

Dutton, George. 2006. *The Tay Son Uprising: Society and Rebellion in Eighteenth-Century Vietnam*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press. 293 pages. ISBN 978 0 8248 2984 1

Brothers in arms: the Tay Son uprising

KU BOON DAR

The Tay Son movement (1771-1802) was a cataclysmic event that greatly altered the 18th century Vietnamese political and social landscape. It emerged during a period in which Vietnam had been partitioned into two parts along the Gianh River: the Trinh family controlled the north, the Nguyen family the south, while an Emperor of the Le family presided over both regions in name only. George Dutton, assistant professor in the UCLA Department of Asian Languages and Cultures, traces the steps of three brothers, Nguyen Nhac, Nguyen Hue and Nguyen Lu, from the hamlet of Tay Son in Binh Dinh Province (west of modern day Qui Nhon), as they lead a heterogeneous military force that ousts the Trinh and Nguyen families and eventually topples the 348 year-old Le Dynasty (1428-1776).

Dutton argues that the nature of the Tay Son movement and its transformation into a series of political regimes is best understood through an analysis of the dynamic interactions between the various segments of Vietnamese society during this period (p. 5). Indeed, Dutton's analysis challenges the prevailing Vietnamese scholarly traditions, by questioning the assumption of a convergence of interests between the Tay Son movement and the peasantry. Arguing that what might have begun as a movement for the peasants ended up becoming a regime that exploited them, he portrays the movement's leaders as political opportunists whose world view remained constrained by their provincial origins and the exigencies of ongoing warfare and political struggles.

Bandits or populists? Revising history again and again

In fact, during the 19th century, the Nguyen Dynasty (1802-1945), which vanquished the Tay Son regime with the assistance of French mercenaries, wrote its own account of the events of the last three decades of the 18th century. The Dynasty's court historians depicted the movement as an uprising of bandits, rejecting any notion that it was a popular uprising, denying its political legitimacy and arguing that the people had been duped into supporting the Tay Son: they hadn't believed in its objectives, they simply hadn't known any better. The Nguyen Dynasty ensured the dominance of its interpretation of events, at least at the official level, and laid the groundwork for the reinterpretations of early nationalist and Marxist historians trying to understand the Tay Son in light of the Vietnamese revolution. Early 20th century scholarship began to neglect references to the Tay Son as 'bandits' or 'rebels' and suggested the brothers had made legitimate claims to political authority. But even as this shift occurred, it did not address the question of the movement's popular support. Indeed, references to 'peasants' were almost completely absent in the writ-



1971 postage stamp issued in North Vietnam to celebrate the 200th Anniversary of the Tay Son Rebellion

ing of the two most well known early 20th century historians, Phan Boi Chau (1867-1940) (*Viet Nam Vong Quoc Su*, 1905) and Tran Trong Kim (1883-1953) (*Viet Nam Su Luoc*, 1928). They're more comfortable discussing the political and military leaders of Tay Son period. It was not until after the Second World War, in the wake of the Communist Revolution and its association with rural Vietnam, that characterisations of the Tay Son as a peasant movement (*phong trao nong dan*) began to emerge. These representations, most often promulgated by Communist historians of the second half of the 20th century, now dominate discourse pertaining to the Tay Son.

This politicisation of historiography over the course of the 20th century made it difficult for Vietnamese historians to entertain alternative interpretations. The contemporary Vietnamese state has invested so much in its interpretation of the Tay Son, especially the place of Nguyen Hue in the pantheon of national heroes, that historians cannot readily challenge it. When in the late 1980s the noted Vietnamese writer Nguyen Huy Thiep wrote several short stories (including *Vang Lua* (Fired Gold)) that challenged prevailing interpretations, it created an uproar in the Vietnamese intellectual community. It was a strong indication that the Tay Son movement and the ways in which it has been historicised still carry considerable political and emotional weight.

Peasants and pirates: an exploitative regime

Tracing the manner in which Tay Son leaders transformed an inchoate uprising into a new political regime, and by considering the multiplicity of social groups and other pressures that shaped and defined the movement, Dutton challenges common depictions of the Tay Son brothers as visionaries or revolutionaries and the existing scholarship with its simplified view of the Tay Son as a peasant movement. To establish a context for this analytical approach, Dutton's first chapter

provides his readers with an extensive historical background of the Tay Son period as a means of understanding the Tay Son army, or *hissing armie* (p. 18). He examines the major causes of the movement and outlines its trajectory. In chapter two, he addresses the three brothers' leadership, how they saw themselves and how their objectives and political strategies changed over the last three decades of the 18th century. What is interesting in this chapter is that Dutton also examines the period's political culture to look at the ways in which claims to power were made by the Tay Son brothers. He argues they relied on various sources of legitimacy, ranging from references to the supernatural to elements of Confucian political philosophy, namely mandate of heaven (*menh troi*) (p. 64), righteous uprising (*khoi nghia*) (p.74) and virtue (*due*) (p. 77), to concrete connections with existing political institutions and ruling families. In fact, the Tay Son brothers, who were of the Ho clan (to which Ho Quy Ly had belonged), adopted the name Nguyen in an attempt to establish a marital link to the Chinese imperial family. These various affiliations and justifications were extremely important to the Tay Son, who in reality emerged from an economic backwater.

