stiff resistance to the Tây Sơn while fighting on behalf of the Nguyễn. In retaliation, the Tây Sơn destroyed villages through which the Mường had successfully passed, or which had given them support.[220] Still, the Nguyễn were not always successful in their efforts to woo members of the minority groups. Thus, for example, in 1796 there were two anti-Nguyễn uprisings led by what the *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện* termed "barbarians" [*man*].[221]

Meanwhile, further to the north, the Nguyễn were similarly gathering strength among various ethnic groups. Prominent among northern minority supporters was Hà Công Thái, who lived in the western reaches of Thanh Hoa. In the chaos of the Tây

[218] Letter from M. Jean-François Le Roy to M. Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 6 December, 1786, in Cadière, "Documents Relatifs," 7.

[219] *Đại Nam Thực Lục*, vol. 2, 181.

[220] Pierre Eyot to Chaumont and Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 15 December, 1801. MEP 693, 548.

[221] *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện*, vol. 2, 615. For a brief discussion of Cham-Nguyễn relations during this period, see 614-615.

Sơn entry into the north, he and another tribal leader, Nguyễn Đình Ba, gathered together an alliance of ethnic minority chieftains to resist the Tây Sơn in their region. Then in 1794 he sent agents south to meet with Nguyễn Ánh and to form an alliance. As a result, Thái was given responsibility for representing the Nguyễn cause in the two provinces of Thanh Hoa and Nghệ An. This responsibility consisted primarily of recruiting soldiers to harass the Tây Sơn in those two provinces. Several years later, in 1799, with the Nguyễn attacking Qui Nhơn, Thái received instructions to prepare for an uprising to coincide with the planned Nguyễn attack further to the north. The following year Thái sent back a message requesting permission to send troops along the highland routes to attack the Tây Sơn. The Nguyễn leader agreed to this and granted military positions to many of Thái's underlings. Thereafter, Thái sent regular reports about Tây Sơn troop movements and about the geography of the region back to the Nguyễn.[222]

What the evidence suggests is that there was no uniform ethnic minority support for the Tây Sơn, but rather that minority groups and villages more likely responded to their own practical circumstances or even changing political fortunes around them. At times the Tây Sơn were able to recruit among ethnic communities in the highlands and along the coasts, while at others the Nguyễn were far more successful in the same venture. Whatever their allegiances, what is clear is that ethnic minority groups were a very important element in the wars of the Tây Sơn years. As in most times of major warfare in Vietnamese history, the geographically peripheral regions (and those most typically inhabited by ethnic minority groups) became very much involved in the events of the lowlands. Armies of the Tây Sơn initially took refuge in the highland plateaus to the west of Qui Nhơn, recruiting their early armies there. During their later campaigns, Tây Sơn armies crossed through highland regions on their way to campaigns into both Laos and Cambodia, once again involving those peoples. In response, the Nguyễn also became involved in seeking to garner support in these regions which served as useful transportation and communication routes along

[222] *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện*, vol. 2, 474-476.

the interior spine of the country. Unfortunately, the amount of information on precise ethnic alliances and their shifting patterns is too limited to offer more detailed analysis.

Mercenary Participation in the Tây Sơn movement

It is clear that the Tây Sơn period was a highly complicated one that reflected the very nature of the Southeast Asian world of this period. It involved peoples from around as well as beyond the immediate region. The national borders that we see today were not as immediate a reality in the late eighteenth century, and indeed as Thongchai Winachakul has pointed out in his *Siam Mapped*, the very idea of fixed borders on the mainland was still far from clear as late as the second half of the nineteenth century.[223] The Vietnamese did have a fairly clear border with their Chinese neighbors to the north, but even this border was routinely violated in this period, with many Chinese working the mines of northern Vietnam and traveling back and forth with impunity. The distinction between "ethnic minorities," that is members of different ethnic communities living within Việt Nam, and "foreign mercenaries," soldiers coming from other countries, is a very blurry one. Nonetheless, it is clear that there were peoples from outside the realm of the Vietnamese polity who came to take part in the Tây Sơn wars.

Although the evidence for the early years of the movement is quite sketchy, there are numerous later accounts describing participation by Lao, Thai and Khmer soldiers in the Tây Sơn ranks by the late 1780s and early 1790s. A 1790 letter, for instance, describing the Tây Sơn army in the north, commented that it contained "Indians, Siamese, Chinese and Portuguese."[224] Even in the last years of the Tây Sơn movement, as late as 1800, local missionaries described the Tây Sơn armies as having Siamese, Cambodian and Lao troops in their ranks, including apparently some of

[223] Thongchai Winachakul, *Siam Mapped* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994).
[224] Charles La Mothe to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 20 January, 1790. MEP 692, 158.

officer rank.[225] The Tây Sơn armies thus comprised a melange of people of various ethnicities and nationalities, drawing not only on Chinese pirates and local coastal and highland minorities, but also on natives of various Lao principalities, Khmers and people as far away as Siam, and apparently some Europeans as well. The extensive foreign mercenary participation in the Tây Sơn armies is frequently overlooked by studies that seek to characterize the Tây Sơn as some sort of heroic indigenous movement to unify the nation and defend it against foreign aggression. What mattered in this period was manpower, not its origins or the implication of somehow mixing national affiliations or loyalties. In this respect the Tây Sơn armies were quintessentially "Southeast Asian."

While we know that Khmers took part in the Tây Sơn armies, it is difficult to establish precisely when they joined the Vietnamese rebels. Most likely Khmer troop were added to the Tây Sơn forces, either voluntarily or involuntarily, after the Tây Sơn invasion of Cambodia in 1782. The Cambodians in the south pragmatically offered their surrender to the Tây Sơn troops at this time, and some may have entered the rebel armies then.[226] As Khin Sok observed in a study of Cambodia during this period: "During ten years – from 1783 to 1794 – Cambodia was the closed field of battle between the Siamese and the Vietnamese; the Khmer people, conscripted by force by the two camps, continued to suffer massacres, destruction and desolation."[227] At times the Vietnamese camp would have been represented by the Nguyễn side, especially after 1787, but at times it would also have been the Tây Sơn, who were strong in the south intermittently until that same year.

There was also considerable involvement of Lao troops in this period, perhaps unsurprising in a time when battles of the Vietnamese "civil war" spread into the neighboring regions of Cambodia and many parts of Laos. Indeed Laos was traversed by at least one small group of northern Vietnamese refugees who found their way to

[225] Pierre-Marie Le Labousse to ?, 24 April, 1800. MEP 746, 875. In terms of officer-rank Siamese, see "Relation de la persécution." in *Nouvelles Lettres Edifiantes*, vol. 8, 60,

[226] Jacques Liot to Jean-Jacques Descourvières, 25 July, 1782. MEP 800 (vol. 2), 1742.

[227] Khin Sok, *Le Cambodge Entre Le Siam et Le Viêtnam (de 1775 à 1860)* (Paris: École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1991), 51.

Bangkok, which became then a place of exile for northern as well as southern Vietnamese refugees.[228] Because of the considerable influence that the Siamese court had over many Lao principalities, it was able to send Lao troops in support of the Nguyễn in the latter part of the 1780s. Some of these troops may well have been captured by the Tây Sơn and entered into their armies. Moreover, the Tây Sơn themselves launched an invasion of Lao territories in 1791 in response to the failure of a Lao ruler to make a tribute payment. This campaign, while apparently not entirely successful, would also have been an opportunity to bring Lao prisoners back to Việt Nam to be enrolled in Tây Sơn military ranks.[229] Tây Sơn border posts, such as that in the highland district of Quy Hợp, would also have been places from which to seize Lao peoples during periodic campaigns against the Lao principalities.[230]

Finally, there were also a small number of Europeans who found themselves fighting in the Tây Sơn armies, most of them not voluntarily. When the Tây Sơn attacked the Trịnh at Phú Xuân in the spring of 1786, they found a Portuguese ship at anchor there. The ship was seized, some of its crew murdered, and the remaining ten sailors were forced into service on various Tây Sơn vessels destined to sail in the campaigns toward the north.[231] The crews of ships arriving in Tây Sơn territory were not always forced into military service. In another instance in 1790, a Portuguese ship was blown off course into Tây Sơn territory, and the ship was seized by the Tây Sơn, while the crew was given a much smaller vessel to make their way back to Macao.[232]

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[228] Several hundred northern refugees from Tây Sơn rule there made it overland through the Lao principalities to Bangkok in the 1780s and 1790s.

[229] For more details on the Lao-Siamese-Vietnamese relationship, see Ngaosyvathn, Mayoury and Pheuiphanh Ngaosyvathn. *Paths to Conflagration: Fifty Years of Diplomacy and Warfare in Laos, Thailand and Vietnam, 1778-1828* (Ithaca: Cornell University SEAP, 1998), 91-96.

[230] See, eg. documents described in Trần Văn Quý, "Một Số Tư Liệu Thời Tây Sơn mới phát hiện" (Some Newly-Discovered Documents from the Tây Sơn Period) *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử*, No. 2 (1981), 84-86, 93.

[231] Jean Labartette to Claude-François L'Etondal, 1 August, 1786. MEP 801, 127.; see also "Extrait du Journal de la Procure des Missions Française a Macao sur ce qui s'est passé de plus remarquable pendant l'anné 86 dans la Chine, Tonquine, Siam, etc." MEP 306, 912.

[232] "Journal de la procure de Macao de 1790." MEP 306, 1089.

Although it is clear that the Tây Sơn armies were composed of a multiethnic and indeed multinational body of soldiers, this was no less true of their Nguyễn rivals. Commenting on the Nguyễn forces resisting the Tây Sơn armies in this period, Alexander Woodside noted that, "based upon the shifting brigand populations of the Gulf of Siam and the South China Sea, Gia Long's forces at the lowest ebb of their fortunes exhibited a maritime heterogeneity which was typically Southeast Asian."[233] The Nguyễn force included members of numerous national and ethnic group, though it is best known for its inclusion of a number of Europeans. Among the more notable among these men was a French mercenary by the name of Immanuel (Man Hóe) who became involved in the Nguyễn cause through Nguyễn Ánh's ardent supporter, Pigneau de Béhaine. Man Hoé was from Pigneau de Béhaine's hometown and entered the Bishop's service in Cambodia as a cook and tailor. He was later enrolled as an officer in the Nguyễn force and was entrusted with high military ranks.[234] Man Hóe was only one among several Europeans already fighting in the Nguyễn armies during this period, predating the arrival of larger numbers of French advisors and soldiers in the late 1780s.[235] In addition to Man Hóe, the *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện* records two other Europeans, Gia Đô Bi and Ma Nộ E of the country of Y Pha Nho.[236] According to Vietnamese records, these two were sent on a Nguyễn mission in 1783 to the Philippines to seek arms and soldiers, but were captured by a Tây Sơn vessel and killed.[237]

Somewhat earlier, a number of Portuguese vessels and their crews had apparently been forced into the Nguyễn ranks during a planned attack against the Tây

[233] Alexander Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 17.

[234] De Behaine is referred to in the Vietnamese sources by his Vietnamese name Bá đa-lộc; Màn Hòe held titles including: imperial envoy, regimental director, overseer of Trung Khuong (*Đại Nam Thực Lục*, vol. 2, 39.)

[235] Man Hóe is mentioned in several sources: *Tây Sơn Ngoại Sử*, 1b, (Durand Collection manuscript); also *Đại Nam Thực Lục*, vol. 2, chpt. 1, 39; *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện*, vol 2, 477. See also *Sử Ký Đại Nam Việt Quốc Triều*, 24-25.

[236] Possibly Ireland.

[237] *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện*, vol. 2, 477.

Sơn capitol at Qui Nhơn. Two of the three vessels were able to flee, while the third was captured by the Nguyễn and most of its crew executed.[238] The ten men that were able to escape on a small vessel, fled to Tây Sơn territory, where they joined the rebel armies in attacks against the Nguyễn.[239] During a brief exile in Siam, where he sought the assistance of the new Siamese ruler, Rama I, Nguyễn Ánh, "received the assistance of forty-four French officers and Rama I, who sent Siamese, Lao, Khmer and Chinese contingents against the Tây Sơn forces to help Nguyen Anh regain the throne."[240] Siamese involvement in the Tây Sơn wars was a combination of formal military assistance offered by the Siamese ruler, Rama I, as well as what must have been considerable mercenary involvement. The *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện*, reports, for example, the case of a Vinh May Ly, who had fled his country during a period of political upheaval. He had taken refuge with some troops on an island in the Gulf of Siam. In 1783 Nguyễn Ánh fled a Tây Sơn invasion of Gia Định by moving to Hà Tiên. Hearing of Ánh's presence, the chronicle reports, Ly traveled to pay his respects and offer his services. The Nguyễn leader accepted the offer and established an alliance with the Siamese, who was killed later that summer in a naval encounter with the Tây Sơn.[241] Finally, a 1793 edict by the Nguyễn ruler curbing liquor sales gives another clear indication of the ongoing multinational character of the southern forces:

> And he also saw among the soldiers that there were ethnic Chinese, Frenchmen, and Siamese, and their character was aggressive, and when they were drunk they were hard to stop, therefore he banned all the stores from selling liquor in the markets, (and) anyone violating this order would receive 50 strokes of the cane.[242]

The Tây Sơn, like the Nguyễn during this same period, assembled an army that drew soldiers from any source they could find. Consequently, their armies included

[238] For details see an unsigned letter, November, 1781. MEP 313, 651.
[239] "Journal de la procure de Macao pour l'année 1782." MEP 306, 766.
[240] Ngaosyvathn and Ngaosyvathn, 97.
[241] *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện*, vol. 2, 477-478.
[242] *Đại Nam Thực Lục*, vol. 2, 169.

not only Vietnamese lowland peasants, but also members of various ethnic minority groups – Chinese, Chams, highland dwellers. Tây Sơn armies also included outsiders ranging from Europeans to troops from nearby neighbors such as Cambodia, Laos and Siam. In light of the complex ethnic and national composition of the Tây Sơn forces, existing assumptions that the Tây Sơn represented any sort of an indigenous, nationalist force unifying the country to fight off foreign aggressors are clearly dramatic oversimplifications. Moreover, accusations against the Nguyễn for having betrayed the country to the Siamese and the French must be balanced against the Tây Sơn willingness to employ troops and advisors of all nationalities. The evidence makes clear that the Tây Sơn were very eager to win over the services of the same mercenaries who were assisting the Nguyễn, and although the Tây Sơn leaders were largely unsuccessful in recruiting such adventurers, the fact that they were prepared to use them indicates that it was not purity of purpose that prevented their employment of these men.

Conclusion

The Tây Sơn relationship with those at the social margins was of considerable importance for their movement in many respects. In times of relative tranquility members of these groups at the social margins might avoid the attention of the state, or, as in the case of bandits, perhaps not exist at all. During the turmoil of the period from 1770 to 1802, however, each of these groups mattered a great deal, and was accorded more than ordinary amounts of attention. Bandits and pirates existed in large numbers during these years, serving as both a source of great disruption for the general populace, but also as a useful reservoir of military assistance to the Tây Sơn and their Nguyễn rivals. The key role that these groups played demonstrates the degree to which Vietnam remained very much a Southeast Asian state, in which rigid borders and national identities were frequently rendered insignificant.

The role of ethnic minority groups also looms large in this period. This was

not the first Vietnamese popular movement in which this had been the case. The uprising of Lê Lợi in the fifteenth century relied heavily on both northern ethnic minority groups and their more easily defensible highland territories. The uprisings in the north in the period from 1740 to 1770 also frequently featured the participation of ethnic minorities in alliances with the lowland leaders. The Tây Sơn case then is only a continuation of this long-standing pattern of highland-lowland alliances in times of turmoil.

Finally, as a closer examination of the voluminous evidence concerning Vietnamese Christians shows, this religious minority was a significant element of the Tây Sơn period. Christians were unable to avoid the attention of political and military leaders in this period, and the involvement of French missionaries and mercenaries on the side of the Nguyễn inevitably dragged Vietnamese Christians into the political equation. Although many Vietnamese nationalist historians have depicted the Tây Sơn as particularly tolerant of Christianity, the evidence makes quite clear that the new regime's actions vacillated between tolerance and severe repression. Tây Sơn actions in this regard were very clearly a product of political and military calculations and perceptions more than a function of ideological hostility toward Vietnamese Christians. Moreover, treatment of Christians varied considerably based on local circumstances and the avarice or charity of provincial or district officials.

I have also shown in this chapter that far from being the pure and patriotically motivated force the Tây Sơn have often been depicted to be, the movement involved many social elements from both within and without. While the Tây Sơn leaders themselves may not have been bandits as was often suggested in the Nguyễn histories, many of their followers and soldiers clearly were. With the large numbers of bandits and then pirates found in the ranks of the Tây Sơn armies, it is hardly surprising that Vietnamese populations of this period suffered considerably from looting and other depredations. Even if such acts were sometimes (though not always) discouraged or prohibited by the movement's leaders, the makeup of their armies as well as the scope of their campaigns made such activity inevitable.

Chapter Five

Weighing Loyalty and Circumstance: Northern Scholars and the Tây Sơn

> Phạm Công Thế, a scholar who joined the rebellion of Lê Duy Mật in the middle of the eighteenth century was captured and questioned by the Lê: "How could a scholar become a rebel and lose all sense of hierarchy and social value?" Phạm Công Thế responded: "High positions have not been clarified for a long time. How is one to distinguish between consent and rebellion?[1]

Having considered the roles of the Tây Sơn leadership, the peasantry and various members of the margins of eighteenth-century Vietnamese society, I now take up the case of intellectual elites. In particular I consider these men in the northern half of the country and their relationship to the Tây Sơn leadership beginning in 1786. It was in that year that Tây Sơn troops attacked and occupied territory north of the Gianh River, long the boundary between the Trịnh and the Nguyễn. By focusing on men in the north I do not suggest that southern intellectuals or officials did not also have to grapple with issues of loyalty. Rather my focus here is guided largely by the availability of sources, which are very rich for the north, and by the political complexities in the north that make it a particularly important test of scholars' loyalties. The issues addressed here are closely linked to those found in Chapter Two, for northern scholars were particularly concerned with the questions of political legitimacy as they related to the claims to power being made by the Tây Sơn leadership.

The work in this chapter grows out of studies by some Vietnamese scholars, such as Thế Long's 1978 article, "Bước Đầu Tìm Hiểu về Sĩ Phu Với Phong Trao Nông Dân Tây Sơn," (A Preliminary Examination Regarding the Attitudes of Intellectuals Toward the Tây Sơn Peasant Movement). I also follow the classic 1943 study by Hoa Bằng, *Quang Trung: Anh Hùng Dân Tộc, 1788-1792* (Quang Trung: A

[1] Thế Long, "Bước Đầu Tìm Hiểu về Sĩ Phu Với Phong Tráo Nông Dân Tây-Sơn," (A Preliminary Study of the Attitude of Confucian Scholars Toward the Tây-sơn Movement) *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử* No. 183 (Nov.-Dec. 1978): 114.

National Hero, 1788-1792), which studied the Tây Sơn almost exclusively in their northern manifestation under the rule of Emperor Quang Trung and thus touched on the issue of northern scholars during this period. Finally, I draw some ideas from Alexander Woodside's "Conceptions of Change and of Human Responsibility for Change in Late Traditional Vietnam" [1982], which addressed some of the issues of loyalty and morality that concern this period, though with greater emphasis on philosophical considerations than I do here. Above all, however, I have tried to rely on the words of the participants or descriptions of their actions found in eighteenth and nineteenth-century sources.

