

Li Tana. *Nguyen Cochinchina: Southern Vietnam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998. 194 pp. \$16.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-87727-722-4.



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In the last fifteen years, we have seen slow but marked changes in the scholarship on Vietnam. With the publication of an article here and a book there, scholars have begun to call into question some of the standard interpretations of pre-modern Vietnamese history. Li Tana's *Nguyen Cochinchina: Southern Vietnam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century* builds on and advances this new scholarship. Focusing on the Nguyen ruled lands, the author shows how the inhabitants of Dang Trong (the south) developed through a process of localization, a "new way of being Vietnamese." Not only is this new way of interest in itself, as she shows, but it also suggests a novel interpretation of the rise of the Tay Son rebellion—one of the major rebellions in Southeast Asian history—at the end of the eighteenth century. While her work is too short to realize fully its ambitious goals, it is, nonetheless, an important addition to Vietnam scholarship.

Situating this monograph in the context of other Vietnam scholarship shows the extent to which Li Tana challenges the conventional view of premodern Vietnam. For the tenth through

nineteenth centuries, it is still exceedingly common to read works informed by two master narratives. The first sees a centralized bureaucratic Confucian state imposing its will on the populace, especially from the fifteenth century onwards, culminating in the nineteenth century implantation of strongly Nguyen Confucian state. A second narrative, common among Vietnamese Marxist-nationalist scholars, both emphasizes the rise of a feudal, centralized, and Confucian state and the rise of an ethnonationalist popular consciousness that finds its expression in popular culture and in peasant rebellions.

Some Western studies of Vietnamese history, like Thomas Hodgkin's *The Revolutionary Path* and Le Thanh Khoi's *Le Vietnam* draw extensively on these narratives to explain the genesis of revolutionary nationalism. Le Thanh Khoi, for example, argues that the Tay Son rebellion stemmed from a desire to overthrow rapacious Nguyen leaders exploiting the peasantry: he sees it as a peasant rebellion (and one that, Khoi manages to argue, targeted the Chinese minority as well). The rebellion also ends up, in this view, being an ex-

pression of Vietnamese will against that of the Chinese invaders, with the genius of the Tay Son triumphing over the outclassed Chinese forces.

Such views have begun to come under sharp criticism in the past fifteen years. Whereas it once was acceptable to characterize the Ly and Tran period (1225-1400) as a time of Confucianization, such a view has become discredited by the works of Oliver Wolters, Keith Taylor, John Whitmore, and a few others. Where scholars once felt free to make blanket statements about "Vietnam," now a few important studies of particular individuals (e.g. the first Nguyen lord Nguyen Hoang), regions (like the south, or Dang Trong), practices (like the Vietnamese appropriation of Cham deities), or rebellions (e.g. the Phan Ba Vanh rebellion of the nineteenth century and the Hoa Hao of the twentieth) have helped us see with greater clarity the heterogeneity that characterized the Vietnamese past. In some cases, Western and Japanese scholars are building on insights of their Vietnamese colleagues, while in other cases they are breaking new ground.

But new scholarship does not transform our understanding overnight. Master narratives do not just disappear: they seem to acquire a life of their own. Historians thus continue to portray the Vietnamese as disdaining commerce, venerating Confucianism, suspicious of outsiders and foreigners, and little influenced by other ethnic groups save the Chinese. Li Tana's work overturns some of this conventional wisdom. She does so on the basis of wide-ranging research in Vietnamese, Chinese, Japanese, French, Dutch, and English sources.

According to Li Tana, the Nguyen lords were not simply variants on a Trinh model. They developed, in her words, a "new way of being Vietnamese." The Nguyen lords initially imposed their will on the south through military rule in the seventeenth century and then gradually developed a civilian administration in the eighteenth century. (It was, she notes, an administration that differed

significantly from that of the Trinh to the north.) The Nguyen encouraged foreign commerce: indeed, "[o]verseas trade was the engine driving Dang Trong's spectacular development" (p. 59). Economically, "the two rather alien fronts of mountain and sea dominated over agriculture" (p. 119). Nguyen rulers and followers held heterodox cultural values. Notable is the fact that Buddhism was very strong, Confucianism somewhat weak, and non-Vietnamese culture interpenetrated with that of the Vietnamese. Slavery was common. In general, Dang Trong, or the south, was where a heterogeneous assemblage of upland and lowland ethnic groups, like the Cham and Bahnar, intermixed with the Vietnamese, giving rise to a new culture.

