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An Alternative Vietnam? The Nguyen Kingdom in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

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Introduction

The seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Nguyen kingdom which controlled the area later known to the West as Cochinchina, had its origins in modern central Vietnam. The Nguyen annals portray Nguyen Hoang, the governor of Thuan Hoa and Quang Nam, which then marked the southern frontier of Dai Viet, as the founder of this kingdom of the south. War broke out in 1627 between the Nguyen in the south and the royal Le-Trinh government which controlled the region from Nghe An to the Red River delta. By creating a new state, the Nguyen put themselves into a rebellious position that was fraught with danger, for they were far weaker than the Trinh in almost every way. The north had well-established institutions, its territory was three or four times larger than that of the Nguyen, and it possessed correspondingly more military strength. In addition, the Trinh were established in an area occupied by ethnic Vietnamese and therefore governed their own people, while the Nguyen administration governed the former lands of Champa, an Indianized kingdom which had remarkably different traditions from those of the Vietnamese.¹ Yet the Nguyen government not only survived, defeating seven campaigns launched by the Trinh, but also progressively pushed its border further into the south, securing control over three-fifths of the territory that makes up present-day Vietnam in the space of just 200 years. Why did forces operating in a new environment survive, and triumph, while those that remained in familiar surroundings faltered?

Space to manoeuvre and the growth of new social elements seem to have provided a crucial stimulus for what would later develop into a society and polity far removed from the Confucian model of the Le dynasty. These differences can be seen in many aspects of life.² Where population growth and an accelerating cycle of natural disasters³ made life increasingly insecure and impoverished in the Le/Trinh north, in the Nguyen south natural

I am grateful to Nola Cooke for providing extensive comments on a preliminary draft of this article.

¹For the most significant discovery which revolutionises our understanding of Champa, see Po Dharma, *Le Panduranga (Campa) 1802–1835. Ses rapports avec le Vietnam* (Paris: EFEO, 1987), 2 vol. (Paris: Travaux du Centre d'histoire et Civilisations de la Péninsule Indochinoise, 1988), especially Bernard Gay, "Vue nouvelle sur le composition ethnique du Campa", pp. 49–56, and Po Dharma, "Etat des derniers recherches sur la date de l'absorption du Campa par le Vietnam", pp. 59–70. See also Pierre-Bernard Lafont, "Les grandes dates de l'histoire du Campa", in *Le Campa et la Monde Malais* (Paris: Centre d'Histoire et Civilisations de la Péninsule Indochinoise, 1991), pp. 6–25.

²For an illuminating discussion of the two societies, see Keith Taylor, "Regional Conflicts among the Viet People between the 13th and 19th centuries", paper presented at a seminar entitled "La conduite des relations entre sociétés et états: Guerre et paix en Asie du Sud-Est", Paris, July 1996, pp. 7–8.

³According to Sakurai's statistics of 49 floods in the Red River delta between 1422 and 1786, 22 occurred in the last 100 years. See Yumio Sakurai, "A Study on the Peasant Drain during Le Dynasty in Vietnam", *To-nan A ja kenkyu* 1,16 (1978): 137.

abundance prevailed, and the population was small. Where political and economic disasters from the late sixteenth to the early eighteenth centuries forced northern peasants against their will to quit their homes and drift to the southeast or the northwest, Vietnamese families in the dynamic Nguyen realm willingly moved to live amongst non-Vietnamese on the open, shifting frontier.