As was shown in Chapter Two, the Tây Sơn period was not the first in which Vietnamese scholar-officials were forced to choose between competing claimants to the imperial throne. In Vietnam's long history all points of political disjuncture – the transitions from Lý to Lê in the early eleventh century, from Lê to Trần in the early fourteenth century, the Hồ Qúy Lý interregnum in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, the transition from the Ming occupation to the latter Lê, and the Mạc challenge to authority in the sixteenth century – can be examined in this same way. In fact, the relatively rapid series of changes in political regimes between 1400 and 1802, from the Trần to Hồ Quý Lý, to the Lê, the Mạc interregnum, the rise of the Trịnh and Nguyễn, the arrival of the Tây Sơn and finally the victory of the Nguyễn, led one modern Vietnamese historian to observe that the term "loyalty" did not have the controlling force for Vietnamese literati that it had for their Chinese counterparts.[2]

To make sense of the political choices being made by northern literati as they were confronted by the Tây Sơn movement, I begin with a brief introduction to the intellectual environment in which these men lived and worked, for it was a combination of their philosophical understandings and their observations about the political and social context in which they lived that shaped their responses to the

[2] Phan Đại Doãn, ed., *Một Số Vấn Đề Về Nho Giáo Việt Nam* (Some Matters Regarding Vietnamese Confucianism). (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Chính Trị Quốc Gia, 1998), 289.

arrival of the Tây Sơn. There were clearly other factors as well, of course, including financial and personal ones, that guided the political responses of these individuals. The intellectual context is, however, extremely important in helping to understand the ways in which these men thought, and how they responded to or rationalized their responses to events of the Tây Sơn era. I then look at the methods used by Nguyễn Huệ to recruit scholars in the north including issuing edicts calling for their assistance, using already-recruited scholars to appeal to their friends and colleagues, and when necessary attempting to track down and force these scholars to join the Tây Sơn. I conclude with detailed case studies of three individual scholars in which I explore their personal responses to the summons by the Tây Sơn leader. I show that while some, like Ngô Thì Nhậm were eager to serve the Tây Sơn, others, like Trần Danh Án just as steadfastly refused to serve, and yet others, like Bùi Dương Lịch sought to avoid serving, but found that circumstances prodded them into reluctant service.

Eighteenth-century Intellectual Ferment

The eighteenth century, while renowned for its social and political unrest, was also one of intellectual ferment in the northern part of Việt Nam. Some of the most important intellects of Vietnamese history were active in this period and the eighteenth century has been described as one of the high points in the history of Vietnamese philosophical thought.[3] The latter half of the eighteenth century was the era of Lê Quý Đôn (1726-1784), among the most important writers and philosophers of Vietnam's long history, and of Nguyễn Du (1765-1820), the author of the *Tale of Kiều*. Perhaps less well known, but also formidable talents such as Ngô Thì Nhậm (1746-1802), Phan Huy Ích (1751-1822), Bùi Dương Lích (1758-1827), Bùi Huy Bích (1744-1818), and others were active during the Tây Sơn period and affected by and reflecting on its events. Many of these men belonged to the ranks of the *tiến sĩ*

[3] Nguyễn Tài Thư, ed., *Lịch Sử Tư Tưởng Việt Nam, Tập 1* (History of Vietnamese Thought, vol. 1) (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1993), 414.

(進士), men who had passed the final stage of the multi-level imperial examination system. This placed them into the upper echelon of literati, and this rank is a useful if imperfect guide to their intellectual stature in northern society at the time. The numbers of men accorded this rank remained very small, setting them apart in a very real sense. For example, between 1770 and 1787 only 73 men attained this rank in the examinations, which were generally held every three years.

Confronted with the social and political turbulence of their generation, the Vietnamese scholars of the late eighteenth century began to reexamine their Confucian traditions. They were convinced that the problems of their generation stemmed in part from an inadequate understanding of the Confucian classics. Thus, the period of the mid to late eighteenth century was one of intensive study of the classics, driven by the conviction that the cure for what ailed their era was contained therein. This renewed commitment to Confucian study became known as *khảo chứng* (考 正) scholarship, or "evidentiary studies." Rather than a new way of thinking, it was a new method of examining the texts. Like their counterparts in China, which during the eighteenth century saw a very well-developed *khảo chứng* movement, the Vietnamese scholars sought to reassess the basic texts of the Confucian canon. For the first time, they were looking carefully at the original Confucian Classics, rather than viewing them through the interpretations of the great Sung scholar, Zhu Xi.[4] They also attempted to gather as many texts as they could, attempting to analyze their content and veracity. This tradition blossomed into a movement that expanded beyond simply looking at the Confucian canon, to suggesting new ways of researching and writing histories, geographies, biographies, etc. – an approach that extended well into the nineteenth century.

But study of these texts was just the first step for scholars. For this study to have an impact on society, the Confucian texts and their message had to be broadly disseminated to give the general population a better grounding in the basic precepts of Confucianism. This was considered critical, because the important scholars of the

[4] Doãn, 70-71.

day, including notably Lê Quý Đôn and Ngô Thì Nhậm, echoed Confucius' maxim that "the people are the cornerstone of the state."[5] Or, as Nguyễn Thiếp phrased it in a 1791 letter to the Tây Sơn ruler, "The people are the foundation of the country; they are the stable base of the newly pacified state."[6] These scholars knew from personal experience the hardships that the rural populations faced, and each had memorialized to their leaders about the need to address the concerns of the population. So at the practical level of concrete actions they were aware that policy changes had to be made: removing corrupt officials, conducting new land and population surveys, and returning vagabond populations to their homes. But for them the more fundamental problems of the larger society had to be addressed at the level of morality and proper conduct.

In this regard, drawing on *khảo chứng* scholarship to promote reform and popularization of Confucian principles, the Vietnamese scholars departed markedly from their Chinese counterparts of the same era. For the Chinese scholars, *khảo chứng* scholarship was a purely philosophical pursuit, albeit possibly one with political overtones.[7] For the Vietnamese it was a much less abstract issue, related to their thoughts about how best to serve their society. This difference also makes clear that whatever the Chinese philosophical influences on Vietnamese intellectuals, and indeed to whatever degree Vietnamese intellectuals assumed themselves to be following the Chinese traditions, the southern scholars operated in a milieu shaped by the different historical and social context of their country. Thus, Vietnamese scholarship related to Confucian traditions must be recognized to be distinct from the Chinese practices concerning those same traditions. Vietnamese scholars did not merely imitate Chinese Confucian practices, any more than they merely imitated Chinese poetic forms. The Vietnamese scholars borrowed from the Chinese tradition, while at the same time adapting Chinese ideas to their own needs, circumstances and

[5] This view is set forth in the *Kinh Thư* (Book of History), cited in Thư, 461; on Nhậm, eg. see Thư, 461-462;

[6] Hoàng Xuân Hãn, *La Sơn Phu Tử* (The Master of La Sơn) (Paris: Minh Tân, 1952), 141-142.

[7] R. Kent Guy, *The Emperor's Four Treasuries: Scholars and State in the Late Ch'ien-lung Era* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 40-41.

even aesthetics.

It is also important to bear in mind that the Confucian scholars of this generation were very closely linked to the larger rural populations. As Phan Đại Doãn, a noted Vietnamese intellectual historian, has pointed out, the vast majority of elite Confucian scholars were from rural areas, and were not natives of the capitol, Thăng Long.[8] While some might temporarily serve in the capitol as officials, most of those who passed the examinations at various levels would either serve as officials in far-flung parts of the country, eventually retiring to their native village, or would never serve as officials, instead returning to their native villages as teachers. In either case, these scholars remained very much connected to their rural roots (in contradistinction to their Chinese counterparts, according to Doãn). Thus, the Confucian scholars had a very personal and concrete interest in seeing that the needs of the peasantry were being met, for in meeting these needs the populations would remain tranquil, which in turn would provide stability to the larger state. When the peasantry rose up in revolt, it was not an abstract problem for these Confucian scholars, but a very real concern that could affect their own villages and families.

Indeed, the Confucian scholars of this period clearly had a mental image of an ideal village life and peasant mentality. Lê Qúy Đôn's record of his observations while in the south, the *Phủ Biên Tạp Lục*, provides us with one such idealized description:

> The people in the trấn of Thuận-hóa in the prefecture of Quảng-bình had a character that was sincere and meek. These people had tranquil hearts and remained in their villages and their fields and gardens. Rarely would they go out to other regions or go through a lot of travails to go to distant places. Usually they did not know which district was at the side of their village, and if there were many roads or short roads. They also did not usually know what sort of beautiful scenic features the capital of Phú-xuân had. The prefecture of Triệu-phong was a place that had many immigrant residents, but it originally did not have any areas with loose customs or groups of vagabonds. Some aboriginal villages and hamlets were also all pacified and

[8] Doãn, 65; see also David Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism: 1885-1925* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 52-53.

> earning a living, and they were not acquainted with going to places of cities and markets. These customs were very good . . . If there were some minor officials and some people who brought suits against one another, then we would give them notice and we would mediate. In this manner the people in one area were all at peace.[9]

From this description a picture of an ideal village resident emerges. It is a meek person of sincere character who spends their time in their own village and farm. He or she has never contemplated visiting the nearby villages, much less towns, and would never consider wandering off. Unfortunately for Vietnamese Confucian scholars of this era, few villages (if any) approximated this ideal, and many were in turmoil reflecting political and economic chaos exacerbated by crop failures and famines.

Combining then their concern about the social crisis of their community and their belief in the ameliorative qualities of Confucian doctrine, northern scholars engaged in a flurry of activity to popularize the Confucian classics. These popularizers included prominent intellectuals such as Lê Quý Đôn and Bùi Huy Bích, as well as Ngô Thì Sĩ (1726-1780) and Bùi Dương Lịch. These popularizations took various forms: abridged versions of the originals, simplified extracts from the classics, versification of the classics, and very importantly, efforts to translate the classics or at least parts of them into the vernacular script – *chữ nôm*.[10] While the Tây Sơn have often been credited for their project to produce *nôm* translations of the classics, their effort was merely the largest and most formal effort of an existing tradition that sought to extend popular awareness of the Confucian texts through their availability in a more widely readable form.[11]

While scholars sought to popularize the Confucian classics within the larger society, this era also saw a new emphasis on family morality and family relationships. More than any other element of society, the family was perceived as

[9] *PBTL* (1972), vol. 3, 258-259.

[10] This vernacular script was derived from Chinese characters, using two Chinese characters, or subcomponents of Chinese characters to represent the meaning and Vietnamese pronunciation of that word.

[11] Doãn, 69-72.

central to the task of producing a stable population. As Insun Yu noted in an important study of seventeenth and eighteenth-century Vietnamese society:

> Filial piety based upon family morality was the main theme of Confucianism and received the primary emphasis in the attempts at Confucian revival. The emphasis on Confucianism was closely connected to the ruler's political control of the society: the stabilization of families through their self-control would lead on the one hand to establishing the social order, and would be essential to the supply of revenue and manpower to the government on the other.[12]

Thus, the late eighteenth century also saw the production of a large number of *gia huấn* (家 訓) or "family admonitions." While this literary form was not new to the eighteenth century, it flourished more so than perhaps at any other time in Vietnamese history.[13] These texts were designed to provide children with a grounding in the fundamentals of correct (Confucian) behavior within the family as well as within the larger community. Among the most well-known such texts are Ngô Thì Sĩ's *Ngô Thị Gia Huấn* (Ngô Family Admonitions) and Bùi Dương Lịch's *Bùi Gia Huấn Hài* (Bùi Family Admonitions for Youth) These texts also served to popularize the Confucian ideals and hopefully lay the groundwork for a more harmonious society to replace the chaotic one that these men confronted.

Finally, along with the ongoing efforts to instill Confucian virtues in the society in general and the family in particular, some scholars felt this was still insufficient to resolve the larger social and political problems. For them there remained a more immediate problem to be addressed, namely the poor quality of officials serving the court. According to these scholars, many court officials were inadequately trained and lacked both morals and sufficient vision to serve their generation. Bùi Huy Bích lamented a situation in which officials understood formulas for writing memorials or other imperial paperwork, but did not understand

[12] Insun Yu, *Law and Society in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Vietnam* (Seoul: Asiatic Research Center, 1990), 135.

[13] A representative list of extant *gia huấn* held at the Viện Hán Nôm indicates that the preponderance of such texts date from the eighteenth century, see Doãn, 164.

basic principles of statecraft or military matters.[14] Ngô Thì Nhậm bemoaned the lack of training in decorum and propriety for court officials as indicative of poor education, which in turn would lead to failed policies and corruption.[15] For both of these men, the answer lay in a renewed commitment to proper education, and for Bích adequate testing to ensure that officials were prepared for all aspects of their duties. Again, these were the sorts of solutions that could be brought about by a renewed pursuit of Confucian ideals and their wider propagation, and not necessarily by a change in regime.

Eighteenth-century northern scholars then saw a society in turmoil, beset by corrupt officials, a lack of proper moral training and insufficient family decorum. Their answer to all of these problems was in part, as we have seen, to propagate Confucian values and education. Once this was properly understood by all levels of society, these scholars believed that the proper harmony would be restored. For some this was the ultimate answer to their concerns. For others more had to be done – the solutions required actions and not merely words. The question that they faced as the Tây Sơn entered the north in 1786 and especially after 1788 (when the Lê Emperor was formally displaced) was whether the Tây Sơn represented a potential solution – a fresh start – or merely the most dramatic manifestation of the disorder that had brought their society to its troubled state. Secondly, they had to ask themselves whether, if they believed the Tây Sơn might be part of the solution, they could forego Confucian dictates regarding loyalty to serve a new dynasty.

Despite the uncertainty of this period, many scholars continued to emphasize loyalty as a fundamental concept of the Confucian ethic they sought to promote among the larger populace. Thus, whatever their misgivings about the regime in charge, many felt they had to serve as models of loyalty. And many of them did

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[14] Vũ Khiêu, "Bùi Huy Bích và Nho Giáo,"(Bùi Huy Bích and Confucianism) *Tạp Chí Triết Học*, 4 (104) (1998): 34.

[15] *Tuyển Tập Thơ Văn Ngô Thì Nhậm* (Collected Writings of Ngô Thì Nhậm), eds. Cao Xuân Huy and Thạch Can, vol. 1 (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1978), 162.

remain genuinely loyal to their Emperor or their Lord (the Trịnh Chúa). This was despite the fact that, as Alexander Woodside has observed, "the latent, if not manifest, content of Confucian concepts like 'loyalty' had become unprecedently blurred and treacherous in Vietnam between the 1780s and the 1880s."[16] For scholars seeking to maintain their loyalty regardless of circumstances, the arrival of the Tây Sơn was not the answer to prayers for salvation, but rather represented the onset of a dark period that one scholar described as being "in the mouth of the tiger." This phrase would have resonated for their Chinese counterparts, who had used it frequently in referring to their own dilemma during the seventeenth century Ming-Qing transition, when similar challenges to orthodox notions of loyalty had existed.[17] In some ways this situation in Việt Nam was similar to that of China a century and a few decades earlier, for it was also a time of disruption and anguish, of massacres and war, and of questions regarding loyalty and betrayal.

It is important to bear in mind that the issues being addressed by scholars involved not merely whether or not the "mandate of heaven" had been transferred to the Tây Sơn, but also a number of complicating factors. The Tây Sơn had initially entered the north to "save" the Lê, but later had seemingly driven them into exile, and sought to supplant them, something even the Trịnh had never attempted. These scholars had also seen their Emperor restored by a huge Chinese army, which he himself had invited in and to whose commander he appeared completely subservient. Then, after the Chinese restorationist forces had been driven out, the Chinese court recognized the new Tây Sơn Emperor's status, leaving northern scholars to grapple with the implications of this act by the Chinese. Just as problematic, the Lê Emperor was still alive in exile (until 1793), and a crown prince of the royal family was still rallying troops in Đại Việt a year later. All of these issues served to complicate the calculus that northern scholars confronted as they contemplated the

[16] Alexander Woodside, review of *Lettrés et Paysans Vietnamiens Face à la Conquête Colonial*, by Charles Fourniau, *Journal of Asian Studies* 49, no. 4 (November 1990): 994.

[17] See for example Lynne A. Struve, *Voices from the Ming-Qing Cataclysm: China in Tigers' Jaws* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 1.

Tây Sơn regime.

Broadly speaking these northern scholars can the placed into two categories based on their responses to the events of this period: those who served the Tây Sơn and those who did not. Scholar-officials chose to serve the Tây Sơn for a variety of reasons and with varying degrees of commitment. Some served enthusiastically, while others joined more reluctantly and under considerable pressure. A few agreed to serve out of a genuine enthusiasm for the Tây Sơn project and the prospects for a renewed political and social order. Others joined for more pragmatic reasons, supporting what they perceived to be the de facto political authority in order to continue careers as officials begun under the Lê. The ultimate expression of this pragmatism is found in the case of Tuần Huyện Trang. After defying his teacher and betraying the fleeing Trịnh Chúa (who had been entrusted to his care), he explained his actions this way: "I am not as much afraid of my teacher as I am of the rebels, and I do not love the Chúa as much as I love myself."[18] Many political pragmatists like Trang rode out the Tây Sơn storm and then offered their services to the new Nguyễn regime after 1802. For this they occasionally suffered considerable criticism, such as the nineteenth-century observation about Bùi Dương Lịch's career:

> In the era of [Lê] Cảnh Hưng he passed the *tiến sĩ*.
> During the reign of the false Tây Sơn he entered the Hàn Lâm Academy,
> And in our present reign he is again acting as a supervisor of studies.
> This is truly going with the times and [being] a flying bird.[19]

Among northern scholars who did not serve the Tây Sơn this was a period of great anguish and danger. Not surprisingly, the majority of scholars, as is often the case in periods of turmoil, simply went into retreat refusing to serve anyone and

[18] Ngô Gia Văn Phái, *Hoàng Lê Nhất Thống Chí*, Tập 2. (The Imperial Lê Unification Records, vol. 2) trans. Nguyễn Đức Vân and Kiều Thu Hoạch (Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Học, 1998), 119. (Hereafter *HLNTC* (1998).

[19] Nguyễn Văn Hoàn, "Phong Trào Khởi Nghĩa Nông Dân và Văn Học Việt Nam Thế Kỷ XVIII và Nửa Đầu Thế Kỷ XIX" (Righteous uprising peasant movements and Vietnamese literature of the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries), *Tạp Chí Văn Học* 4 (1973): 28.

waiting for the situation to resolve itself. This led Quang Trung to lament (via the hand of Ngô Thì Nhậm): "alas, when heaven and earth are in deadlock, then the virtuous and talented hide themselves."[20] While some scholars were in retreat or retirement, others went into deep hiding, often forced to wander from one place to another to avoid being summoned or forced to come to the court.[21] This highlights once again a particular difficulty for scholars in this period, for simple retirement was rarely an option for prominent scholars. They had actively to avoid summons or risk capture, as will be detailed below. Some succeeded in avoiding capture, like Nguyễn Du and Bùi Huy Bích, while many others were discovered and brought to the Tây Sơn court. A few pleaded old age or illness as factors preventing their serving the new regime.[22] Some actively fought the Tây Sơn, raising troops in ill-fated attempts to defend the Lê dynasty.[23] Others went into exile with the Lê in China, hoping that perhaps the Qing could be convinced to send a second restoration force after the defeat of the first Qing army in 1789.[24] And finally, some committed suicide rather than face capture or forced service to the Tây Sơn.[25]

This array of responses should make clear that one cannot argue that some underlying belief in Confucianism was a constant guide to these men. Indeed, the wide variety of reactions to the Tây Sơn suggests that there was no standard "Confucian" response to the Tây Sơn challenge to the northern political order. Thus I do not wish to reify Confucianism and its hold on Vietnamese thinkers of the eighteenth century. Some genuinely acted out of respect for deeply held belief in a Confucian ethos. Others reacted pragmatically to personal circumstances or relationships with one or another political alliance. In this chapter I want only to suggest that the language of Confucianism was often the one used by scholars to express themselves politically. Whether their discourse reflected their personal beliefs

[20] *Tuyển Tập Thơ Văn Ngô Thì Nhậm*, 124.
[21] Examples include Nguyễn Du and Ngô Thì Đạo.
[22] Examples include Ngô Trọng Khuê and Bùi Huy Bích
[23] Examples include Trần Danh Án and Ngô Thì Chí (1753-1788)
[24] Examples include Lê Quýnh (1750-1805) and Lê Duy Đản.
[25] Examples include Lý Trần Quán and Nguyễn Huy Trạc.

or truly explained their political affiliations is perhaps another matter entirely. Their actions as much as their words reveal the attitudes of these scholars, and in this study I attempt to describe their responses to the Tây Sơn in terms of both. To do this I turn next to the ways in which the Tây Sơn ruler Nguyễn Huệ recruited these individuals, before looking in detail at the cases of three representative scholars.