In the following chapter, Dutton examines the manner in which the peasantry was affected by the movement and provides a detailed and concrete look at the nature of peasant existence in a time of enormous political upheaval. Rather than characterising the Tay Son as a peasant movement, he argues it was led by men who were arguably not true peasants but opportunists who quickly lost focus on peasant aspirations to become leaders of a conventional political regime. Peasant lives did not improve during the 30 years of the Tay Son administration. Instead, ordinary people suffered the vicissitudes of military service, forced labour, heavy taxation and the constant uncertainty produced by the incessant cycle of conflict. Consequently, the peasants began to look to the grow-

ing strength of Nguyen forces in the far south as a potential source of salvation from their miseries, just as they had earlier looked to the Tay Son (p. 170).

Finally, Dutton considers the dynamics between the Tay Son leadership and various segments of Vietnamese society, or those living at the 'social margins' whom Dutton classifies as bandits, pirates and ethnic and religious minorities. He reveals the critical role each of these groups had played in shaping the course and nature of the movement and how their role had frequently been misstated, overlooked or misrepresented in previous studies. For example, outlaws and Chinese pirates* were integral to Tay Son military successes: 'The rebel leader connected himself to the Chinese pirates as their [his] protector, just as these same pirates were, through their control of the seas, protecting the Tay Son leader and his regime' (p. 227).

Debunking common narratives

For those who are well versed in Vietnamese language (*Quoc ngu*, modern Vietnamese written with the Latin alphabet), there are a great number of sources available on the Tay Son. According to Li Tana, thousands of books and articles have been published since the beginning of 20th century (Li Tana 1998:139). Nevertheless, Dutton has written the comprehensive Western-language study of the Tay Son movement, which permanently altered Vietnam's political trajectory. He uses the movement as a lens through which he examines the period's complex social dynamics, and weaves together an impressively broad range of sources from northern and southern Vietnam while integrating invaluable manuscripts and printed materials of the *Quoc Su Quan* (Historical Academy), *Archives des Missions Etrangères de Paris* (MEP), and writings of Vietnamese, French and English scholars.

While the overall scope of the volume is comprehensive, the reader will find that there is an emphasis on a social historical

approach, which is Dutton's area of specialisation and results in some areas being neglected. One is Tay Son foreign policy; Dutton merely lists a representative selection of relevant works. It would have been useful to include the information that, after 1785, one of the three brothers, Nguyen Nhac, had already been installed as an emperor with a functioning court and capital near Qui Nhon, and that the Tay Son were developing foreign trade contacts, minting coins and organising the populations under their control. Having been transformed from a movement into a government, the Tay Son exercised a true foreign policy; examining its nascent foreign policies in the far south and north of the country when those regions were under Tay Son control in the 1770s and 1780s can help explain how people throughout Vietnam perceive this 18th century rebellion. Scholars commonly bisect Vietnam into south and north (Dang Trong and Dang Ngoai), which helps one avoid generalisations about a culturally diverse country, but inadequate when we are trying to understand regional Vietnamese politics during the first half of the 19th century. A model that shows the trisection of Vietnamese territory (north, centre and south) is more appropriate. Thus the Tay Son movement is best understood not as an isolated event but as part of a longer era in Southeast Asian history.

The Tay Son Uprising is a splendid, important and well researched contribution to Vietnamese studies. More important, Dutton delves into previously poorly understood topics and in the process undermines many common narratives of the Vietnamese past. Scholars studying other parts of Southeast Asia, as well as those interested in Chinese and Japanese regional involvement, will benefit from this engaging and exceptional book.

Ku Boon Dar is a PhD candidate at the University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. kuboondar@perdana.um.edu.my

References

Li Tana, 1998. *Nguyen Cochinchina: Southern Vietnam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*. Ithaca: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program.

*See Murray, Dian H. 1987. *Pirates of the South China Coast, 1790-1810*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. Her excellent study describes how the Tay Son government integrated numerous Chinese pirate groups into its military ranks (pp. 32-55).