From the seventeenth century, the Red River delta ceased to be the only centre of Vietnamese civilization: a new centre — Phu Xuan (Hue) — challenged Thang Long (Hanoi), and a second important socio-economic zone — Thuan Quang — took shape far from the Red River delta. This was more than a simple southern extension of the former Vietnamese economy and society. Rather, a new society developed, with a different cultural background and quite different political and economic circumstances. As residents of a region over which the hostile Le/Trinh northern government never formally renounced control, southern Vietnamese described their territory as the “inner region” (*Dang Trong*), and characterized the northern Red River plains as the “outer region” (*Dang Ngoai*). The terminology indicates clearly that they perceived the south as a distinct entity, and the emergence of marked dissimilarities between the two areas amounted to two different ways of being Vietnamese.⁴

The formation of Dang Trong was a dramatic and fundamental change in Vietnamese history, comparable in significance to Vietnam’s securing independence from China. At first sight, these events may seem, as they were often presented in nineteenth-century official histories, to be little more than the story of the survival and ultimate success of a family which had failed to advance itself in the Thang Long court; however, Nguyen successes produced a new society and a new culture. Economic factors played a decisive role: within a few short decades, Dang Trong became richer and stronger than the north (although not strong enough to topple the Trinh), despite being a newly-opened region, less populous and at this stage smaller than the old Red River delta. Both the economic condition of the people and the comparative openness of society in Dang Trong contrasted favourably with the so-called “central government” of the royal Le kingdom. These advantages formed the basis of the Vietnamese Nam Tien (southward expansion) which finally brought them to the Mekong delta.⁵ Dang Trong became the historical engine of change, and pulled the national Vietnamese centre of gravity — whether seen in political, economic or even cultural terms — southwards from the seventeenth century until the imposition of French rule.⁶

A Non-Confucian, Buddhist South

For Vietnamese in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the south, and the idea of the south, meant something far more important than merely a place to live. The south offered a diversity of options. Occupying an “illegal” or “rebel” position gave the

⁴The terms Dang Trong and Dang Ngoai apparently originated in the 1620s, either before or soon after war broke out between the Trinh and the Nguyen. Alexandre de Rhodes’s dictionary, published in 1651 contains both terms. See his *Dictionarium Annamiticum, Lvsitanum, et Latinum* (Rome: Typis & Sumptibus eiusdem Sac. Congreg., 1651), p. 201.

⁵For a discussion on the term “nam tien”, see Keith Taylor, “Regional Conflicts”, pp. 6–11.

⁶See Li Tana, *Nguyen Cochinchina: Southern Vietnam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Monograph, 1998).

Nguyen a sense of freedom to try anything that seemed workable without reference to the constraining standards of Confucian morality. For instance, uniquely in Vietnamese history, the Nguyen allowed Japanese and Chinese to become government officials, and Westerners to have positions in the court, even if only as physicians. At the same time, the fact that they lived as part of the larger world of Southeast Asia enabled Vietnamese immigrants to borrow, blend and absorb extensively from the cultures of the Cham and other peoples in the region.

Under such circumstances, it was beneficial for the Nguyen regime to emphasize its local character. When proclaiming himself king in 1744, Nguyen Phuc Khoat declared proudly, “our country rose and developed from O Chau”,⁷ using a name with strong local colour for the place of origin of the royal family and many high officers. O Chau emphasized a perception of Dang Trong as a separate country that had developed since the early seventeenth century. This identification actually implied two meanings: a country equal to the north and a local rather than a foreign regime for the local people. The latter sense was related to legitimacy, and to the self-confidence of the Nguyen.

In comparison with the north, where the Chinese-style examination system ensured that neo Confucianism never lost its grip on the literati elite, Confucian ideas played a much reduced political and social role in Dang Trong. To borrow Nola Cooke’s words:

Confucianism in Dang-trong became a matter of private choice and practice to an extent unknown in the north since the thirteenth-century. Indeed, so modest was its niche in the southern ideological spectrum that no-one even bothered to record when the first humble Confucian Temple of Literature *Van Mieu* was actually founded here.⁸