The Tây Sơn recruit Scholar Officials

For the Tây Sơn leader in the north, Nguyễn Huệ (also known as the Emperor Quang Trung after 1788), these scholars represented several things. First of all, their support or approbation would serve as a welcome form of legitimation for the Tây Sơn leader as he sought to establish a new dynasty. Legitimacy in the eyes of the scholars was important, because their stature in society could convince the broader populations to follow the Tây Sơn. With their ties to specific rural areas, once particular scholars had been drawn into serving the Tây Sơn the populations from their home districts might also be brought into the fold. Trương Bưu Lâm has succinctly summarized the importance of scholars in this regard:

> A rebel leader with national ambition could break down the skepticism of constituencies that did not know him only if he first won over their scholars. That, naturally was not an easy task as scholars generally occupied a favoured position in traditional Vietnamese society, and so were disinclined to wish for change. Their conservatism could be superseded only if the gravity of local conditions forced their hand or, if their ambitions had seen no fruit under the current regime. Whatever their motive, no rebel message could get very far until the scholars agreed to carry it, for the villagers typically mistrusted unfamiliar messengers . . . [26]

Clearly, winning over scholars for their role as conduits to the wider population was an important part of the Tây Sơn leaders' strategy. At a more pragmatic level, the Tây Sơn also needed these men as administrators for the newly captured territories and as ambassadors to China, especially after 1789. But

[26] Trương Bưu Lâm, *Resistance, Rebellion, Revolution: Popular Movements in Vietnamese History* (Singapore: ISEAS, 1984), 8.

ultimately and most concretely the Tây Sơn needed scholars for their knowledge of the north and its problems and populations for this was a territory largely unknown to the Tây Sơn coming up from the southern realm. The degree to which Nguyễn Huệ relied on scholars and deferred to them is demonstrated in his relationship with Nguyễn Thiếp, a respected and reclusive scholar in Nghệ An. Huệ repeatedly asked Thiếp's advice, acted on his suggestions, and deferred to his wishes, all of which suggest the importance of this man in specific and scholars in general.[27]

Apparently as early as 1786 Nguyễn Huệ was already thinking about the degree to which he would need to rely on northern scholars to help him in his interactions with that region. The advent of the summer 1786 campaign across the Gianh River coincided with provincial-level exams taking place in Nghệ An, which lay in the path of the invading armies. According to one account, Nguyễn Huệ ordered his troops to safeguard the completed examination papers so that they could later be graded.[28] That he would order this degree of care concerning the examinations suggests that he wanted to ensure that he had a sufficiently large pool of educated men to draw from in order to assist him in the north. One of his most noted officials, Nguyễn Thế Lịch, was in fact among those who had taken part in these Nghệ An examinations, and who was later recruited based on his performance there.

Nguyễn Huệ's pursuit of scholars was remarkable for its tenacity. He seemed unwilling to allow any scholars simply to retreat quietly into seclusion in hopes of waiting out the turmoil of that era. Huệ made concerted efforts to recruit all of the major scholars of the day and many minor literati as well. As one scholar of that era wrote about Huệ's efforts: "(he) behaves toward scholars without differentiating between those of South or North, searching and inquiring everywhere in caves and

[27] There is no room to describe their relationship in more detail, but the story is told in Hãn (1952), based on Hãn's remarkable discovery in the 1940s of a trove of documents exchanged between Huệ and Thiếp from 1787 to 1792.

[28] Hoàng Tuấn Phổ, "Một Trí Thức Yêu Nước Cuối Thế Kỷ 18" (A Patriotic Intellectual of the Late Eighteenth Century) *Tạp Chí Tổ Quốc* No. 365 (Feb. 1977): 42-43. This examination session is also described in Bui Dương Lịch, *Lê Quý Dật Sử* (Unusual Tales of the Precious Lê), trans. Phạm Văn Thắm (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1987), 61. [Hereafter *LQDS*]

forests, in grasses and thickets."[29] In a second letter the same scholar described the process as "looking into mountain caves, asking in native areas, gathering and collecting and not leaving out any types of vegetables or grasses."[30] This assessment was probably not entirely metaphorical, but reflected the reality of the Tây Sơn leader seeking to track down scholars who had taken to hiding themselves in caves and forests, like Huy Trâm, a 1779 *tiến sĩ*, who swore that "if I do not die, then I will take refuge in the mountains and forests, determined not to serve as an official for the Tây Sơn."[31] While some did escape detection, many were unable to hide and were forced either to come to the court or at least to justify their refusal to appear there.

Determined to garner the services of northern literati, Nguyễn Huệ took a number of steps to recruit these men. He issued proclamations that broadly sought loyalty to his person and support for his regime, and more specifically called on individuals to serve in a variety of administrative and consultative positions. Secondly, he made more direct appeals to individual scholars, using as intermediaries respected scholars who had already agreed to join the rebel side. Finally, when these two methods failed, Nguyễn Huệ did not hesitate to coerce or force particular scholars into audience so he could appeal to them in person.

Huệ initially issued proclamations designed to indicate his respect for scholars' talents and expressing his willingness to employ them in his new regime. In late 1788, on ascending the throne as the Quang Trung Emperor (thereby formally supplanting the Lê ruler), he put forth a proclamation designed to appeal to scholars:

> Recently, the civil and military generals, and the officials both inside and out, all wanted me quickly to ascend the precious throne in order tightly to defend the hearts of the people. They had already two or three times submitted letters advising me to ascend the throne. It was a golden petition of veneration whose words they had not schemed among themselves. I held the spirit dish to be very important, and the throne of heaven truly to be a

[29] Ngọc Liễn,"Từ Mấy Văn Bản Viết Đời Tây Sơn Mới Phát Hiện," (A Number of Recently Discovered Original Documents from the Tây Sơn Period) *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử* 162 (1975): 41.
[30] ibid., 41.
[31] *Tây Sơn Thuật Lược* (A Summary Recounting of the Tây Sơn) (Phủ Quốc: Phủ Quốc Vụ Khanh Đặc Trách Văn Hóa Xuất Bản, 1971), 13.

> difficult one. My only true worry was that I would not have the strength to endure it, but the oppression of the people everywhere was all around me. Thus, since this is the will of heaven, what then can a person do?[32]

In his edict the Tây Sơn leader repeatedly emphasized his reluctance to name himself Emperor, arguing that it had been a necessary response to dire circumstances and also to the appeals of northern political officials. In doing so, he was clearly hoping to emphasize the sanction he had received. In fact, Nguyễn Huệ emphasized that his action had not only been sanctioned by court officials, but had been urged by them – a sign to others contemplating the Tây Sơn that his taking the throne had received the imprimatur of men of standing.

Of course these claims were merely that – claims – and needed to be repeated and elaborated in the hopes of strengthening their appeal. In a later decree, "An Edict Seeking Worthy Men," Quang Trung again emphasized his desire to bring out people of talent to serve his administration:

> It has been heard that virtuous people on the earth are like bright stars in the heavens. The stars must all wait on the North Star, and likewise, virtuous people must all be ready to act according to the employments of the Son of Heaven. If they hide their reputations, or they have talents but do not provide them for the reign to use, then this is not the intention of heaven, which gives birth to people of virtue.[33]

and

> During the time that heaven is still building in its early stages, this is a time that superior men use [their talents] in statecraft . . . [and] all those who carry talent and embrace virtue, should have the intention of striving to use [their talents], to display themselves at the king's palace, and be of one respectful heart in order together to enjoy honor and veneration.[34]

In another edict, possibly issued in 1789 or 1790 though it is not specifically dated, Quang Trung tried to use ancient precedent to assure northern officials that

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[32] *Tuyển Tập Thơ Văn Ngô Thì Nhậm*, 104-105. The mention of the scholars having appealed "two or three times" reflects a highly ritualized resistance on the new Emperor's part, a ritual dating from the earliest period of Chinese history.

[33] ibid., 121.

[34] ibid., 123.

switching allegiance and serving a new dynasty was an acceptable option:

> All people should take this opportunity to undertake tasks, and to imitate the scholars of the Ân house who went quickly to provide their assistance to the Chu house in order to defend their reputations. These heroes received wealth and honors. If it is like this what could be better? If you are still going ahead with being crazy, then in the end you will bring disaster upon yourselves. I urge you to act in time.[35]

Here the reference was to members of the house of Zhou overthrowing the Shang dynasty (in China of the twelfth century B.C.E.), and the willingness of Shang political figures to shift their loyalties to the new regime. But even classical precedents were frequently insufficient at times like these, because for every classical precedent there is frequently a counter-precedent, or at least an alternative moral guidepost. For example, a Lê loyalist in a poem recounting his despair noted "I am angry that I do not have Vương Xúc's sword of loyalty," in reference to a classical figure who committed suicide rather than serve a new regime.[36] And many scholars simply replied to the Tây Sơn appeals by quoting the maxim that "loyal scholars do not serve two regimes."

It soon became clear that Nguyễn Huệ's edicts were not succeeding in procuring the services of many top-level officials, and subsequent edicts repeatedly touched on the slow response by scholar-officials and the fact that many remained in hiding. For example, the "Imperial Edict to the Civil and Military Officials of the Old Dynasty," declared:

> I again bestow this royal edict, opening up the roads and rivers, as I have already insisted two or three times. And yet, all the people continue to wait in impatient indecision, purposely remaining at large . . . I have a feeling of love for people of talent, and I am not even for a short moment able to forget them.

In yet another appeal, the "Edict Seeking Loyalty," Quang Trung lamented:

I am currently carefully paying attention to trying to listen. In the early

[35] ibid., 113.

[36] Nguyễn Đình Giản (1734 - ?) a 1769 *tiến sĩ*. See *HLNTC* (1998), vol. 1, 211-212.

> days I waited impatiently. And even though the peoples of talent and advanced studies are numerous, no one has yet come. Is it that I am a person of little virtue, not worthy of receiving support? Or is it that during this time of chaos they are not yet able to give service to any king?[37]

When these general appeals for support failed or as he continued to await a response, Quang Trung turned to more direct appeals, namely the time-honored technique of using those who had already joined the new regime to recruit their friends and peers. Quang Trung understood that the easiest way to gain the support of northern intellectuals was to engage the assistance of a few key figures, who could themselves serve as conduits to the others through their personal and professional relationships. This was to prove the single most successful recruiting method for the Tây Sơn, bringing in some of the most important scholars of the age.

One important characteristic of the elite scholars in the north was that they formed an extremely close-knit community. Many of them had either studied together, had become friends while taking the examinations or elsewhere, or were related by marriage. For example, Ngô Thì Nhậm was Phan Huy Ích's brother-in-law, and had studied with Lê Quý Đôn. Nguyễn Du was Đoàn Nguyễn Tuấn's (1750-?) brother-in-law. Ninh Tốn (1743-?) had either received poems of praise or introductions for his literary works written by Phạm Nguyễn Du, Phan Huy Ích, Ngô Thì Nhậm, Vũ Huy Tấn (1749-1800), Đoàn Nguyễn Tuấn, Nguyễn Thế Lịch (1748-1817), and Vũ Huy Đĩnh (1730-1789).[38] Together these closely-connected men represented many of the most important northern scholars of their generation, and those whom the Tây Sơn Emperor most hoped to draw into his service. This meant that during the Tây Sơn years, if one of these scholars could be recruited to the rebel side, then hopefully he could be counted on to bring others into the Tây Sơn government. Of these scholars several were particularly important to Quang Trung's efforts in recruiting others: Trần Văn Kỷ, Ngô Thì Nhậm, and Nguyễn Thiếp.

Trần Văn Kỷ (1740s?-1801), who ranks among the earliest scholar-official

[37] *Tuyển Tập Thơ Văn Ngô Thì Nhậm*, 121.

[38] *Thơ Văn Ninh Tốn* (The Poetry of Ninh Tốn), ed. Hoàng Lê (Hà Nội, Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1984), 17. With the exception of Vũ Huy Tấn, each of these men had attained the rank of *tiến sĩ*.

supporters of the Tây Sơn, was the lynchpin for Quang Trung's efforts to recruit important northern scholars. One can trace the support of nearly all the key northern literati either directly or indirectly to his efforts. Trần Văn Kỷ was not a native northerner, but a resident of the Thuận Hóa region near the old Nguyễn court's power center at Phú Xuân. In 1777 he passed the provincial examination administered by the Trịnh in the newly captured Phú Xuân region, and the following year in 1778, he sat for the *thi hội*, the last stage before the court exam, in Thăng Long, becoming perhaps the first southerner ever to participate in these exams. During his time in the north Kỷ gained a reputation as an outstanding scholar and developed connections with many important northern intellectuals. Then, at some point in the early 1780s, he returned to Phú Xuân. When Nguyễn Huệ seized that city from the Trịnh in 1786, he summoned Trần Văn Kỷ to, as the *Hoàng Lê Nhất Thống Chí* put it, "ask of matters pertaining to the South and North."[39] Kỷ apparently heeded the summons eagerly, quickly becoming one of Quang Trung's most trusted advisors.[40]

In early 1788, Kỷ accompanied Nguyễn Huệ's armies as they returned to the north to subdue a renegade Tây Sơn general who had been supervising political affairs at the northern capitol, Thăng Long. During this trip Trần Văn Kỷ arranged introductions for Nguyễn Huệ with some of the most important northern scholars. First of all, he counseled Nguyễn Huệ to make contact with Nguyễn Thiếp (1723-1804), the renowned but reclusive scholar in Nghệ An, through which region the Tây Sơn troops passed as they traveled between south and north. Thiếp was unwilling to come out to serve the Tây Sơn leader in a formal official capacity, but he did agree to offer advice and information on the problems of his region. Moreover, despite Thiếp's reluctance to serve the Tây Sơn leader, the two men developed a close relationship that was to endure until the Tây Sơn Emperor's death in 1792. Thiếp's connections to the Tây Sơn were almost certainly instrumental in helping the Tây

[39] *HLNTC* (1998), vol. 2, 112-113.

[40] Kỷ would have provided a good balance with the other northern who had already joined the Tây Sơn - Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh. While Chỉnh was a military general by training and had connections in Nghệ An, Kỷ was a scholar and had experience with the circle of scholars in Thăng Long.

Sơn recruit several other prominent Nghệ An scholars, one of whom – Bùi Dương Lịch – I will discuss in more detail later. While it is not clear if Thiếp actively recruited Nghệ An scholars, the mere fact that he established a good relationship with the Tây Sơn leader no doubt made it easier for other Nghệ An *tiến sĩ* to agree to serve the Tây Sơn. And clearly Huệ had Thiếp's influence and reputation in mind when he pursued him. Bùi Dương Lịch made this clear when he recorded in his *Lê Qúy Dật Sử*, that "Nguyễn Huệ wanted to rely on him [Thiếp] in order to restore the hearts of the people . . ."[41]

Later in 1788, during the time that Huệ was in Thăng Long and after the Lê Emperor had fled, Kỷ arranged further meetings between Nguyễn Huệ and some of the leading northern scholars, including Ngô Thì Nhậm and Phan Huy Ích.[42] Like many of his fellows scholars, Nhậm was initially reluctant to come forth, but Kỷ is said to have told him:

> I have heard that you are a man of extraordinary talent, but who was unfortunately slandered and forced to flee for the past five or six years . . . Now you must come forth to be employed in this generation, and in a timely fashion. I have brought up your name before the high Chúa [ie. Nguyễn Huệ], and praised your talents as being useful for great tasks. Fortunately now the Chúa has condescended to this, and has sent me to find you.[43]

At this point Nhậm agreed to join the Tây sơn cause, and in turn became vitally important to the Tây Sơn leader's recruitment efforts.

Nhậm had connections to many important northern scholars because of his extensive service under the Trịnh and his prominent lineage. As was noted earlier, he was related to another important *tiến sĩ*, Phan Huy Ích, by marriage and he was also friends with many others. In his efforts to recruit the services of important scholars for the Tây Sơn, he wrote numerous letters of appeal both at Quang Trung's behest

[41] *LQDS*, 90.

[42] Đỗ Băng, "Trung Thư Phụng Chính Trần Văn Kỷ" (The Trung Thư Phụng Chính Trần Văn Kỷ), *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sủ* 177 (1981): 65.

[43] *HLNTC* (1998), vol. 2, 113. The use of the term Chúa (Lord) to refer to Nguyễn Huệ reflects his having adopted this title after seizing the Nguyễn capitol at Phú Xuân in 1786.

and on his own accord. Among others, he wrote to his uncle Ngô Thì Đạo, and to friends and colleagues including Ninh Tốn, Đoàn Nguyễn Tuấn, Nguyễn Nha, Trần Danh Án, Trần Ba Lãm and Vũ Trinh. He also indirectly came to recruit others. For example, one of his recruitment letters came to the attention of a *giải nguyên* (first on the list of those who passed the second examination) by the surname of Lê, who sent out feelers to Lê Huy Dao, a diehard Lê supporter still active in the north.[44] Quite a few of those he contacted, including Đạo, Dao and Án, resisted Nhậm's entreaties, but others heeded him. Thus, through joining the Tây Sơn cause he was able to bring with him Phan Huy Ích, Ninh Tốn, Đòan Nguyễn Tuấn, Nguyễn Thế Lịch, Trần Ba Lãm, and Vũ Huy Tấn, all of whom became important officials for the Tây Sơn. Consequently, while Nhậm is often remembered for his service to the Tây Sơn as the man who drafted Quang Trung's edicts and provided services as diplomatic correspondent and ambassador to China, his efforts in recruiting fellow scholars were also of considerable importance.[45]

But even personal appeals did not always work; *tiến sĩ* were not always willing to follow the advice of even respected fellow scholars as Nhậm's experience indicates. When this was the case the Tây Sơn ruler was not above resorting to force. This was in spite of the fact that he made early pronouncements indicating a policy of tolerance toward those who chose not to serve the new regime. For example, in his "Edict on Ascending the Throne" in 1788, Nguyễn Huệ declared:

> As for the civil and military officials of the old dynasty, any individual who has gone into exile or who has sought to avoid [us], I declare that they may be allowed to return to their native place, and any person who does not wish to come out to serve as an official may do as he sees fit.[46]

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[44] Hoàng Xuân Hãn, "Phe Chống Đảng Tây Sơn ở Bắc Với Tập 'Lữ Trung Ngâm'" (Those Who Resisted the Tây Sơn in the North and the Volume 'Lữ Trung Ngâm') *Tạp San Sử Địa* 21 (1971): 13.