Some of Li Tana's observations are not new. Nguyen The Anh, for example, has commented on the appropriation of Cham deities into the Vietnamese pantheon. Many others have noted the significance of Buddhism in the south and center of the country. And the whole notion of a "new way of being Vietnamese" echoes a point made by Keith Taylor: writing about Nguyen Hoang, the southern "rebel" who fought the ruling Trinh, Taylor argued that Nguyen Hoang showed new possibilities for being Vietnamese. But to point such scholarship should not diminish the accomplishments of Li Tana. For one, extremely little scholarship has been published in Western languages on the seventeenth and eighteenth century Vietnam. Li Tana has brought together our fragmentary knowledge on these topics, and added new research, to sharpen our sense of the distinctiveness of the "south" to Vietnam.

The work does have shortcomings. One is its brevity: the author covers a wide range of developments in Dang Trong over two centuries in less than 150 pages of main text (pp. 11-158). Points that need to be developed are only sketched out. For example, one of the most interesting chapters to this reviewer was the one that discussed new world-views. When we turn to this part, however,

we find a reductionistic view of religion that probably centers too much on the role of the Nguyen rulers. For example, the author argues that "the Nguyen rulers needed to provide an alternative to Cham beliefs that would help sustain Vietnamese immigrants spiritually and psychologically" (p. 103).

She then asserts that "Mahayana Buddhism provided a compromise solution [to Cham beliefs or Confucianism?] appropriate to Nguyen needs. It shored up Vietnamese ethnic identity and calmed immigrant anxieties while at the same time reinforcing the legitimacy of the Nguyen rulers" (p. 103).

While Buddhism undoubtedly benefitted from dynastic patronage, this model of Buddhism diffusing from the state to the populace is simplistic. Furthermore, one senses that the author, imprisoned by modernity, reads back on to the past her concerns about ethnic identity and anxiety. For what much of the rest of this book shows is that, far from being anxious, the Vietnamese seemed open to new ways of constructing their identity.

This same quotation does, however, underline a key point: Buddhism was central to the life of the south. Li Tana is probably on quite firm ground in making such an argument. Yet given that the author is challenging the orthodox view that Confucianism was of central importance to both the Nguyen and Trinh rulers, one hopes for more proof.

In other areas, Li Tana has put forth important correctives or amplifications to past scholarship. She stresses, for example, the significance of the money economy to Dang Trong, the different nature of the Nguyen administrative system (which she argues often has more in common with other Southeast Asian administrative systems than with the Sinic one), and the importance of uplanders in the life and economy of the region. All of these different points help her come up with a novel and important corrective to the

most famous uprising in Vietnamese history, the Tay Son.

This rebellion has often been seen as a peasant uprising. But was it? Can we construct alternative, more historically grounded arguments that take the particularities of the South (Dang Trong) into consideration? The author suggests that we can.

Li Tana, who only looks at the outbreak of this rebellion, argues that previous approaches impose modern "political myths and symbols" on the past, often in the service of Marxism and nationalism. She argues that rather than see the uprising as a manifestation of a general trend (i.e. as a peasant rebellion), it makes more sense to see the Tay Son uprising in its local context, in terms of the development and response to Nguyen rule in the south. Her argument is often compelling. She underlines the local particularities of this movement, particularities that have usually been downplayed by other scholars. For example, it becomes clear that the Tay Son drew on local cultural and sacred beliefs, including Cham ones. But once again, given that Li Tana is attacking the scholarship on the most discussed rebellion in Vietnamese history, we hunger for more. We want a richer, more deeply textured view of the origins of that event.

In her attention to the significance of regional dynamics, this monograph (inadvertently?) points out a strange fact about Vietnamese studies in the West. We know about individuals (and individual texts), about villages, and about the nation as a whole. We know precious little about regions. We have thus become too sloppy in making generalizations about "Vietnam" and the "Vietnamese," mixing evidence from all regions together to construct generalizations about the whole. Li Tana avoids such carelessness.

In conclusion, I would like to contextualize my criticism. As my comments, taken in their entirety, should indicate, I believe that this is an admirable work. Li Tana has contributed an impor-

tant and well-researched work to Vietnamese studies. She has delved into topics previously poorly understood in the scholarship of the period and in the process has undermined many of the common narratives of the Vietnamese past. This reader hopes that scholars studying other parts of Southeast Asia, as well as those interested in Japanese and Chinese interactions with Southeast Asia, will study this book. Its author has performed a welcome service.

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