But the Nguyen did not reject other Vietnamese traditions; in particular they embraced Mahayana Buddhism as the solution to their spiritual and ideological needs as a new ruling family. Buddhism shored up the Vietnamese sense of ethnic identity and reinforced Nguyen legitimacy. From Nguyen Hoang on, the early Nguyen Lords (*chua*) were all devotees of Buddhism. Few matched the fervour of the sixth Nguyen ruler, Nguyen Phuc Chu (r. 1691–1725), who claimed to be in the thirtieth generation of the Lam Te (in Chinese, Lin ji) school of Buddhism.⁹ This assertion is reminiscent of those kings of the eleventh-century Ly dynasty who became the first, third and fifth generations of the Thao Duong (in Chinese, *cao tang*) school, and of the Tran kings, Thai Ton and Nhan Ton, who were famous for their Truc Lam school. Yet nothing similar had been seen in northern Vietnam since the establishment of the Le dynasty, with its foundations in classical Chinese political theories. In the north the king was the pinnacle of society, its direct link to heaven, and thus superior to all other beings. For a king to become simply one among successive generations of any particular religious school would have been seen there as

⁷*Dai Nam Thuc Luc Tien Bien* (Chronicle of Greater Vietnam, Premier Period of the Nguyen, hereafter *Tien Bien* (Tokyo: Keio Institute of Linguistic Studies, Mita, Siba, Minato-ku, 1961), vol. 10, p. 136.

⁸Nola Cooke, “Nineteenth-Century Vietnamese Confucianization in Historical Perspective: Evidence from the Palace Examinations (1463–1883)”, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 25,2 (Sep. 1994): 284.

⁹This claim appeared in his 1715 inscription on a Thien Mu stele. Ngu Kien Thien Mu Tu Bi (The royal inscription on a bell in Thien Mu temple), shelf number 5683, Han-Nom Institute, Hanoi.

degrading. Freed from such imperial constraints, however, the Nguyen kings in Dang Trong were at liberty to practice their religion as they wished. Buddhism so flourished with Nguyen support that by 1749 the French traveller Pierre Poivre reported the existence of about 400 Buddhist temples around the Dang Trong capital alone, plus many more elsewhere.¹⁰

Where Buddhism was concerned, the real qualitative difference between the two polities in the north and the south lay at the court level, in the consistency with which the Nguyen championed syncretic Buddhism and made it in effect the state religion of Dang Trong. Admittedly both the Le kings and the Trinh Lords in the north also patronised Buddhism during these centuries, in some cases enthusiastically. At the height of revived literati influence in the 1660s, and only a few years after scholarly officials had prepared a consciously sinicising 47-article edict of moral education which attacked superstitious practices and restricted the unlicensed building of Buddhist pagodas,¹¹ the Trinh family itself had imported Chinese monks to renew local Buddhism in 1667. Trinh princes frequented Buddhist sites and went on pilgrimages, while one family member founded a new sect. However, despite this high level patronage, no one in the north ever believed Buddhism could challenge the Chinese political concepts and official ideology that formed "the vital principle of the state".¹² Rather, Buddhism was sanctioned in the north very much on the basis that it was a vehicle of personal salvation which posed no threat to the established political order.¹³ Had it been otherwise, Buddhism would no doubt have been as tightly controlled as Catholic Christianity, whose foreign origins and European associations created suspicions among the authorities in both north and south at the time.

That southern Buddhism was highly syncretic gave it a more inclusive appeal. The most famous temple in Hue, the Thien Mu, is a striking example of how different religious currents combined and of how, from Nguyen Hoang onwards, the new rulers were able to weave these various strands into a local religious pattern which domesticated and supported their own power. Thien Mu stood on a hill whose geomantic force was so powerful that, local legend held, it had forced a ninth-century Chinese governor to try to neutralize its dragon vein by digging a ditch across it. The site also housed an important Cham temple dedicated to the great earth goddess Po Nagar. According to Vietnamese legend, in 1600 the goddess miraculously appeared in the form of an old woman, a "Heavenly Mother" whose description combined elements of Po Nagar and the Taoist Queen of Heaven. She announced that the true lord of the land had arrived and would restore the dragon vein beneath the hill by building a pagoda to concentrate its spirit

¹⁰P. Poivre, "Journal de voyage du vaisseau de la compagnie le Machault à la Cochinchine depuis le 29 août 1749, jour de notre arrivée, au 11 février 1750", reprod. by H. Cordier in *Revue de l'Extrême Orient*, III (1885), p. 381. Today Hue has several hundred temples and is called the "capital of Buddhism". See Thanh Tung, *Tham Chua Hue* (Hue: Hoi Van Nghe Thanh Pho Hue, 1989), p. 3.