[45] Quốc Sử Quán Triều Nguyễn, *Đại Nam Chính Biên Liệt Truyện* (The Principle Record of the Ranked Tales of Đại Nam) (4 volumes), trans. Đỗ Mộng Khương and others (Huế: Nhà Xuất Bản Thuận Hóa, 1993), 513, suggests that Nhậm not only recruited these scholars, but also urged a more forceful approach to track down and forcibly return scholars who fled rather than serve the new court. [Hereafter *ĐNLT*]

[46] *Tuyển Tập Thơ Văn Ngô Thì Nhậm*, 109

Moreover, he granted an amnesty to all officials of the old dynasty, excepting those accused of high treason. Even these promises of leniency did not appear to have convinced people to come forth, and in later edicts he had to repeat his assurances that he would be generous towards those who had resisted the Tây Sơn and were continuing their defiance:

> There should be a special department for forgiving the crimes of all people. All people who have been imprisoned will be pardoned, certain individuals who have remained at large and have not yet been captured will be ordered to be given clemency.[47]

In reality, the Tây Sơn approach was rather more complex, and from the outset tolerance was combined with force. For example, in the spring of 1788, after the Lê Emperor had fled from Thăng Long, Nguyễn Huệ attempted to bring together the Lê court officials to assist him in conducting political affairs in the north. In this instance he gathered them and according to some sources forced them to sign a petition of loyalty.[48] They all did this, apparently more or less willingly, with two exceptions: the noted philosopher and compiler Bùi Huy Bích, who feigned illness and did not attend the session, and Nguyễn Huy Trạc (1733-1788), a 1769 *tiến sĩ*, who killed himself by drinking poison.[49] From this episode it is clear that the pattern of forcing cooperation was established fairly early in the Tây Sơn regime in the north. In this particular case, circumstances made it relatively easy to coerce cooperation, since the scholars were already resident in Thăng Long and had little means of escape. In many other cases, however, reluctant scholars had to be tracked

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[47] ibid., 113.

[48] Quốc Sử Quán Triều Nguyễn, *Khâm Định Việt Sử Thông Giám Cương Mục* (The Imperially Ordered Mirror and Commentary on the History of the Việt) (2 volumes), trans. Hoa Bằng, Phạm Trọng Điềm, and Trần Văn Giáp (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Giáo Dục, 1998) vol. 2, 835 specifically mentions Huệ forcing the Lê officials to sign a petition requesting him to ascend the throne. The *Đại Việt Sử Ký Tục Biên* (479) notes that Huệ summoned the old court officials, but does not speak of the forced petition; one source claims that when Bích refused to sign Huệ was upset but had someone else sign for him, see Trúc Khê, *Bùi Huy Bích: Danh Nhân Truyện Ký* (Bùi Huy Bích: Recorded Tales of a Famous Man) (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Hà Nội, 1998) 55-56.

[49] Hoa Bằng, *Quang Trung: Anh Hùng Dân Tộc, 1788-1792* (Quang Trung: National Hero, 1788-1792) (Hà Nội: Tri Tân, 1944; reprint, Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Hóa Thông Tin, 1998), 140

down and brought to the Tây Sơn court by force. Those who on receiving the summons to the Tây Sơn court were unwilling to comply had two choices: suicide or flight. Only a small handful of men chose the former option, and they were honored for their decision in the nineteenth century Nguyễn dynasty chronicle, the *Đại Nam Nhất Thống Chí* (Records of the Unified Đại Nam). This text, produced by the eventual conquerors of the Tây Sơn, highlighted the cases of Trần Đình Liễn, a 1779 *tiến sĩ* who committed suicide by poison when summoned to the Tây Sơn court, and Nguyễn Gia Vận, a 1787 *tiến sĩ*, who when summoned embarked on a hunger strike and died.[50]

Scholars who attempted to flee or hide on the other hand, frequently found themselves the targets of concerted and aggressive Tây Sơn efforts to find them or to force them out of hiding. Nguyễn Đình Giản, a *tiến sĩ* in the 1769 examinations and a devoted Lê supporter was, like many others, unable to follow the Emperor into Chinese exile. He went into hiding in the *trấn* of Sơn Tây. In response the Tây Sơn leader sent soldiers to kidnap his daughter in Thanh Hóa, hoping to use her to convince her father to come out of hiding to serve as an official. He is alleged to have replied: "That young girl is not dead, but she has betrayed our family. I cannot, because of my feelings for my little girl, abandon righteousness toward my king."[51] The Tây Sơn eventually found a way to capture him alive, but he still refused to serve, and then died.[52]

Another Nguyễn text, the *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện* (Ranked Tales of Đại Nam) reported another hostage-taking by the Tây Sơn to force a notable scholar to serve: "Ninh Tốn had initially fled into hiding and refused to come forth, but Huệ then captured his younger brother Hương Công, and put out word that he was going to execute him in order to frighten Tốn. Thereafter Ninh Tốn came forth and also acted

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[50] Quốc Sử Quán Triều Nguyễn, *Đại Nam Nhất Thống Chí* (The Unification Records of Đại Nam), trans. Phạm Trọng Điềm, ed. Đào Duy Anh (Huế: Nhà Xuất Bản Thuận Hóa, 1997), vol. 4, 135. (Hereafter *ĐNNTC*)

[51] ibid., 211.

[52] It is unclear whether he was killed or simply died in prison.

as an official, but before long he requested to retire because of ill health."[53] This account is somewhat at odds with other descriptions, which suggest that Ninh Tốn was a considerably more enthusiastic and longer-serving official, but it appears to reflect his initial reluctance to support the Tây Sơn cause.[54]

There is also the case of Hoàng Nguyễn Thư (1749-1801), who was another *tiến sĩ* in the notable class of 1787. He was able to avoid the Tây Sơn summons for a number of years, but he was finally captured in 1793 and brought to Phú Xuân and forced to serve in the new government. He did so until his death in 1801, while he was serving as the *hiệp trấn* [協 鎮 – assistant provincial administrator] in Lạng Sơn. His is an interesting case both because of the length of time he was able to remain at large and because he was one of the few, if not the only, *tiến sĩ* who was "recruited" after the death of Quang Trung.[55] Another interesting case is that of Ngô Trọng Khuê (1744-1813), a *tiến sĩ* of 1769 who lived in Hà Đông. Apparently a large landholder in that area and an important Lê official, he found his landholdings and property confiscated by the Tây Sơn in 1789 when he did not come quickly enough to offer his services. Although two of his sons chose to serve the new regime, he continued to decline the Tây Sơn Emperor's appeals. Instead, he wrote letters generously praising the Tây Sơn accomplishments, while pleading a lack of skills and his own advanced age as reasons for not coming forth to serve.[56]

It should be noted that while forcing scholar-elites to serve might produce uninspired or perhaps even treacherous officials, this was not always the case. One example is Vũ Huy Tấn, a northern scholar who had tried unsuccessfully to avoid serving the Tây Sơn. He was captured by rebel soldiers in early 1789 and forced to

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[53] *ĐNLT* (vol. 2), 513.

[54] See, for instance, Hoàng Lê, "Về Bước Đường Dẫn Ninh Tốn Đến Vời Tây Sơn" (Concerning the Path that led Ninh Tốn to follow the Tây Sơn), *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử* 184 (1-2, 1979): 57-61.

[55] For a very brief biography see Nguyễn Lộc, ed., *Tổng Tập Văn Học Việt Nam, 9B* (The General Collection of Vietnamese Literature) (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1993), 651. This text also offers a number of his poems, which reflect his reluctance to serve the Tây Sơn.

[56] See Ngọc Liễn, 40-44.

serve the new regime.[57] He did so with great distinction, becoming one of the chief members of the various Tây Sơn embassies to China, and also serving as one of Quang Trung's closest confidants. Probably the principal reason that Tấn was willing to serve the Tây Sơn after his initial reluctance was the pressure of Ngô Thì Nhậm. Like Nhậm, Vũ Huy Tấn was a native of Hải Dương, and not surprisingly the two men had been well acquainted prior to the Tây Sơn attack to the north. This suggests again, that while personal ties did not always guarantee that scholar officials would chose the same side, often such connections did play an important role in persuading otherwise reluctant scholars to serve the new regime.

All of these incidents give lie to the rather benign view of the Tây Sơn treatment of scholars put forth by some Vietnamese academics.[58] While it is true that most were recruited peacefully, and those who refused to serve were often permitted to return home, others were pursued with greater determination and more ruthless tactics. The Tây Sơn ruler was clearly determined either to recruit northern scholars to his regime, or to intimidate them into remaining in retirement rather than raising armed challenges. Primarily, I believe, it was this former desire that motivated Quang Trung's actions. His relentless pursuit of Nguyễn Thiếp despite the latter's repeated refusals to come out to serve in an official capacity gives at least some indication of this. His repeated approaches to such scholars as Trần Danh Án and Trần Ba Lãm, where in both cases he refused to accept their initial decisions to decline to serve, also suggest his desire to recruit even the most recalcitrant individuals.[59]

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[57] Hoa Bằng, "Ông Võ Huy Tân với tập Hoa Trình Tùy Bộ" (Võ Huy Tân and the volume Hoa Trình Tùy Bộ) *Tri Tân* no. 35 (1942): 6.

[58] See for example, Trương Hữu Quýnh. "Thái Độ của Nguyễn Huệ Đối với Trí Thức" (The Attitude of Nguyễn Huệ Toward Intellectuals) in *Gop Phần Tìm Hiểu Phong Trào Nông Dân Tây Sơn Nguyễn Huệ* (Contributions to Understanding the Tây Sơn Peasant Movement and Nguyễn Huệ) (Qui Nhơn: Sở Văn Hóa Thông Tin Nghĩa Bình, 1983), 168-181.

[59] There is evidence of three letters by Nhậm to Án, as well as at least one appearance by Án at the court. In the case of Lãm, there is only one extant letter [*Tuyển Tập Thơ Văn Ngô Thì Nhậm*, 213-216], but it refers to repeated approaches to Lãm.

Cảnh Thịnh and the Intellectuals

Finally, while I have given considerable attention to the relationship of Quang Trung and the northern literati, I want also briefly to examine the relationship that his son and successor, Emperor Cảnh Thịnh (r. 1792-1802), had with these men. Perhaps even more than his father, Cảnh Thịnh was dependent on scholar officials, for when he assumed the throne after his father's unexpectedly sudden demise in 1792, he was only a child of ten. His reign can be characterized as one of considerable internal political turmoil, reminiscent of the chaos in the north in the 1780s. He was initially under the tutelage of his uncle, Bùi Đắc Tuyên, who served as regent (*thái sư*).[60] Tuyên took considerable power into his own hands and became very unpopular among some of the men who had been the key supporters of Quang Trung. Consequently, he was removed in a coup orchestrated by Võ Văn Dũng and Trần Văn Kỷ in 1795.

At this point, the Emperor Cảnh Thịnh, no longer under the control of a powerful regent, followed his father's footsteps in requesting the assistance of men of talent. He issued a series of proclamations to this end, including two edicts seeking suggestions and advice, both written for him by Ngô Thì Nhậm, who had drafted his father's earlier edicts. Moreover, he renewed his father's attempts to bring the scholars out of hiding, as a French missionary observed in a letter written in the summer of 1795:

> There was also another edict that ordered a search for all of the literati who had fled and concealed themselves since the invasion of the kingdom by the Cochinchinese and their delivery to the capitol city to employ them in affairs.[61]

Also, following in the manner of his father, Cảnh Thịnh turned to the reclusive scholar, Nguyễn Thiếp, seeking advice and service as the Tây Sơn regime found itself under increasing pressure from the Nguyễn armies in the late 1790s. The

[60] Bùi Đắc Tuyên was the grandfather of the famed female Tây Sơn general, Bùi Thi Xuân (?-1802).
[61] Charles-François Langlois to Pierre-Antoine Blandin, 18 July, 1795. MEP 692, 46.

Đại Nam Liệt Truyện records their meeting:

> The Cảnh Thịnh king, Quang Toản, found his strength diminishing by the day, and he ordered people to bring generous gifts to summon Nguyễn Thiếp. Nguyễn Thiếp came, and the Cảnh Thịnh king questioned him about affairs of the nation.
> Nguyễn Thiếp replied: "There is nothing further that can be done."
> The Cảnh Thịnh king asked again and Nguyễn Thiếp replied: "Who can bear this?"
> Toản said: "If I am entrusted with the sword and seal who dares not listen to me?"
> Nguyễn Thiếp replied: "Why does the king not listen to this?"
> The Cảnh Thịnh king, Nguyễn Quang Toản, remained silent.
> Nguyễn Thiếp turned and went back speaking to his intimates saying: "There are two fish in a dried up pond. The Nguyễn family has returned to their old homeland. The mountains and rivers of the former lord will imminently become the property of the old lord."[62]

Thiếp, who had been extremely reluctant to serve even Nguyễn Huệ, whom he clearly admired, was entirely unwilling to offer his services to the young Tây Sơn Emperor. Like many other northern scholars, Thiếp's service appears to have been more a function of his respect for the person of Nguyễn Huệ, than for what the Tây Sơn represented more generally. Although Cảnh Thịnh did received the assistance of northern scholars, including Ngô Thì Nhậm, he continued to struggle with ways to solve the political turmoil within his regime. His difficulties were compounded by the fact that many of his father's most prominent and gifted advisors drifted away from the movement during the Cảnh Thịnh reign. While Nhậm and Phan Huy Ích, for instance, continued to write some edicts for the new ruler, their day-to-day involvement decreased considerably in the post-Quang Trung period.

Northern Scholars Shape the Tây Sơn Agenda

Given the keen Tây Sơn interest in procuring the services of northern

[62] Tạ Quang Phát, *Nhà Tây Sơn* (The House of Tây Sơn) (Sài Gòn: Phủ Quốc-Vụ-Khanh Đặc-Trách Văn-Hóa Xuất Bản, 1970), 50a.

scholar elites, it is clear that this relationship between rebel leaders and scholar elites was one of tremendous significance. What impact did these scholars have on the Tây Sơn? Looking at the nature of Tây Sơn rule in the north it seems clear that the scholars recruited into the movement were important not only for their administrative roles, but also their own philosophical contributions to the Tây Sơn agenda. Indeed, their impact in this latter realm is particularly notable.

The Tây Sơn are often cited by Vietnamese historians for their commitment to increasing the use of the written vernacular – *chữ Nôm*. Scholars typically point to anecdotes suggesting that Nguyễn Huệ had long been interested in this issue. In reality, prior to the Tây Sơn period, northern scholars had already, as was noted earlier, developed a very strong interest in using *Nôm*, not as a cultural statement, but as a pragmatic means by which to popularize their own philosophies. Specifically, they wanted to disseminate and make more accessible the key elements of the Confucian canon. To do this they had begun efforts to translate some of these texts into *Nôm*. This casts an entirely new light on the Tây Sơn Emperor's own project to do the very same thing. The Tây Sơn program to translate the Confucian classics into *Nôm*, must be seen as reflecting not merely Quang Trung's personal interest in advancing *Nôm*, but also the ongoing efforts of northern literati to popularize the Confucian literature. Indeed, while contemporary Vietnamese scholars often praise the Tây Sơn for elevating the status of *Nôm* within the official state culture, it is equally important to remember not merely what language was being used, but what was being translated. By making translation of the Confucian canon the centerpiece of Quang Trung's *Nôm* project, it seems clear that northern scholars were promoting their own agenda. Moreover, while Vietnamese scholars see the Tây Sơn promotion of *Nôm* as a way to reduce Chinese cultural influences, the decision then to turn around and translate the core Chinese cultural texts seems at odds with this alleged impulse.

At the same time, the Tây Sơn use of Nôm has sometimes been overstated. While Nôm was used in an official capacity to a much greater extent than ever

before, this must be regarded as a relative measurement. While there are some notable examples of Nôm official writing in this period – ranging from Quang Trung's letters to Nguyễn Thiếp, to the Tây Sơn proclamation appealing for support for their northern campaign in 1786, to the funeral laments written by Phan Huy Ích commemorating the deaths of first Quang Trung, and then his wife Lê Ngọc Hân – in some ways those texts can be seen as exceptional. Most extant Tây Sơn official documentation was still in classical Chinese, including edicts, letters and various decrees.[63] Moreover, some of the most well-respected Tây Sơn officials, including Ngô Thì Nhậm, either never wrote in Nôm, or somehow none of their Nôm writings have survived, suggesting they wrote very little.[64] Thus, while the Tây Sơn, particularly under Quang Trung, clearly made some efforts to encourage the use of Nôm, such efforts were never fully realized. In any event, it is also worth noting that although Quang Trung's letters to Thiếp are frequently cited as the first case of a Vietnamese ruler using the vernacular in official correspondence, his counterpart, Nguyễn Ánh, was writing official letters in Nôm to various foreign governments at virtually the same time.[65] This suggests that Nôm was clearly viewed as an acceptable form of official writing in both Tây Sơn and Nguyễn regions at this time.

The influence of Confucian scholars can also be seen in other elements of northern rule, perhaps nowhere more dramatically than in an edict from the Cảnh Thịnh era calling for a crackdown on followers of the "Portuguese religion" – Christianity.[66] Issued in 1795, this edict sought to restore confidence in state-sponsored Confucianism, describing Christianity as a social cancer. This emphasis on strengthening Confucian practices and beliefs that lay at the core of the Imperial

[63] I am indebted to Stephen O'Harrow for an enlightening conversation that further reinforced my suspicions about the degree to which Nôm had been promoted during the Tây Sơn period.

[64] Ngô Thì Nhậm is known to have written one version of a popular Nôm-Hán primer, so he was clearly highly literate in Nôm, but apparently never chose to write other prose or poetry in that idiom.

[65] See copies of these letters in Nguyễn Cẩm Thúy and Nguyễn Phạm Hùng. *Văn Thơ Nôm Thời Tây Sơn* (Nôm Literature of the Tây Sơn Period). (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1997), pp. 424-461.

[66] *Cảnh Tịnh Triều Công Văn* (Public Documents of the Cảnh Tịnh Court), ms. Vht. 45, Viện Hán Nôm, Hà Nội, Việt Nam, 1a-2b.

state was also central to the objectives of northern intellectual elites. As was noted above, many of the most influential northern scholars decried the decline in political and cultural stability in their state, tracing this decline to insufficient training for officials and a limited popular understanding of basic Confucian precepts. The Tây Sơn decision to consolidate and systematize education at the local level, including the requisition of buildings for schools and the recruitment of local scholars as teachers should also, I believe, be seen to reflect the influence of scholar advisors who had entered the Tây Sơn administrative ranks.[67]

The influence of Confucian scholars on the Tây Sơn leadership appears great, for what we know about the policies of the Tây Sơn leadership appears chiefly in edicts they issued, edicts written for them by some of the most knowledgeable northern scholar officials. It is difficult to distinguish which ideas are those of the Tây Sơn leaders, and which of their scholarly edict writers. But it is likely that a large percentage of the ideas put forth in these edicts are those of the scholars themselves, men who best understood the circumstances in the north. Thus, whether it was a call for a more systematic educational structure or a restoration of agricultural pursuits, the agenda of the Tây Sơn, an agenda that sought to restore harmony, appears very much to have coincided with that which scholars had already been promoting prior to 1786 when the Tây Sơn troops arrived. Moreover, the methods and objectives being pursued had clearly discernible historical antecedents, once again suggesting the influence of historically-versed scholar-elites.

Indeed, the degree to which the Tây Sơn were influenced by the northern Confucian scholars is reflected in the reign and actions of the Emperor Quang Trung, who came to rely on promotion of Confucianism as a form of political and personal legitimation during this period. Specifically, I would argue that the reign of Nguyễn Huệ, and to a lesser extent that of his son Cảnh Thịnh, represented a brief period of re-Confucianization in terms of administration and philosophical orientation that stands in contrast to the earlier Trịnh and Nguyễn administrations. Thus I challenge

[67] See the "Edict Establishing Studies," in *Hàn Các Anh Hoa*, 3a-4b, ms. HV.95a, History Faculty, Hà Nội National University.

Ralph Smith's contention about the Tây Sơn in his "Cycles of Confucianization in Vietnam," that the Tây Sơn represented, if anything, an example of a low point in these cycles of political Confucianism.[68] In fact, a brief summary of Quang Trung's reign makes clear the level of his commitment to Confucianism.

I have already touched on the fact that Quang Trung sought to promote knowledge of the Confucian canon through his Nôm translation project. His interest in these texts was, however, not remote, but also quite personal. The *Tây Sơn Thuật Lược* reported, for example, that Quang Trung established a "Secret Readings Office," which met six times a month in order to read and discuss the Classics and the Histories, and where he could question scholars about the meanings of these texts.[69] We have also Ngô Thì Nhậm's comment that Quang Trung was an intelligent reader with a considerable interest in education.[70] Finally, with respect to the Confucian emphasis on education, Quang Trung took two important steps. First, he restarted the civil service examinations, whose administration had been abandoned during the turmoil of the 1780s. Although only one provincial level exam had been held before his death, it is clear that Quang Trung hoped fully to restore this system as part of his attempts to reestablish political stability throughout his domain. Secondly, he ordered the establishment of a state-sponsored system of schools and made preparations to appoint local scholars to serve in this new school structure.[71] This was another project that was not fully implemented prior to Quang Trung's premature death, but nevertheless gives an indication of the Emperor's commitment to Confucian education.

As this chapter has already made clear, Quang Trung also appointed a large number of Confucian officials to high level positions in his government, suggesting both his practical need for these men as well as a more general respect for their

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[68] Ralph Smith, "Cycles of Confucianization in Vietnam," in Walter Vella, ed, *Aspects of Vietnamese History* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1973), 1-29.

[69] *Tây Sơn Thuật Lược*, 16.

[70] see note 100.

[71] The text of Quang Trung's edict regarding education is found in *Tuyển Tập Thơ Văn Ngô Thì Nhậm*, 225-227.

status, which was closely related to their scholarly and ideological commitment to Confucian doctrines. In addition, he came to follow a rigorous Chinese model in terms of creating titles for positions in his government, looking to the ancient Chinese text the *Zhou-li* for suitable precedents for political and administrative positions and titles. Further evidence of his close connections to Confucian scholars was his very close affiliation with the Nghệ An scholar, Nguyễn Thiếp. Thiếp was widely regarded as one of the most highly respected Confucianist scholars of his generation, having been consulted by numerous earlier rulers, including members of the Trịnh royal family. Indeed, he might well be viewed as an eighteenth-century analog to the sixteenth-century scholar Nguyễn Bỉnh Khiêm. Like Khiêm before him, Thiếp was a respected, and reclusive, scholar to whom political leaders looked for advice and to which advice they frequently deferred.

Finally, one can point to Quang Trung's crackdown on Buddhism as evidence of his greater commitment to Confucianism. Although the Tây Sơn actions against Buddhism were unsystematic by any measure, and were perhaps driven as much by practical as by ideological considerations, the effect was to threaten the one major institution that constituted a challenge to Confucian ideological dominance. In addition to forcing many monks out of their monasteries to serve as soldiers and porters in his armies, Quang Trung later took steps to reduce the number of pagodas and monasteries in his state, seeking to consolidate these and bring them more directly under state control. He also ordered the destruction of various unauthorized temples to "obscene officials," suggesting an attempt to restore state control and sponsorship over ritual altars and temples and the spirits and figures worshipped at these sites.[72]

Taken collectively, Quang Trung's various personal and political commitments to Confucianism make clear the degree to which northern scholars and their agenda greatly shaped the Tây Sơn leader. His actions and policies reflected a continuation of the agendas of northern Confucianists seeking to restore order to a

[72] ibid., 105.

troubled society. Thus, rather than viewing the Tây Sơn leadership as representing a low point in Vietnamese Confucianization, as Smith has done, I believe it must be seen, at least during the short reign of Quang Trung, as a time of revitalization of state commitments to Confucian ideology. Indeed, the policies of Quang Trung suggest that the Nguyễn reliance on the "Chinese model" in the nineteenth century was hardly without very immediate precedents.

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Having described the ways in which two generations of Tây Sơn leaders sought to recruit northern scholar-officials and the impact of these officials on the Tây Sơn regime in the north, I want next to look in greater detail at three particular cases. The men in each of these cases are broadly representative of three types of reactions to the arrival of the southern forces: those who served the Tây Sơn enthusiastically, those who served reluctantly and under pressure and those who refused to serve, remaining loyal to the Lê. Each of these cases has unique aspects and cannot be seen as fully representative, but each is also indicative of the various types of reactions to the Tây Sơn that scholars exhibited and the reasons that people gave for the manner in which they responded to the Tây Sơn.

Ngô Thì Nhậm, a Tây Sơn enthusiast

Ngô Thì Nhậm (1746-1803) became one of the most ardent supporters of the Tây Sơn regime and arguably its most instrumental spokesman. Nhậm was, moreover, one of the most important thinkers and writers of the premodern period, and thus a man whose historical significance transcends his role in the Tây Sơn government. Nhậm was born in the Red River Delta region of Hải Dương west of Thăng Long, an area that had already produced a number of noted scholar officials, including Chu Văn An in the Trần period, and Nguyễn Trãi in the early Lê.[73] He was the eldest son

[73] Thư, 460; Tân, *Ngô Thì Nhậm*, 15.

of Ngô Thì Sĩ, a *tiến sĩ* and high-ranking reformist official of the Trịnh court, perhaps best known for his historical writings.[74] Nhậm's intellect was recognized at a young age, and under the tutelage of his father he wrote a number of texts on Vietnamese history while still in his teens. Then in 1769, at the age of 23, he was posted as an assistant inspector envoy (*hiến sát phó sứ*) to his native Hải Dương. In 1775, he attained the *tiến sĩ* degree and his official career blossomed. He served in a number of positions both in the imperial center and in outlying regions, first in the Finance Ministry and then in postings in Sơn Nam and Thái Nguyên. His career under the Lê reached its pinnacle when he served concurrently as the Civilian Governor of the *trấn* (provinces) of Thái Nguyên and Kinh Bắc from 1778 to 1780.

Nhậm's political career developed during the reign of Chúa Trịnh Sâm (1767-1782), a ruler whom Nhậm respected for his talents and who he hoped would be capable of carrying out some much needed political reforms.[75] For his part, Sâm respected Nhậm, the son of a devoted and long-serving official, calling Nhậm "a literatus without equal," and personally praising both his military and literary accomplishments.[76] Relying on his good relationship with the Chúa, Nhậm developed a reputation for speaking bluntly and straightforwardly whether this had been requested by the ruler or not. Commenting on notions of loyalty and honesty, Nhậm observed: "To serve as a subject and venerate a king and know what can be done, but not do it, this is disloyalty. And to stand at the court and be able to speak but to remain silent and not speak, this is dishonesty."[77] This echoed Confucius' response to

[74] His most important work may have been his *Đại Việt Sử Ký Tục Biên* (The Continued Historical Records of Đại Việt) a major survey of Vietnamese history from the Hồng Bàng period up to the 15th century.

[75] The *HLNTC*(1998), vol.1, 11, said of him "Sâm was also a person of greater firm clearsightedness, decisiveness and intelligence than others, having sufficient literary talent and military knowledge. He studied the classics and history books and also knew how to write prose and poetry." Moreover, Sâm wrote a considerable amount of poetry in both Nôm and Chinese which has been preserved in various texts.

[76] Trần Lê Sáng and Phạm Thị Tú, "Về Một Số Tập Văn Của Ngô Thì Nhậm" (Regarding some Writings of Ngô Thì Nhậm), *Tạp Chí Văn Học* 4 (1974): 76.

[77] Vũ Khiêu, "Vấn đề Đánh Gía Ngô Thì Nhậm" (The Matter of Assessing Ngô Thì Nhậm), *Tạp Chí Văn Học* 4 (1973): 95.

a disciple who asked how an official should behave towards a ruler: "He should not deceive him, but when necessary, he should take issue with him openly."[78]

Nhậm, like his father, had become well acquainted with the difficulties besetting the populations of the north in the 1770s during his postings in numerous outlying regions. As he wrote in one of his many memorials to the ruler:

> The population is increasing, but those who are scattering are many because the people are poor. The people are forced by the authorities to pay heavy taxes and they are having their land seized by village bullies.[79]

Nhậm, like many scholars of his generation, considered the people to be the cornerstone of a state's stability and prosperity. Consequently he repeatedly memorialized to Trịnh Sâm about the state of affairs both in areas where he was posted and within the larger polity. Despite the fact that Sâm's reign was relatively free of internal military conflict, economic problems compounded by natural disasters made life difficult for many. Moreover, these problems were particularly acute in Nhậm's native area of Hải Dương in the Red River delta east of the capitol. This area was often hard hit by natural disasters and consequently had been the site of several major uprisings in the mid-eighteenth century. Nhậm thus became a champion of the population, arguing to Sâm that the people's needs had to be met to ensure the tranquility of the greater polity. It is important to note here that Nhậm did not see addressing the people's concerns as an end, as modern Vietnamese scholars sometimes portray it, but as the means to an end – the overall well-being and stability of the state.

Nhậm saw corruption among local and provincial-level officials as one of the primary sources of the people's woes. Specifically, Nhậm foresaw a chain reaction stemming from corrupt officials, which would undermine the very foundations of society:

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[78] Cited in Herrlee G. Creel, *Chinese Thought From Confucius to Mao Tse-Tung* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 42.

[79] Trần Nghĩa, "Tìm Hiểu Thái Độ Chính Trị Của Ngô Thì Nhậm," (Seeking to Understand the Political Attitudes of Ngô Thì Nhậm) *Tạp Chí Văn Học* 4 (1973): 60.

> Now then if a policy of "*tụ liễm*" [resorting to bribery] is carried out, then embezzling petty officials shall appear; and if embezzling petty officials appear then the pacifying rules and regulations will be abandoned; if the pacifying rules and regulations are abandoned, then the professions of the four social classes will be scattered, and if the professions of the four social classes are scattered then bothersome bad habits will emerge; if bothersome bad habits emerge, then civilizing with regard to principles will be overturned.[80]

And he repeatedly memorialized about the need for good officials, well-trained and educated, for he saw an overall decline in the quality of the officialdom, which he saw as capable of going through the motions, but lacking a proper and respectful morality.[81]

A defining moment in Nhậm's career occurred in 1782 at the death of Trịnh Sâm. While Nhậm had been loyal to the Trịnh as rulers, he had been particularly loyal to Chúa Sâm, the only ruler under whom he had served. However, Sâm's death plunged the north into political upheaval, stemming as is often the case from a dispute over succession, a dispute in which Nhậm himself became embroiled. As Sâm's physical health had declined, political factionalism had surfaced at the court. An elder son, Trịnh Tông, the former crown prince, had plotted against the newly-anointed heir, Trịnh Cán, the younger son of a beloved concubine. Nhậm, through loyalty to Sâm and a respect for Cán's obvious talents – in contrast to Tông's shortcomings – was involved in revealing a 1780 plot by Tông against his brother.[82] This had resulted in Tông's being imprisoned in the capitol, but had not put an end to Tông's factions and on Sâm's death in 1782, they went into action. Forces loyal to Tông freed him, then ousted Cán and placed Tông on the throne as the new Chúa. Nhậm, because of his role in revealing Tông's earlier plot, was forced to flee the capitol. He was to spend the next four years in retreat, writing an important

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[80] ibid., 61.

[81] ibid., 61; also *Tuyển Tập Thơ Văn Ngô Thì Nhậm*, 162.

[82] There is considerable debate on this point with some Vietnamese scholars arguing that Nhậm was not personally involved in revealing this plot, but that he was later painted as guilty by Nguyễn historians. See for example Mai Quốc Liễn, *Ngô Thì Nhậm Trong Văn Học Tây Sơn* (Ngô Thí Nhậm in the Literature of the Tây Sơn) (Qui Nhơn: Sở Văn Hóa Thông Tin Nghĩa Bình, 1985), 45-48.

philosophical treatise on the *Spring and Autumn Classic* (*Xuân Thu Quản Kiên*), but unable to resume his official career.

This four-year period is very important because it served to loosen Nhậm's ties to the ruling powers, making the final break and shift of loyalty to the Tây Sơn much easier for him. Not only had Trịnh Sâm, the man to whom Nhậm offered a strong degree of personal loyalty and respect, died, but his self-appointed heir had been overthrown in a palace coup. Consequently, while Nhậm had been loyal to the Trịnh ruling family, the formal line of succession had now been broken by the coup, releasing Nhậm from his loyalty to the Trịnh. He expressed his feelings in the introduction to his *Xuân Thu Quản Kiên*, written during this period, when he observed that "the main thing is that a righteous heaven does not have two suns, a country does not have two kings, a house does not have two masters, and in veneration there are not two figures. All matters and all things must have this as their foundation."[83] This suggests that he could no longer support the notion of a division of political leadership between the Chúa and the Emperor.

Thus, Nhậm was probably not at all displeased when the Tây Sơn toppled the Trịnh in 1786. It is conceivable, of course, at this juncture, that Nhậm might have intensified his loyalty to the Lê dynasty, recently "restored" by the Tây Sơn. He did briefly serve in the Lê administration, undertaking responsibilities on the history board, but his acceptance of that posting may have been motivated more by the opportunity to revise and publish one of his father's own works – the *Quốc Sử Tục Biên* (Continued Records of the National History) – than a renewed fervor for the Lê. Two years later in 1788, when the Tây Sơn arrived in Thăng Long for the third time (the Lê Emperor having fled into Chinese exile) Nhậm was confronted with several choices. He could remain in retirement; he could go into exile with the fatally crippled Lê government, headed by a man of limited talent; or he could offer his services to a new dynasty and side with the Tây Sơn, headed by a man of enormous ability.

[83] Viện Triết Học. *Tư Tưởng Việt Nam Thế Kỷ XVIII, Tập 1 & 2* (Vietnamese Thought in the Eighteenth Century, Volumes 1 and 2) (Hà Nội: Viện Triết Học, 1972) vol. 2, 32.

The path of inaction was simply not possible for a man of Nhậm's commitment to political service generally, and to reform more specifically. The defining aspect of Nhậm's service as an official was his activist political philosophy, which he expressed in the *tự* (private name) he had chosen for himself – Hy Doãn, the name of a reformist hero of the Chinese classics.[84] Thus, when friends such as Ninh Tốn wrote letters counseling Nhậm to go into retreat at this period, Nhậm replied that he could not. To Tốn he wrote "I received your letter of counsel, with its deep ideas and true words. But while you can bear inaction and remaining silent, I cannot be silent. While you can go into retirement I cannot seclude myself."[85] He also wrote to others like his friends Trần Ba Lãm and Nguyễn Nha goading them into action, and criticizing their reluctance to come forth.[86] For Nhậm seclusion and complacency during this period were unacceptable for himself or his colleagues.

Nhậm was aware that in choosing to act in this manner he might suffer personal or spiritual harm. He wrote to his paternal uncle, who had chosen to fight the Tây Sơn, that in life there were matters that while harmful for the individual were beneficial to the state. This harm might be taken as meaning physical harm, but might also perhaps be seen as a sort of moral harm.[87] In writing this Nhậm was apparently signaling his own willingness to risk violating certain Confucian precepts, "loyalty" for example, for the good of the nation. Thus, we can begin to explain Nhậm's decision to serve the Tây Sơn by his life-long commitment to political activism, which convinced him that standing idly by while the people, and just as importantly the larger polity, suffered was an impossibility.

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[84] Alexander Woodside, "Conceptions of Change and of Human Responsibility for Change in Late Traditional Vietnam," in *Moral Order and the Question of Change: Essays on Southeast Asian Thought*, eds. David A. Wyatt and Alexander Woodside (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Series, 1982), 126.

[85] Sáng and Tú, 82; see also *Tuyển Tập Thơ Văn Ngô Thì Nhậm*, 198-202

[86] These letters are found in *Tuyển Tập Thơ Văn Ngô Thì Nhậm*, 207-209 and 214-216.

[87] See for example Woodside's commentary on the lament that Nhậm made regarding his inability to maintain basic Confucian precepts while adjusting to the cirumstances of his situation. Woodside, 121.

A closer look at Nhậm's political philosophy also reveals attitudes that might have made a decision to side with the Tây Sơn easier. While Nhậm had once written in absolute terms about personal obligations: "Even if the father does not act charitably, the son cannot not act filially; even if the king does not act humanely, his subjects cannot not be loyal; and even if an older brother does not act filially toward his friends, his younger brother cannot not be respectful,"[88] there continued to be an underlying tension in his philosophy between absolute rules and the need for accommodation to circumstances. For example, Nhậm often wrote of loyalty to a ruler in less than absolute terms. He appeared to touch on the contingency of loyalty to a ruler, when he observed that "(when) the King is humane, then I am loyal."[89] He made a similar observation in his commentary on the *Xuân Thu* classic, in which he wrote: "The commands of the king and of the father are of course important, but [for them] to be correct with respect to reason is also deserving [of being seen as] important."[90] Thus, Nhậm further elaborated his notion of a contingent rather than an absolute loyalty. While this example speaks very immediately to the reasonableness of "commands," it can surely be taken to refer generally to the nature of a type of rule. For Nhậm, loyalty and reason were linked, and if this link was broken then loyalty itself might be questioned.

Indeed Nhậm's comments on loyalty reflect the very idea developed in Confucius' *Analects*, that loyalty was not merely slavish devotion to a particular ruler. Rather, it was a broader principle that stressed personal integrity in relationships with others. To the extent that this concept of loyalty extended toward a ruler, it stressed loyalty toward the office rather than the person who filled that office.[91] Indeed, as Trương Bưu Lâm has observed, "the allegiance given was not

[88] Thư, 479.
[89] *Tuyển Tập Thơ Văn Ngô Thì Nhậm*, 219-222.
[90] Cited in Văn Tân, "Ngô Thì Nhậm, Một Nhà Trí Thức Sáng Suốt Và Dũng Cảm Đã Đi Theo Nông Dân Khởi Nghĩa Tây Sơn" (Ngô Thì Nhậm: An Outstanding and Brave Intellectual Who Followed the Peasants in the Tây Sơn Righteous Uprising), *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử* 148 (1973): 7.
[91] See, eg. Hsieh Yu-Wei, "The Status of the Individual in Chinese Ethics," in *The Chinese Mind: Essentials of Chinese Philosophy and Culture*, ed. Charles A. Moore (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1968), 316-317.

directly to the emperor himself, but to the power of which he was the instrument. Viewed otherwise, the emperor was, in fact, little more than the greatest magician of the land, whose task it was to channel the munificence of Heaven onto mortal earth."[92] In this interpretation, loyalty was linked the success of the Emperor. Were he to fail – as indicated by inauspicious occurrences such as floods, famine, civil disorder – then his legitimacy might be brought into question. There was no firm rule dictating what constituted the loss of the "mandate of heaven." It was a matter for interpretation, and consequently the idea of loyalty was potentially highly contingent.