¹¹*Tien Bien*, vol. 19, p. 974; *Le Trieu Chieu Lenh Thien Chinh* [The benevolent edicts of the Le dynasty] (Saigon: Binh Minh, 1961), p. 311; K.W. Taylor, "The Literati Revival in Seventeenth-Century Vietnam", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 18,1 (1987): 1-23.

¹²Philippe Langlet, *La Tradition vietnamienne: un état national au sein de la civilisation chinoise* (Saigon: BSEI, 1970), pp. 70-71, quote p. 71.

¹³Insun Yu, *Law and Society in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Vietnam* (Seoul: Asiatic Research Center, Korea University, 1990), p. 29.

forces. Whether this prophecy was made before or after Nguyen Hoang symbolically fulfilled it by building such a structure in 1601 may never be known. What matters here is that when the first Nguyen Lord consciously erected a Buddhist pagoda on this site of great spirit potency, he was making a gesture of great political significance. If, as Nguyen The Anh has recently reported, this was a symbolic construction on the site of an existing temple whose spirit had not been officially recognized by the Le court, the act was even more charged with local meaning.¹⁴

As for Po Nagar herself, this principal Cham goddess was soon Vietnamized into Thien-Y-A-Na, and the area around Hue came to abound with her shrines. In the early twentieth century Léopold Cadière listed so many of them still extant that Nguyen The Anh has suggested “the Nguyen center of power never ceased to be steeped in an atmosphere deeply influenced by the spiritual imprint of this deity”.¹⁵ Certainly in this area her worship remained unconstrained, and close to its Cham roots. There were additional objects of veneration among the common people, such as stones (*tho da*), crocodiles (*tho ca sau*), or tigers (*tho cop*).¹⁶ “Mountains, forests, rivers, the memory of ancestors, respect for the dead and especially spirits are subjects of worship.... There is a god for each man’s fancy”, Poivre said.¹⁷ While northern popular religion also contained a similar pantheon of animal and mineral objects of veneration, the authorities there tried to take measures to “purify the society”. Nothing similar happened in the south, where the Nguyen court sought to patronize rather than penalize local deities, recognizing that southern gods and goddesses were as diverse as southern society itself.

Similarities with other parts of Southeast Asia extended to kingship. As O.W. Wolters has pointed out, in Southeast Asia “the king’s status was unique only because it was a religious one”.¹⁸ This is probably the reason the Nguyen proclaimed themselves *thien vuong* (king of heaven) in 1744, after having earlier used the title *chua Sai* (Buddhist Priest Lord). Da Shan, a Chinese Buddhist monk who visited Cochinchina in 1695 observed that the palace of Nguyen Phuc Chu was decorated with Buddhist flags, hangings, wooden fishes, and inverted bells, just like a Buddhist temple.¹⁹ By adopting these symbols, the Nguyen showed their subjects they combined religious and royal authority in Dang Trong, and represented their national and cultural identities to the Vietnamese while indicating to local people where the highest authority in the region lay. Probably following the lead of their southern neighbours, Nguyen practices resembled what rulers of kingdoms such

¹⁴Cooke, “Vietnamese Confucianism”, pp. 283–84; Nguyen The Anh, “The Vietnamization of the Cham Deity Po Nagar”, in *Essays into Vietnamese Pasts*, ed. Keith Taylor and John Whitmore (Ithaca: SEAP, Cornell University, 1995), p. 49. See also A. Bonhomme, “La pagode Thien-Mau: Historique”, in *Bulletin des Amis du Vieux Hue* 2,2 (1915): 175–77.

¹⁵Nguyen The Anh, “The Vietnamization of Po Nagar”, p. 49.