In addition, Nhậm linked several elements of Confucian morality together, and as a result none appears for him to have had a transcendent status. For example, he linked many of these virtues when he wrote: "Venerating myself I cannot fail to be devoted and respectful, and venerating my king and father I cannot fail to be loyal and filial; and in the family I must act honestly toward the people; and in the village I must act virtuously toward the people; and there should be sincerity so that the people will not come into conflict with one another, and there should be courtesy for them to act politely with one another."[93] But it is also important to note, as Nguyễn Tài Thư has argued, that "Ngô Thì Nhậm also focused on humaneness, righteousness and virtue. But with regard to these matters he did not look to the individual but to the court."[94] That is, Nhậm saw an obligation on the part of the ruler to manifest humaneness and virtue to serve as a bedrock for society, or as he put it, "if you wish to secure the citadel, then you must have stable virtue . . ."[95] Once again, if the person of the ruler lacked virtue and humaneness, then Nhậm felt himself justified in looking elsewhere.

A final important element of Nhậm's political philosophy was his emphasis on the opportune moment (*thời*), which stressed the need to act in a timely manner

[92] Trương Bửu Lâm, *Resistance, Rebellion, Revolution: Popular Movements in Vietnamese History* (Singapore: ISEAS, 1985), 7-8.
[93] *Tuyển Tập Thơ Văn Ngô Thì Nhậm*, 179.
[94] Thư, 479.
[95] Cited in ibid., 479.

in response to changing circumstances. Thus both rulers and subjects had to react to circumstances in order to take advantage of opportunities:

> According to Ngô Thì Nhậm, "*thời*" had a very important role with respect to the fate of a dynasty, if it was able to take "*thời*" and to act according to "*thời*" then a dynasty would be able to rise, but if it lost "*thời*" and it acted contrary to "*thời*" then the era would be lost. On the other hand, he also said that "*thời*" was [in a state] of continuous change, and thus the way also had to change to be in accord, and all of the dynasties had changed continuously for this reason. All of these ideas he set forth as follows: "I think: the years wait and the emperors change as they bear fate, three generations of kings encountered the time of the opening of fate, and the way has changed, and the times have changes, and sagely men obey the way of heaven in order to act as masters in the country, and to act as father and mother to the people, and this only has one meaning.[96]

For Nhậm, the Tây Sơn represented this "opportune time," and he felt himself called to respond to the potential that the Tây Sơn offered.

In addition to his inability to stand idly by, and his personal philosophical convictions, there was yet another consideration for Nhậm – the larger-than-life figure of Nguyễn Huệ, whose charismatic stature was touched on in Chapter Two. In Nhậm's admiration for Huệ one can see a parallel to his earlier devotion to Trịnh Sâm – namely respect for an individual of talent, who held out the possibility of introducing social and political reforms and restoring order. In Huệ, Nhậm found not a crude peasant leader clutching for power, but instead: "a hero and strategist, having both literary and military talents."[97] Thus he wrote: "Quang Trung is a person fond of education, and even when he is in the midst of warfare, he does not forget about discussing doctrines. On days when we have discussions his opinions are very outstanding and he brings up points which the books of old have not yet touched upon."[98] The *Tây Sơn Thuật Lược* confirms the Emperor's commitment to continuing

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[96] From the "Edict on ascending the throne" – written for Quang Trung, cited in ibid, 470.

[97] From the poem "Phụng Nghĩa Bài Ký Chuông Điểm Giờ" cited in Tân, 6.

[98] Cited in Lê Thước and Trương Chính, "Tìm Hiểu Dòng Văn Học Tiến Bộ Thời Tây Sơn" (Seeking to Understand the Flow of Progressive Literature in the Tây Sơn Era), *Tạp Chí Văn Học* 6 (1971): 70-71.

his own education, noting that Quang Trung established a "Secret Readings Office," which met six times a month in order to read and discuss the Classics and the Histories, and which provided the Tây Sơn leader with the opportunity to question scholars about the meanings of these texts.[99] Moreover, another close confidant of Huệ, Võ Huy Tấn, also wrote in a poem that the Emperor's "writings are good, and the words sagely and always worthy of praise."[100] Finally, in an era of political uncertainty and often deep despair, Nhậm saw in Nguyễn Huệ a man "stately and imposing, yet deeply humane," and one who "restored life to some sorrowful men."[101]

A glance at just one of Nhậm's memorials to the Tây Sơn throne reinforces the impression that for him Huệ was the man capable of seizing an opportunity. An excerpt from one is indicative:

> [You have] risen righteously from the west to eliminate the cruel and contrary ones, and brought talent in administration in order to suppress chaos and to rescue the people who were drowning in the river; success in the entire land of the North was not overtaxing for a heroic person, taking the powerful military officials and the will of the people, and treating with tolerance the wounded remnants of people who were still alive.[102]

But it was not just in memorials such as this one, where hyperbole is to be expected, but also in his poetry, that Nhậm praised (posthumously) the Tây Sơn ruler:

> In five years he has completed a great undertaking,
> China knew this earlier, that the Master star would fall.[103]
> [He has] stepped down from the regions of life, leaving behind rules and regulations for the country,

[99] *Tây Sơn Thuật Lược*, 16. This source is problematic as it is anonymous and undated (though certainly written after the Tây Sơn defeat) and contains some obvious factual errors. However, some Vietnamese historians have argued based on internal evidence that it was probably written by a contemporary to these events. See for example, Nguyễn Tuấn Lương's introduction to Viện Nghiên Cứu Hán Nôm, *Thơ Văn Đoàn Nguyễn Tuấn: Hải Ông Thi Tập* (The Poetry of Đoàng Nguyễn Tuấn: the Collected Writings of Hải Ông) (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1982), 9.

[100] Hoa Bằng, "Ông Võ Huy Tân," 18.

[101] Cited in Tân "Ngô Thì Nhậm, Một Nhà Trí Thức," 6.

[102] Nguyễn Lộc, ed., *Văn Học Tây Sơn* (Tây Sơn Literature) (Sở Văn Hóa Và Thông Tin Nghĩa Bình, 1986), 217-220.

[103] A reference to a Chinese prophecy that appeared to predict the short span of the Emperor's rule.

> On high he can be compared with the virtue of heaven, and he is of a resounding authority.
> [He was] truly humane and of great righteousness in the matter of preserving the ancestral temples of the Lê house,
> [He was] truly of a generous virtue and a deep gratitude in the matter of acting tolerantly toward the enemy warriors of the Mãn [the Chinese invaders].
> The precious throne has been there for a long time, relying on the contributions of the people.
> The mountains of the mausoleum will be stable for a myriad ages in the place of the capitol.[104]

Once again, Nhậm praised Quang Trung's humanity, his "resounding authority," his "great righteousness," and his "generous virtue." All of these were the types of attributes that Nhậm had seen as critical for a ruler's ability to govern effectively and to stabilize the population. He had not seen these attributes in Trịnh Tông, the weak-minded successor to Trịnh Sâm, nor had he found them in the last Lê Emperor, Lê Chiêu Thống, also generally considered a man of little ability or political stature. In Huệ, Nhậm had apparently found attributes of leadership and thus he responded when the Tây Sơn leader told him in their first meeting:

> Formerly, because you could not countenance the Trịnh Chúa, you alone abandoned the state and departed. If I had not come here how would you have been able to see the light of day? Perhaps it was the intention of heaven to set aside people of talent for me to put to use. Thus you should work hard and concern yourself with matters of reporting and replying . . .[105]

While attracted to Nguyễn Huệ as a charismatic leader, Nhậm also was undoubtedly drawn to the position that was offered him, drafting edicts and providing advice. Here he might exert an influence he had not wielded under Trịnh Sâm. This role was important for both men. For Nguyễn Huệ it meant being able to issue proclamations in a style worthy of an Emperor, replete with suitable classical

[104] Tòng Giá Bái Tảo Đan Lăng Cung Ký [Following the Royal Carriage and Bowing at the Tảo Đan Mausoleum and Respectfully Recording (this)] in Lộc, *Văn Học Tây Sơn*, 186-187.
[105] *HLNTC* (1998), vol. 2, 113.

references and flourishes, and written in a manner calculated to appeal to the intellectual elites he wished to reach. Furthermore, these proclamations were being written by a figure who commanded great respect among northern scholars. For Nhậm, on the other hand, this role offered the opportunity to influence the Tây Sơn leader, perhaps pointing toward some of the reforms he himself longed to implement. In addition, it gave him the opportunity to help justify the Tây Sơn claims to legitimacy, and at the same time legitimize his own decision to serve the Tây Sơn "rebels."

While it is a bit difficult to trace the specific areas in which Nhậm had influence on the Tây Sơn leader's policies there are some clues. One source in particular, the *Tây Sơn Thuật Lược*, argues that Nhậm's role was particularly influential in matters of policy. For example, it claims that a Tây Sơn policy requiring all citizens to carry identity cards was originally conceived by Nhậm.[106] It also credits Nhậm with a campaign to recruit northern *tiến sĩ* by offering them titles, and to bring them in by force if they refused his summons.[107] The text hints that Nhậm's motivation was to corrupt these officials by forcing them to serve the Tây Sơn. The implication being that if Nhậm could recruit more prominent *tiến sĩ* to the Tây Sơn it would be easier to justify to himself his decision to serve the Tây Sơn. Certainly Nhậm went to great lengths to justify his actions in the letters he wrote, although whether he sought self-justification in luring more scholars is open to debate. As he stressed in a letter to a friend, Nguyễn Nha, "sagely men go in accord with one another, they do not follow one another," implying that those who joined him in serving the Tây Sơn should do so not merely to follow his actions (be they right or wrong), but out of a personal understanding of the existing political circumstances.[108]

While Nhậm was very important to Quang Trung in the drafting of edicts, and in certain matters of policy, his most critical contribution may have been in the

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[106] *Tây Sơn Thuật Lược*, 12.
[107] ibid., 13.
[108] Cited in Sáng and Tú, 83.

field of diplomacy. It was possibly Nhậm's writing letters to the Chinese court and its representatives in the southern Chinese provinces that helped prevent a second Chinese invasion, pacified the Chinese, and ultimately convinced them to offer formal recognition to Quang Trung as the ruler of Đại Việt. Nhậm also served on one Tây Sơn embassy to the Chinese court, in 1793, when he had the unhappy task of announcing the death of Quang Trung and seeking the investiture of the crown prince as the *An Nam Quốc Vương* (安 南 國 王). After this embassy, Nhậm, along with many other officials who had willingly served Quang Trung, slowly retreated from public life. While they still had feelings of loyalty to the Tây Sơn, the Lê having been irrevocably toppled in their eyes, these men had developed personal ties with Quang Trung that were broken by his death. Nhậm did serve briefly under the succeeding Tây Sơn ruler, Quang Toản, writing a few more edicts for him and also serving on the History Board, which revised and then arranged the printing of his father's *Đại Việt Sử Ký Tiền Biên* in 1800. His important role in the Tây Sơn came back to haunt him after the Nguyễn victory in 1802. He was seized, and together with his brother-in-law and long-time friend Phan Huy Ích, publicly flogged at the Temple of Literature in Hà Nội. While Ích survived this beating by a quarter of a century, Nhậm succumbed to his injuries and died at home shortly thereafter at the age of 57.

Ngô Thì Nhậm and Divided Families

The case of Ngô Thì Nhậm also illustrates a particularly painful aspect of the Tây Sơn period – namely divisions within families concerning political loyalties. Three members of the Ngô Thì lineage served the Tây Sơn: Ngô Thì Nhậm, his younger brother, Ngô Thì Trí, and Nhậm's son, Ngô Thì Điển. Two other family members, however, resisted the new regime: an uncle Ngô Thì Đạo and a younger

brother Ngô Thì Chí.[109] These divisions were particularly painful for Confucians of this era, who deeply valued family cohesion. The Ngô Thì clan was not alone in feeling these divisions, for other prominent northern literary lineages families suffered similar schisms. The Phan Huy lineage saw two brothers serve the Tây Sơn and two actively resist it. Nguyễn Du, the famous author of the *Tale of Kiêu*, refused to serve the Tây Sơn, while his elder brother Nguyễn Nễ (1761-1805) served the new regime faithfully from 1788, and his brother-in-law, Đoàn Nguyễn Tuấn also served the Tây Sơn for the duration of their existence, later refusing to serve the Nguyễn.[110]

Although numerous northern scholar families saw divisions over the Tây Sơn regime, the Ngô family was perhaps most directly embroiled in this problem, as the cases of Nhậm's uncle and brother illustrate. His uncle, Ngô Thì Đạo (1732-1802), although refusing to serve the Tây Sơn, did not become an anti-Tây Sơn activist. Đạo had been a Lê official who had gone into temporary retirement after Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh's takeover in 1787. After the Lê were ousted in 1788, he chose a life of permanent seclusion. Like many others, Đạo was not allowed to retire without a struggle. Trần Văn Kỷ had come to know of Đạo's reputation and after 1789 invited him to come forth to serve the new regime. Đạo declined this offer, and Kỷ was tempted to bring him to the court by force, as had been done with some other notable northerners. In reply to this threat, Đạo wrote a series of 80 poems in which he expressed his feelings on this subject. Impressed by the sentiment expressed in these poems, Kỷ abandoned his plans to force Đạo to come to the capitol, allowing him to return home and live among friends. Even there, some of Đạo's colleagues who had joined the Tây Sơn continued to entreat him to join them, but he repeatedly declined these invitations.[111] During this period, Ngô Thì Nhậm entered into

[109] For a brief description of Điển, see Trần Lê Văn, ed. *Một Số Tác Giả Và Tác Phẩm Trong Ngô Gia Văn Phái* (Some Authors and Works in the Ngô Family Literary Group) (Hà Sơn Bình: Ty Văn Hóa và Thông Tin Hà Sơn Bình, 1980), 218; on Trí, see the entry in Lại Nguyên Ân, ed. *Từ Điển Văn Học Việt Nam* (Literary Dictionary of Việt Nam) (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Giáo Dục, 1997), 339.

[110] For more on Nguyễn Nễ see Nguyễn Quảng Tuân, ed., *Nguyên Du Toàn Tập*. (Collected works of Nguyễn Du) (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Học, 1996), 83-84.

[111] Tảo Trang, "Bước Đầu Tìm Hiểu Về Một Số Nhà Văn Trong Ngô Gia Văn Phái" (Preliminary findings Regarding Some Authors in the Ngô Family Literary Circle), *Tạp Chí Văn Học*, 5 (1973): 35.

correspondence with his uncle debating the divisive issues of the period. Among other things, he wrote to his uncle pleading for family unity and trying to explain his own reasons for joining the Tây Sơn. As Nhậm noted: "Our house has encountered a period of misfortune, uncle and nephew and elder and younger brother are in a time of conflict and apprehension."[112] His anguish over these family divisions may well have been more painful to Nhậm than his concerns about the questions of political loyalties.

For Nhậm, the case of his younger brother, Ngô Thì Chí may have been even more traumatic. Chí not only refused to serve the Tây Sơn, but actively resisted them on behalf of the Lê Emperor, as one of Lê Chiêu Thống's core supporters during the Emperor's flight in 1788. He memorialized to the Emperor requesting permission to recruit supporters among the minority peoples in Lạng Sơn. He reasoned that his father, Ngô Thì Sĩ, had served in that area and won the affection of the populations and that they would thus heed a call from one of his sons.[113] Unfortunately for the Lê ruler, Chí fell ill while on this mission and had to request permission temporarily to retire. The Emperor sent money to purchase medicines, and Chí thanked him saying:

> Encountering a crisis, our wills are united, our hearts are as one, and my king's righteousness is of a type that is only encountered once in a thousand years. In the Way of moral obligations, and of the fate of love and heavy feelings, how can the feelings of the father and son be different from one another? Now we are in a period where the state is still in hardship, and when subjects must forget themselves. Who would dare to undertake a special task but then begrudge giving his life? I pledge that I will endure illness in order to quicken my pace.[114]

Chí died shortly thereafter, unable to fulfill his pledge to gather support in Lạng Sơn, his death perhaps providing a modicum of relief to his elder brother.

As was suggested above, there are numerous similar tales of families divided by the political turmoil of the Tây Sơn years. The multiplicity of such cases

[112] *Tuyển Tập Thơ Văn Ngô Thì Nhậm*, 218.
[113] *HLNTC* (1998), vol. 2, 102.
[114] ibid., 102.

underscores the fact that there was no fixed response among Confucian scholars toward the possibility of serving a new regime. The decision to serve or resist the Tây Sơn was one that took into account a variety of factors, both personal and philosophical. At times such decisions separated brothers and friends, and there was no easy way to predict a given scholar-official's response to the summons of the Tây Sơn rulers. The second case study demonstrates more of these tensions, focusing on the divisions that took place even between good friends.

Trần Danh Án, Lê loyalist in hiding

Trần Danh Án (1759-1794), was a close friend of Nhậm, but unlike Nhậm with his considerable service to the Trịnh lords, Án was a devoted Lê supporter. Trần Danh Án was born in the province of Bắc-ninh, the son of Trần Danh Lâm who among other things is noted as the author of a preface to Lê Quý Đôn's *Vân Đài Loại Ngữ*.[115] Án showed exceptional talent as a child and achieved the *tiến sĩ* rank in 1787, following both his grandfather and father in attaining that status. Moreover, he was ranked as a *hoàng giáp*, which placed him in the highest ranks of that year's examinations along with Bùi Dương Lịch and Nguyễn Đăng Sở, each of whom were also subsequently recruited by the Tây Sơn. While Án had barely been able to launch his career as an official before the Lê Emperor was put to flight in 1788, that event and its repercussions created an unbreakable bond between Án and the Lê ruler.

When the Lê Emperor was forced to flee the capitol in 1788, Trần Danh Án was one of his closest followers and supporters. It was Án, along with another *tiến sĩ* Lê Duy Đản, who drafted the Emperor's appeal to the Chinese, seeking support in regaining the throne. It was Án who along with Đản endured the humiliation of cutting his hair in the Chinese style and disguising himself in the rags of a lowly merchant in order to escape Tây Sơn patrols as they crossed into China carrying

[115] Khai Sinh, *Trần Danh Án: Một Chí Sĩ Đời Cuối Lê* (Trần Danh Án: A Man of Character in the Period of the Late Lê) (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Đông Tây, 1958), 10. The *Vân Đài Loại Ngữ* (Discourses on Various Matters), is one of Đôn's most well-known writings.

their appeal. And it was Án who was forced to bear the additional humiliation of having Chinese officials chide him for taking so long to make the Lê appeal.[116] Nonetheless, the Chinese agreed to help restore the Lê, and Án was able to return to his homeland with the Chinese invading army in late 1788. Soon thereafter the Tây Sơn defeat of the Qing armies forced the Lê Emperor to flee once again. This time, however, possibly because of illness, Án was unable to follow him into exile again.[117] Instead Án came to lead a wandering existence, seeking to avoid notice by the Tây Sơn regime, which was actively recruiting Confucian scholars to its government. Unfortunately for him, his efforts to evade the notice of the Tây Sơn were doomed to failure.

Knowing that Ngô Thì Nhậm had been a friend of Án, Quang Trung asked Nhậm to make a personal appeal to the reluctant scholar.[118] Nhậm did so in a series of letters in which, rather than discussing the needs of the nation or the honors of office, Nhậm sought to appeal to Án in a less direct manner, emphasizing their past relationship. Nhậm wrote:

> The teacher Mencius in days of old said: 'I cautiously nourish my upright spirit . . . .' Like him, you have already truly cautiously nourished this spirit, and I do not dare to compel you. Moreover, I still often recall your two poetic lines:
>
> 'The clouds fly intermittently on the Cứu sơn mountains; the spreading trees are sparse at the edge of the Thiên dức river.'
>
> and my heart greatly admires you. At present I am together with the Thụy-Nham Công [Phan Huy Ích] in the same house, and every day we just discuss matters of poetry, and aside from that we have no other concerns. If you have the heart to make an effort, I invite you to come for pleasure, and

[116] For details on Trần Danh Án's role see, eg. Lê Quýnh. 1993. *Bắc Hành Tùng Ký*. (A Record of Travelling Along to the North) trans. Hoàng Xuân Hẫn (Huế: Nhà Xuất Bản Thuận Hóa. 1993), and especially Sinh.

[117] *ĐNNTC*, vol. 4, 138.

[118] *HLNTC* (1998), vol. 2, 212.

> our meeting would give me great joy.[119]

Thus, Nhậm seemed innocently to suggest that Án meet with an old friend to sit around and talk about poetry.[120] Án offered a powerful rebuff:

> I have just read your letter and was very moved. But I see knowledge that is narrow, and minds that are dark, and now I still do not know what errors I have committed. Is it not obvious that I still hold dear the sash and turban, and the hat and robe that the court has bestowed upon me? Every time that I see again the hills and rivers and the flowers and grasses of the Lê house I cannot forget them.[121]

Moreover, he implicitly chided Nhậm (and Phan Huy Ích, who co-wrote this letter), for having sold out to the Tây Sơn when he stated, "There is no way that I can assist this (new) dynasty, and still obsequiously seek after petty honors in order happily to satisfy myself; I could never go to the point of burying my conscience like that."[122] He was still fully committed to supporting the Lê as he wrote: "Now the country is lost, and the king has fled, and I have not been able to go after him, [and thus] I am resigned to living temporarily in villages and small alleys, and every time I see the capitol of the Lê home again, I become choked up with tears."[123] And finally, in response to Nhậm's explicit invitation, he acidly replied: "at this point in my life is it really the time for me to discuss poetry with the two gentlemen?"[124] With this letter he also included a poem to elaborate his feelings:

> Meeting you sir in this life is many times easier,
> Than looking dimly at dreams that are often nearby.

[119] Khai Sinh, "Một Bậc Chí Sĩ dời Lê Mạt: Ông Trần Danh Án" (A Man of Character in the Period that the Lê Fell: Trần Danh Án), *Tri Tân* 131 (1944): 15.

[120] While no doubt Nhậm hoped to gain Án's service for the Tây Sơn, he did have a genuine passion for discussing and chanting poetry, and thus was probably speaking earnestly when he requested Án join him in such endeavors. See for example Nhậm's "Bài Thuyết Liên Hạ Thi Minh," [*Tuyển Tập Thơ Văn Ngô Thì Nhậm*, 225-227], in which Nhậm happily discussed the various diversions that he and his friends pursued when not busy with court matters.

[121] Phạm Tú Châu, "Nhà Thơ Kinh Bắc Trần Danh An và Ngô Thì Nhậm" (A Kinh Bắc Poet Trần Danh Án and Ngô Thì Nhậm), *Tạp Chí Văn Học* 2 (1983): 153.

[122] Sinh, *Trần Danh Án*, 37.

[123] Châu, 153.

[124] Sinh, *Trần Danh Án*, 37..

. . . .
As for depending on shelter, in this life I only know myself.
Though hiding oneself in the north, one still recalls the Tấn.[125]
In the Eastern Sea one prefers death to following the Tần.[126]
I hope that people who come later and pass near my grave
will raise a hand and point:
[There lies] a *tiến sĩ* of the former Lê, by the surname of Trần.[127]

After exchanging several letters with Nhậm, Án apparently concluded there was no point in discussing the matter further. He wrote a final letter to Nhậm in which he referred to a prophecy in the *Book of Changes* that spoke of people perceiving things in different ways. The reference made clear that the two men saw different things, and that their differing perceptions could not be resolved. Nhậm wrote a letter chiding him for his inapt use of the *Book of Changes* reference, and closed with a combination of threat and enticement:

> The orchid months are expected and I hope we will be able to meet each other. The sundered house is unoccupied, [and we are] mopping up the small lanes as is necessary. Other than this I can say nothing.[128]

Under such pressure to join the Tây Sơn, Án reported overhearing people talking about him, saying that "he has already been pounced upon by the tiger." (ie. the Tây Sơn) Moreover, once Nhậm had seen his initial letters rebuffed, he had ordered soldiers to go to harass Án to put pressure on him to serve the new regime. In response Án wrote a poem, which he sent to Nhậm, in which he used the couplet:

Now I am being buried in the mouth of the tiger.

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[125] Reference to an official of the Jin court in China, who remained loyal to that court, even after it was defeated by the Liu Sung in the fifth century.

[126] Reference to an official in the Warring States period in China, who refused to offer his support for the new ruler.

[127] *HLNTC*(1998), vol. 2, 212-213. The text in Chinese can be found in Ngô Gia Văn Phái, *Hoàng Lê Nhất Thống Chí* (The Unification Records of the Imperial Lê) (皇黎一統志) *Collection Romans et Contes du Viet Nam écrits en Han*, vol. 5 (Paris-Taipei: Ecole Française d'Extême-Orient and Student Book Company Ltd., 1986), 244.

[128] *Tuyển Tập Thơ Văn Ngô Thì Nhậm*, vol. 2, 204; where the phrase "mopping up the small lanes" appears to refer to the earlier letter, in which Án described his taking refuge in "small lanes."

Although I may die I will not act like the heart of a dog-pig.[129]

The implication of course was that the Tây Sơn were a ravaging tiger and that those who served them, including presumably Nhậm, were like "dog-pigs." According to the *Tây Sơn Thuật Lược*, "(when) Trần Danh Án wrote a poem using the words dog-pig in defying Nhậm, Nhậm was ashamed and did not dare to send any more poems."[130] The *Hoàng Lê Nhất Thống Chí* reports that in response to this rebuff the Tây Sơn attempted to lure him with offers of important positions, but that he continued to refuse. At one point Quang Trung demanded that Án be brought to the court where the Emperor could make a direct appeal for his services.[131] Quang Trung posed a series of questions to which Án replied with perfect equanimity, unintimidated by being in the presence of the Tây Sơn Emperor. He was then permitted to return home.

A second effort to intimidate him into coming to serve was ordered carried out by Trần Văn Kỷ, but this also proved singularly unsuccessful as Án wrote a scornful poem mocking Kỷ's service to the Tây Sơn:

> [He holds] the position of *Trung-thư* in the new country,
> and in the former dynasty he was a royal counselor.
> The loyal and the enemy are divided: there is consent and disagreement;
> Life and death are decided in a fleeting moment[132]

Later, a final effort was apparently made to summon him to appear at the court, but Án sent a message indicating that he was gravely ill and unable to attend. At this point Quang Trung finally conceded defeat and allowed the stubborn official to avoid

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[129] Châu, 152.

[130] *Tây Sơn Thuật Lược*, 13.

[131] Some accounts claim that it was Nhậm who made the demand that Án be brought in, for example, the *HLNTC* (1998), vol. 2 , 213; also the *Tây Sơn Thuật Lược*, 13, notes that it was Nhậm's idea to force reluctant officials to be captured and brought to the court. Another account speaks instead of Trần Văn Kỷ taking soldiers to capture Án, though it may refer to a separate instance in which Án is jailed. (see Sinh, *Trần Danh Án*, 41.)

[132] Sinh, *Trần Danh Án*, 40.

serving, writing a vermilion rescript on Án's written refusal: "You are permitted to follow your noble ambition."[133]

While Án's actions and his prose and poetry reveal a strong Lê loyalist with a considerable antipathy towards the Tây Sơn, there is also some anecdotal evidence of a certain ambivalence. When brought into the audience with Quang Trung, Án, though unable and unwilling to serve the new regime in a formal capacity, indicated a willingness to offer advice to the new regime:

> I am not resisting the king and I am prepared to contribute to the king various opinions about the matter of constructing the country, but as for serving as an official for the king this I cannot do, for the precepts of a Confucianist do not permit me to do that.[134]

In addition, while critical of Nhậm and Ích's willingness to serve the Tây Sơn, for the sake of the country he nonetheless urged them: "to go ahead and strive to be able to establish a great spirit in order to usefully aid the generation and the country."[135] Thus, Án, while unable to shake off what he held to be absolute strictures regarding serving only one dynasty and remaining loyal to only one ruler, was still aware from an activist point of view that the country needed help from capable men.

Moreover, the vituperation found in the poem referring to "dog-pigs" does not appear to have been indicative of Trần Danh Án's general outlook, as most of his other poems are not as harshly critical. Rather they are full of despair at the difficulties of his age and the turns of fortune that he has had to endure. While he had helped the Lê Emperor gain the support of the Chinese in an attempt to regain the throne in Thăng Long, Án wrote a poem revealing that he was not happy with this situation:

> I recall the words of the king as we parted
> The homeland is still not in this step.
> Whom do the flowers and grasses encounter who can express this unfortunate plight?

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[133] *LQDS*, 100.
[134] Khiêu, 36.
[135] Sinh, *Trần Danh Án*, 38.

The mountains and rivers rely on guests and that is also not good . . .[136]

And later on hearing that the Qing had decided to enfief the Tây Sơn Emperor in place of the Lê he wrote a poem entitled "Thoughts on Hearing of the Northern Delegation Coming over to Enfief":

There are ups and downs in dreaming of the assistance of high heaven.
The course of the water hyacinth is to drift here and there;
The entire country is piteous and completely sick and tired,
Warding off the difficulties that have extended to every place,
Making me, despite my disgrace, put a stop to my recollections.
I still am ashamed of the king's loyalty lacking the high will.
The royal history is ludicrous and there is no way to avoid that.
I dare not allow the sight of my tears flowing freely.[137]

Once the Tây Sơn ruler had given up on recruiting Án, the latter was permitted to return home, and as soon as he was able Án traveled to the north hoping to go to China to receive news of the status of the Lê Emperor. He was, however, stopped at the border (though it is not clear whether by Chinese or Tây Sơn forces), and he had to return to the capitol region. He continued to cling to the dream of restoring the Lê, and he finally managed to pull together some friends and to recruit some former officials to go into revolt. This effort was a total failure, and he took his own life by drinking poison in 1794.[138]

Bùi Dương Lịch, the Reluctant Tây Sơn Official

Bùi Dương Lịch, like Trần Danh Án, achieved the *tiến sĩ* in the final Lê era examinations of 1787 and like Án devotedly served the Lê Emperor. Bùi Dương Lịch was also, like Án, summoned to serve the Tây Sơn, but unlike Án he was unable to resist these pressures and eventually came to serve the new regime. Lịch

[136] ibid., 19.
[137] Trần Thị Minh, "Quang Trung và Trần Danh Án" (Quang Trung and Trần Danh Án), *Tạp Chí Tổ Quốc* 8 (1982): 48.
[138] Sinh, *Trần Danh Án*, 41-43; see also *ĐNNTC*, vol. 4, 137-138.

(1757-1827), was a native of La Sơn, in the *trấn* of Nghệ An. Like Nhậm and others, he was also the product of a family of Confucian scholars. After passing the provincial examinations in 1774 at the age of 27, he moved to Thăng Long to teach. Like other scholars of his generation he was well-aware of the troubles of his times, and the disorder that was evident all around him. His *Lê Quý Dật Sử* [Unusual Tales of the Esteemed Lê] details the decadence of the Trịnh court, the powerlessness of the Lê Emperor, and the numerous problems involving official corruption. Moreover, he was witness to the Tây Sơn advance into the north in 1786 and their occupation of Thăng Long. Even at the time and in spite of the Tây Sơn leaders' professing loyalty to the Lê, Lịch suspected things would never be the same when he wrote:

> Places of tunics and hats of a thousand ages past have become so much garbage.
> The temple names of eight generations of chúa are blowing as dust in the wind.
> I turn my face to see heaven and earth, mountains and rivers, borders and coasts,
> [But] I cannot see the people shedding tears in the Tân Đình.[139]

Despite his awareness of the degradations of the political apparatus and its uncertain future, the course of official service and the potential for promotion drew Lịch, like most trained Confucian scholars, into the examination system. Thus, in 1787 he received the *tiến sĩ* in the last such examinations of the Lê dynasty. He became a favorite of the new Lê ruler, Lê Chiêu Thống, and spent countless hours with the Emperor discussing literature.[140] This was also the period in which he wrote his own "family admonition," the *Bùi Gia Huấn Hai*, an act that undoubtedly reinforced his notions of loyalty and propriety vis-à-vis the Emperor and his family. Later that year Lịch became a trusted military advisor to the Emperor as the latter was forced to flee the capitol when the Tây Sơn sent troops to put down their independent-minded general Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh.

[139] *LQDS*, 70. The Tân Đình was one of the imperial palaces in Thăng Long.
[140] *Cương Mục*, vol. 2, 808.

When the Lê Emperor fled to China to seek assistance from the Qing, Lịch was unable to accompany him, as Trần Danh Án had, but rather took his mother and returned home. He reflected his misery in a poem in which he lamented his inability to follow and assist the Lê Emperor, whose close confidant he had been for the previous two years:

> From the north to the south there is a long river.
> A hundred worries are like the flow of an immense stream of water.
> The wind brings close waves of the ocean like sounds of the king's carriage bell.
> The clouds of the mountain hamlets and fortresses are like sunshades and parasols for the house of the king, which is the high sun.
> I do not trust that the land of Ba Thục can be the place to serve as the stable and firm base for the Hán dynasty.
> It is such a pity that the seven districts no longer remember the Đường dynasty.
> I am ashamed because I do not have the strength to assist in danger or to come to his aid
> Step by step I only bend my head upwards and await the orb of the sun.[141]

But this was not the full extent of his crisis of conscience. Lịch also wrote a poem that described his mixed emotions as he fled home with his elderly mother. On the one hand he had a profound filial obligation to his mother, while on the other he owed his loyalty and service to the king. In the end his filial obligations won out (perhaps mindful of his recently composed *gia huấn*), but leaving Lịch uncertain about his decision:

> Encountering misfortune, and living through the day, I am ashamed of myself.
> On the journey back to the south the road is long and [seemingly] endless.
> I cannot bring filial piety to substitute it for loyalty.
> I just trust that worrying about matters of the family is more important than worrying about matters of the state."[142]

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[141] *LQDS*, 83-84.

[142] *LQDS*, 86; Bùi Dương Lịch, *Nghệ An Ký* (Records of Nghệ An), trans. Phạm Văn Thắm, ed. Văn Tân (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1993), 333, makes clear his devotion to his mother, when it notes that in the midst of turmoil as he was serving the Emperor in flight, he took time to request a friend to go secretly back to Thăng Long to reassure his mother about his well being. (Hereafter *NAK*)

Like his fellow 1787 *tiến sĩ*, Trần Danh Án, Lịch had developed a close bond to the last Lê Emperor because of personal contact as well as service in a time of crisis. Unlike Án, Lịch could not fend off the demands of the Tây Sơn that he serve their new regime, in no small measure because of geographical considerations. Had Lịch been native to a more obscure corner of the country, he might have been able to remain in hiding more easily or been considered less important to the Tây Sơn polity. As it was, however, Nghệ An, and his particular corner of that region contributed a large number of scholar-officials to the Tây Sơn cause. Moreover, as will be discussed below, Nghệ An was a region of particular importance to the Tây Sơn after 1788.

When Lịch returned home with his mother in 1788, he would have found himself in the same neighborhood as Nguyễn Thiếp, who was still in residence in this region in the district of La Sơn. Nguyễn Thiếp had developed a reputation in that area for his scholarly abilities, and because of his repute had been summoned from seclusion to serve the court both by Trịnh Sâm and then by the Tây Sơn Emperor, Quang Trung. Lịch himself had expressed his personal admiration for Thiếp when he wrote: "Khải Xuyên [Thiếp's pseudonym] was a person who knew and understood a great deal, his learning and education were vast, and all the Confucians respected him."[143] Thus, Lịch's eventual decision to serve the Tây Sơn may have been made considerably easier by the fact that he was not the only person from the district of La Sơn who was taking this path.[144]

In fact, Nguyễn Thiếp and Bùi Dương Lịch were not the only scholars from that region who would eventually serve the Tây Sơn. In coming out to serve as an official for the Tây Sơn, Lịch would even have company from his own village in the person of Phan Bảo Định (1747 – ?). Định, while a good decade older than Lịch, was

[143] *LQDS*, 43.

[144] Interestingly, Hoàng Xuân Hãn challenges Lịch's admiration for Thiếp, arguing to the contrary that Lịch belonged to "the ranks of scholars who hated the La Sơn Phu-Tử" citing an orally preserved poem in which Lịch may have obliquely been critical of Thiếp. Hàn also ascribes a poem criticizing Lịch for serving three dynasties to Thiếp, though it presupposes that Lịch had already been assigned to the position of *đốc học* (Supervisor of Studies) for Nghệ An prior to the time of Thiếp's death in 1804, a dating which I have been unable to corroborate. Hãn, 179-180.

not only from the same village, but belonged to the same *tiến sĩ* class of 1787. Moreover, when the summons from the Tây Sơn finally came late in 1789, the manner in which it arrived once again demonstrated the ongoing Tây Sơn efforts to use personal appeals to attract important scholars. The envoy from Phú Xuân, Nguyễn Huy Tự (1743-1790), perhaps best known as the author of the important eighteenth-century Nôm poem, *Truyện Hoa Tiên* [Tale of the Ornate Letter], was by this time not only an important Tây Sơn official, but yet another native of the district of La Sơn. Again, an invitation by an official of repute from one's home district would obviously have more appeal than a generic summons.

In his *Nghệ An Ký* (Chronicles of Nghệ An), an important survey of the geography and people of Nghệ An, Lịch wrote extensively about his own experiences, though unfortunately not a great deal about his life in the Tây Sơn period. He did make clear his loyalties to the Lê, and the fact that his preference had been not to serve the Tây Sơn, when he explained why he finally assented to travel to Phú Xuân:

> In the winter of the following year [1789], Nguyễn Huy Tự, a person from the hamlet of Lai Thạch, who was acting as the Left-hand minister for the Military Board of the Tây Sơn, brought a summons from the Tây Sơn to come to the court. Because my mother was elderly, I could not flee and escape, and I went down to Phú Xuân to present my situation to the *trung thư lệnh* of the Tây Sơn, Trần Văn Kỷ. I was protected by Văn Kỷ, and finally I was allowed to return to my home to pass the days.[145]

He added a bit more detail in his *Lê Quý Dật Sử*:

> The Tây Sơn summoned the *hoàng giáp* of the former Lê period, Bùi Dương Lịch and the *tiến sĩ* Phan Bảo Định to come to Phú Xuân, and they remained there for two weeks and then turned and went back.[146]

From this we know that he did not make the trip to Phú Xuân alone, but with his fellow villager and exam-mate. Despite the company, the trip marked a journey into

[145] *NAK*, 337-338.
[146] *LQDS*, 96.

moral peril for Lịch as he indicated in a poem written while on his way to the Tây Sơn court:

> Soon I will know the thoughts and the work of acting in a contradictory fashion,
> Then I would rather that in the past I had not gone on with my studies.
> The character filial I no longer know, the character loyal is already dead,
> When I act as an official, when I rest from my labors, how shall I behave?[147]

Another poem at the same time also bespoke his anxiety and sorrow:

> I cannot travel in the universe.
> In this existence I have had a hard time amidst the dusty winds.
> A teardrop has departed before the wind, and still it has not run its course.
> As I chant my odes I am soaked by the rain, and [yet] am still dry.
> Like a solitary slab of stone that falls in a deep forest.
> It is truly funny, on the side of the road I see an old official.
> We greet one another and yet our faces remain distrustful.[148]

As he reported in his *Nghệ An Ký*, Lịch was permitted to return home in 1789, rather than being detained at Phú Xuân against his will. According to one account he was permitted to return home because he had emphasized his responsibilities to his aging mother.[149]

But the Tây Sơn leadership continued to remain interested in Lịch, and he was unable to maintain his resistance, so in 1791 he finally consented to serve the Tây Sơn. Why he did so is not fully clear. We already know that numerous people from his native area had gone to serve the Tây Sơn. Moreover, Lịch undoubtedly knew of the devastating problems that affected his home region and the need for officials to help alleviate the situation. Nguyễn Thiếp, writing in 1789, described in detail the deaths from starvation, the droughts and the abandoned fields that could be

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[147] ibid., 97.
[148] ibid., 97-98.
[149] Viện Triết Học, 138.

seen all around the Nghệ An region.[150] Finally, Lịch may have been further persuaded when he was assigned to serve on the Tây Sơn Nôm translation project at the Sùng Chính Library, working side by side with his two Nghệ An neighbors, Định and Thiếp.[151] Moreover, in deference to Thiếp's reluctance to come to the Tây Sơn capitol at Phú Xuân, the Sùng Chính Library had been established in Nghệ An near Thiếp's place of seclusion, which would have made it easier for Lịch to serve there as well. Lịch thus served on the Nôm translation project, but only for a few months, for shortly after it was begun, Quang Trung died. At his death, this project collapsed and the scholars who had served there apparently went home.

Lịch's reluctance to take part even when his participation was greatly facilitated is implied in his silence on the matter in his writings, in which he does not mention the fact that he later returned there to serve on the Nôm project. We know of his participation in that project, because Quang Trung mentions his name, along with several others, in a letter written to Nguyễn Thiếp praising their work. In addition, while his *Nghệ An Ký* listed several people who surrendered to the Tây Sơn, and some who had earlier served the Mạc in defiance of the Lê, he cited them as aberrations in the region's overall devotion to the ruling dynasty. Finally, he listed himself as one of only two people in Nghệ An who in late 1786 refused to join the Tây Sơn collaborator, Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh, in attacking Thăng Long and an attempted Trịnh restoration.[152] Thus he was clearly trying to gloss over the roles that he and others played in the Tây Sơn period, rather emphasizing his service to the Lê. Since this work was produced under the Nguyễn dynasty it is perhaps not surprising that it would not be a confessional. Nonetheless, Lịch was obviously not proud of his having served the Tây Sơn and his overall reluctance to serve is made quite clear.

Finally, as noted above, Lịch's case is also important because it points to

[150] Hãn, *La Sơn Phu Tử*, 140-141.
[151] On Định see, Ngô Đức Thọ, ed, *Các Nhà Khoa Bảng Việt Nam, 1075-1919* (All the Enrolled Men of Việt Nam, 1075-1919) (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Học, 1993), 758; see also *NAK*, 338.
[152] *NAK*, 330.

both the administrative and psychological importance of the Nghệ An for the Tây Sơn leadership in the period after 1788. First of all, as Quang Trung developed his polity his focus was no longer on the south – the Qui Nhơn center controlled by his brother – but on an entirely new territory encompassing the former Lê capitol of Thăng Long and the former Nguyễn capitol at Phú Xuân. Recognizing the need to centralize his base, Quang Trung not surprisingly chose Nghệ An, situated roughly equidistant from these two centers, as the site of a grand new capitol: the Phoenix Imperial Citadel. This would be the central capitol, relegating the former capitols of the Lê and Nguyễn to secondary status. Quang Trung laid out his arguments for selecting Nghệ An in a letter written to the Chinese:

> Thăng Long was the capitol of the Lê, but now its prosperity is at an end, and its populations are thinly scattered. The citadel of Phú Xuân in Thuận Hóa was in the region of the old Nguyễn clan. From there and down to the tribes of Đồng Nai at the southernmost borders of An Nam still takes one month of travel. Those people frequently brought about troubles in the winds and dust in former days, but recently they have been brought back into harmony. If I stay at Thăng Long that territory will be too distant and messages will not come in a timely fashion. Nghệ An is in the middle part of my court. And for this reason I have chosen this place.[153]

Secondly, Nghệ An had a powerful spiritual pull for the Tây Sơn as well, for it was from here that the Tây Sơn ancestors had come in the seventeenth century. This fact was apparently well known at the time, for Lịch himself described the Tây Sơn connection to Nghệ An:

> The Tây Sơn communicated to the hamlet of Thái Lão [in the district of Hưng Nguyên] to erect an ancestral temple for the *vua* [king] in order that worship could take place there, because according to the family registers, the hamlet of Thái Lão, in the district of Hưng Nguyên had been the home area of his ancestors. The ancestors from the past had gone as soldiers to the south, and had been stationed at Quy Nhơn. In that year, Nguyễn Huệ had invaded the northern region, and had been victorious in the a battle making

[153] Ngô Cao Lãng, *Lịch Triều Tạp Ký* (Collected Records of the Various Dynasties), trans. Hoa Bằng and Hoàng Văn Lâu (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1995), 652.

a triumphal return to Nghệ An . . .[154]

Nghệ An was thus not merely a central location, but it had a spiritual pull on the Tây Sơn as well. For Quang Trung settling in Nghệ An represented a return to his ancestral home. A capitol in Nghệ An would thus be both a political as well as a spiritual center for the new regime. Not surprisingly, Quang Trung invested considerable effort in building up temples to his ancestors in this area, mimicking the traditional ancestral veneration practiced by the Imperial house of the Lê, as well as the lesser seignorial families. While Quang Trung's planned Phoenix Imperial Citadel was never completed, he had grandiose plans for making this the center of his power. Moreover, on his deathbed he is reported to have admonished his son Quang Toản, that Nghệ An and not Phú Xuân, should be the bedrock of his reign.[155] Finally, the Tây Sơn renamed this new region, calling it "Nghĩa An" or "Righteous Peace," suggesting a link to the notion that theirs was a *righteous* uprising (*khởi nghĩa* – 起 義).[156] Given these numerous connections it is perhaps not surprising that the Tây Sơn would have made a particular effort to recruit officials from this region, which they intended to play such a central role in their polity.

The Tây Sơn emphasis on Nghệ An was not without its tensions, for Nghệ An had suffered considerably lying on the path that Tây Sơn troops had taken no less than three times from 1786 to 1788. Moreover, a good number of its elite scholar-officials had given their lives resisting the Tây Sơn during those years. A partial list of Nghệ An *tiến sĩ* who died fighting the Tây Sơn includes: Nguyễn Trọng Đương, Nguyễn Thế Bình, Nguyễn Khuê, and Phạm Nguyễn Du. Numerous other scholars of lesser ranks also lost their lives for the same reason.[157] Perhaps above all, Bùi Dương Lịch saw this period as one of destructive warfare and chaos, affecting no region more so than his native province. In his *phú* poem, "The Kỳ Giang River Bridge", apparently written in 1789, he eloquently described the hardships of the people in

[154] *LQDS*, 91; see also *NAK*, 103.
[155] *Việt Sử Chính Biên Tiết Yếu*, 1984. Document #DC-115 at the Bình Định Provincial Library, 38.
[156] Though it is not clear how widely this new designation was used. While some sources do note this change in name, few contemporary sources call this region anything other than *Nghệ An*.
[157] Hãn, *La Sơn Phu Tử*, 177.

that area who had suffered as victims of drought, warfare and taxation:

> Doors are closed and tasks are abandoned, homes are deserted.
> The masses have suffered misery everywhere.
> And heaven makes for hardship everywhere.
> There are people who formerly were youthful, but now are plagued by age.
> There are people who formerly were healthy, but now are sick and shriveled.
> There are people who formerly were at their ease, but now suffer miserably
> There are people who formerly were wealthy, but now are hungry and poor.
> As for the years and months, there have already been so many,
> But the hills and waters have become deserted places.
> . . . .
> War has risen up, chaos will follow afterward.
> . . . .
> People who go out will endure great suffering on the battlefield
> People who remain at home will die in turn from taxes and labor service.
> . . . .
> Strong men like wolves.
> Powerful generals like panthers
> Dressed for battle in armor and helmet
> On their shoulders lance and spear
> Troop carriages and battle horses,
> Red flags and battle cries
> Echoing thunder and a tugging wind
> Hurling stones and leaping poles
> Furiously firing and a rushing attack
> Arrows and bullets falling rapidly.[158]

The grave difficulties endured by Nghệ An, and the sacrifices that some of its most illustrious men had made in resisting the Tây Sơn, profoundly affected that region. Despite the grand plans to build the central Tây Sơn capitol there, a powerful ambivalence appears to have shaped the responses of its populations and their local leaders. Bùi Dương Lịch, and to an extent Nguyễn Thiếp, are emblematic of this complicated relationship between the Tây Sơn and what they sometimes viewed as the heartland of the northern regime.

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[158] Lộc,*Tổng Tập Văn Học Việt Nam*, 245-248.

Conclusion

The brief nature of Quang Trung's reign leaves open the question of what might have been. While the Tây Sơn dynasty survived his death by almost a decade, the loyalties that had been developed among scholars were ultimately directed more toward the person of Quang Trung than the larger dynasty he had established. The Tây Sơn regime had not yet had a chance fully to coalesce by the time of his death in 1792, and the subsequent reign of his ten-year-old successor saw a period of expanded infighting in a polity increasingly dominated by military figures and regents. Very few, if any, northern scholars joined the Tây Sơn after Quang Trung's death, and those who had eagerly served Quang Trung for the most part drifted away. Some were used sporadically during the reign of his successor, Quang Toản, but their commitment to the regime was markedly reduced. Those scholars who had chosen to remain in seclusion continued in this manner, though a few, like Nguyễn Du and Lê Huy Dao, began to put their hopes in the gathering strength of the Nguyễn in the South.

Ultimately the questions that northern scholars had to answer were these: first, were the Tây Sơn the answer to the problems that had plagued their society for so long, or merely the most dramatic manifestation of these problems? And second, if the Tây Sơn were the answer to those problems, then were they, as officials, justified in setting aside loyalty to the Lê (or what remained of them), to serve this new regime? As we have seen, these answers varied based on factors that we can only partially reconstruct. Some, like Nhậm clearly saw the Tây Sơn as a potential solution, holding out hope that a figure like Quang Trung could succeed in restoring order, and that it was worth risking his Confucian reputation to support such a figure. Others might have answered the first question in the affirmative – the Tây Sơn might just be the answer, but the second in the negative – they could not, under any circumstances jettison their support for the Lê, regardless of the circumstances. And finally some answered the first question in the negative – the Tây Sơn were

merely fuel to the fire of social decay and political turmoil and had to be resisted as had all the northern rebel groups who had come before them.

This chapter is really only a preliminary examination of the many views expressed by northern officials in the Tây Sơn period. The figures I have briefly examined here are to some degree representative, but there are many other voices still to be heard. What has hopefully been demonstrated here is the complex political, philosophical and personal calculations that went into choosing to support or resist the Tây Sơn. In addition, I have tried in this chapter to show that important role that northern scholar-officials played in shaping the Tây Sơn regime in that part of the country. What had once been a seemingly simple, but powerful peasant uprising, was profoundly transformed through its exposure to the world beyond the Qui Nhơn hinterland. With its involvement in northern politics the Tây Sơn movement, and its leaders, had to adapt to new circumstances and the complexities of a crumbling imperial structure and a divided populace.

Conclusion

In the preceding chapters I have attempted to survey the social dynamics of the Tây Sơn movement and in so doing to challenge prevailing historiographical interpretations of the movement. The interactions between the rebel leaders and various segments of eighteenth-century Vietnamese society were complex ones that do not lend themselves to easy explanations nor to the simplified interpretations often applied to the Tây Sơn. This movement profoundly affected the lives of all people living in the Vietnamese territories and indeed well beyond their boundaries. It revealed many of the schisms that had been developing over several centuries both between various socioeconomic groups and between the separate geopolitical entities that had emerged in the aftermath of the Mạc usurpation of the Lê throne in the early sixteenth century. The Tây Sơn movement as well as the resistance against it both by the northern Lê/Trịnh and the southern Nguyễn forces, divided Vietnamese society further and shaped some of the political and social contours of the nineteenth century. And yet, despite these incredible upheavals, the Tây sơn regime specifically, and the Tây Sơn era more generally, reveals a remarkable continuity with the past, and not a profound departure from it.

The Nguyễn victory in 1802, while ostensibly unifying the country under a single leadership, did little to resolve the conflicts that had been stirred up by the Tây Sơn. Peasant discontents that simmered throughout the Tây Sơn period were not addressed, and if anything were exacerbated in the early decades of Nguyễn rule. The hundreds of peasant uprisings that flared up under the reign of Gia Long testified to this new set of frustrations. Indeed, the year 1802, in which the Nguyễn seized political authority from the Tây Sơn must be recognized as constituting a rather arbitrary point of disjuncture. From the peasant perspective the transition of regimes was virtually meaningless. There was a decline in warfare certainly, but the heavy labor demands of the Tây Sơn era were continued and perhaps even accelerated under

the Nguyễn dynasty. The peasants complained loudly about these further exactions from their putative saviors, and the many peasant rebellions that sprang up against Gia Long suggest that in some respects this regime was considerably weaker than its Tây Sơn predecessors.

Furthermore, it was not only peasants who were upset with the new regime. With the Nguyễn ruling from Huế in the geographical center of the country, both the far south and the northern parts of the country were increasingly discontent with their now peripheral status. In the south the virtual warlordships of first Lê Văn Duyệt and then his son Lê Văn Khôi offered a powerful challenge to notions of a united Việt Nam. In the north many scholars who had expected the Nguyễn to restore the Lê found their hopes dashed. They resented the fact that Thăng Long had lost its status as a political capital just as they resented Nguyễn rule. Although the Nguyễn capital at Phú Xuân was to remain a political center and subsequently a capital under the Nguyễn dynasty, an older capital – Thăng Long – was reduced to secondary status, while a new political and economic center – Gia Định (Sài Gòn) – was being formed. The political tensions between these centers helped to define the emergent regionalisms of the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Finally, the Tây Sơn era also accelerated the pace of European involvement in the country as French and Portuguese mercenaries, and French missionaries and British merchants began to appear and become active in the country with increasing frequency. Both the Tây Sơn and the Nguyễn became involved with Europeans, as each side sought the military technologies and mercantile connections offered by these men. This was not a new pattern, for Europeans, both missionaries and merchants, had played important roles during the last great Vietnamese military conflict, that between the Trịnh and the Nguyễn in the middle of the seventeenth century. The difference now was that it was more than one hundred years since the other war had ended, and the reach and strength of the Europeans had grown considerably in the intervening years. Perhaps European involvement in Việt Nam on a larger scale was inevitable, and yet it seems that the nature of western interaction of

the Tây Sơn era played a role in determining the nature of subsequent French involvement in Indochina.

Whatever its concrete accomplishments and whatever the legacies its failures bestowed on its successors, the Tây Sơn movement captured the imagination of subsequent generations – both scholars and peasants – with each seeing a certain heroism in the powerful armies of the era. For the scholars, the Tây Sơn represented the aspirations of a unified nation and one protected against foreign attack. For the peasantry, the Tây Sơn stood for the promise (not fully if at all realized) of socioeconomic change. Time, and the notorious failures of the Nguyễn, helped burnish the image of the Tây Sơn that emerged after their demise. I have tried in this work, however, to view the Tây Sơn from the perspective of the eighteenth century, and not that of the nineteenth and twentieth. In doing so, I have tried to move away from the glorification of a heroic peasantry and a noble leadership to a view that better reflects the many difficulties and hardships (both physical and emotional) that people of this era experienced.

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Appendix A:
A Map of Eighteenth-Century Việt Nam



Notes:
1) Shaded regions (names in boldface) are administrative units comparable to provinces (borders of these units are approximate)
2) The designations "Thuận Hóa" and "Quảng Nam" reflect northern administrative terminology.

Appendix B

Key Dates in the Tây Sơn Period (1771-1802)

What is today Việt Nam was effectively divided between two noble families, the Trịnh governing in the north, where a powerless Lê Emperor still held the imperial throne, and the Nguyễn in the south, continuing to maintain a stated loyalty to the Emperor. The two fought a series of inconclusive wars between 1627 and 1672, which ultimately led to a *de facto* cease fire and division of the country along the Gianh River.

1771 - earliest stirrings of the Tây Sơn movement at the edges of the An Khê plateau west of Qui Nhơn.

1774 - taking advantage of the Tây Sơn challenge to the Nguyễn polity, northern Trịnh forces invade the south, rapidly overrunning Nguyễn positions and eventually taking control of territory to the Hải Vân pass; Nguyễn royal family flees south to Gia Định (Sài Gòn)

1775-1785 - back and forth battle between forces of the Tây Sơn and the Nguyễn for control of the Gia Định area; struggle is temporarily decided in favor of the Tây Sơn after they decisively defeat a joint Nguyễn-Siamese army; the Nguyễn leaders retreat to Bangkok.

1780 - attempted coup in Thăng Long, results in a change of heirs to the Trịnh seat of power; an elder son is removed in favor of an underage prince.

1782 - Trịnh Sâm (r. 1767-1782) dies; ousted elder prince moves to eliminate his brother and seizes control with the assistance of semi-autonomous military forces

1786 - in the wake of a massive famine in the north, Tây Sơn troops advance north, seizing first the old Nguyễn capitol of Phú Xuân, and soon thereafter the imperial city of Thăng Long, where they pledge to restore the Lê Emperor, while eliminating Trịnh political authority. Soon thereafter, the aged Lê Emperor dies, and the Tây Sơn crown his young successor. After doing so, the Tây Sơn troops withdraw to the south. With the Tây Sơn troops gone, the Trịnh survivors briefly regain power over the Lê Emperor. A Tây Sơn general, Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh, attacks and eliminates the new Trịnh ruler, and establishes himself as the new political force in the north.

1787 - A brief civil war breaks out between the elder and younger Tây Sơn brothers, resulting in a division of territories between the three brothers. With peace restored, Nguyễn Huệ turns his attention to the north and removes Chỉnh, whose protege, the Lê Emperor flees into internal exile.

1788 - The new Tây Sơn general in charge in the north quickly alienates the population and his own superiors, prompting his own ouster in the summer of 1788. The Lê Emperor, meanwhile, appeals to the Chinese court for help in regaining his throne. A Chinese army marches into Vietnam in late 1788 and restores him.

1789 - having named himself Quang Trung, the new Emperor of Việt Nam, the powerful Tây Sơn leader, Nguyễn Huệ, gathers together an army and destroys the Chinese forces in a lightening-fast campaign. The humbled Chinese agree to peace and recognize the Tây Sơn as the new rulers of "An Nam."

1787 - meanwhile, in the south, the Nguyễn have returned to capture Gia Định, having taken advantage of the brief civil war between Nhạc and Huệ. From this point forward, the Nguyễn attempt to maintain their foothold in the south and to extend the territory under their control.

1792 - Nguyễn Huệ dies leaving a young son as his successor; Nhạc dies a short time thereafter, leaving a similiarly-aged successor.

1792-1802 - ten years of warfare between the Nguyễn and the Tây Sơn, and within the Tây Sơn camp. Finally in the summer of 1802 the Nguyễn enter Thăng Long, bringing this long period of conflict to a halt. Although sometimes depicted as an inevitable Nguyễn victory in the face of Tây Sơn incompetence and oppression, the two sides were very well matched, and as late as 1801 the outcome of this conflict was still in doubt.

Vita

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