¹⁶Nguyen Cong Binh, *Le Xuan Diem & Mac Duong, Van Hoa & cu dan Dong Bang Song Cuu Long* [Culture and Residents in the Mekong Delta Region] (Ho Chi Minh City: Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi, 1990), pp. 376–77.

¹⁷“Description of Cochinchina, 1749–50”, in *Documents on the Economic History of Nguyen Vietnam, 1602–1774*, ed. Anthony Reid and Li Tana (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies/ECHOSEA, Australian National University, 1993), p. 84.

¹⁸O.W. Wolters, *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1982), p. 19.

¹⁹Da Shan, “Hai Wai Ji Shi”, in *Shi Qi Shi Ji Guang Nan zhi Xin Shi Liao*, ed. Chen Ching-ho (Taipei: Zhong Hua Cong Shu Bian Sheng Wei Yuan Hui, 1960), p. 15.

as Champa and Cambodia had been doing for centuries. The Nguyen also differentiated themselves from the Trinh, who believed in the Confucian idea that the emperor was the son of heaven, but not part of heaven itself.²⁰

This non-Confucian pattern worked so curiously well in the society of Dang Trong that it allowed Vietnamese there to live in a different way from the northerners. In the late eighteenth-century it is striking to see a Tay Son general in Nghe An poking fun at *xa tac*, an important Confucian deity associated with land and crops, and much revered in the north, saying: "A dog is more useful than the *xa tac*!"²¹ This deity was largely unknown to the mass of Dang Trong society; according to the modern Vietnamese scholar Ta Chi Dai Truong, *xa tac* temples did not make their appearance until the reign of Minh Mang (1819–41), when the later Nguyen dynasty, now ruling all of Vietnam, made an effort to unify religious thinking throughout the country.²² The incident illustrates the growing difference in religious beliefs between Dang Trong and Dang Ngoai after two centuries of separation. Many old values from the north had lost their meaning, while something as heretical to orthodox northerners as a Cham goddess had become meaningful to the people of Dang Trong. Buddhism — criticized for centuries by the Confucian scholars of the later Tran and Le dynasties — became the leading religion, both at the level of official policy and popular belief in Dang Trong.

The easy mobility in the south also clashed directly with the primacy of the collectivity, a basic Confucian tenet that emphasized the value of the social group — the family, the village — above the needs or desires of its constituent members. Individuals had little worth or purpose in isolation but only mattered in terms of how they discharged a number of fixed relationships within the community. In other words, anyone who lacked standing in a social group, like the family or the village, was less than a full person and could hope for no better future in traditional village society. Such people seem to have formed one of the main currents in the stream of Vietnamese immigrants to the far south. As one Vietnamese scholar, Huynh Lua, has described it, the south was a place for "those who did not have the right to live on the older opened land".²³ Hickey, too, has underlined the same point:

With the new village [of the south] therefore being established by lower status people rather than the patricians of the traditional society, a certain amount of esoteric knowledge concerning the old ways was inevitably lost.... By the same token, however, the pioneers were less bound by the highly restrictive social ranking and the behaviour expectations of the older society, so they were free to innovate, an essential feature of their successful adjustment (and survival) as they moved continually southward.²⁴

²⁰Ta Chi Dai Truong, *Than, Nguoi va Dat Viet* [Deities, people and the land of Viet] (California: Van Nghe Press, 1989), pp. 220–23.

²¹The comments on "xa tac", made by Cao Huy Dieu in the early nineteenth-century, are reproduced in *Viet Dien U Linh Tap* [Anthology of the spirits of the departed of the Vietnamese domain], trans. into Vietnamese by Le Huu Muc (Saigon: Khai Tri, 1961), p. 218.

²²Ta Chi Dai Truong, *Than, Nguoi va Dat Viet*, p. 235.

²³Huynh Lua, "Qua trinh khai pha vung Dong Nai-Cuu Long va hinh thanh mot so tinh cach, nep song va tap quan cua nguoi nong dan Nam Bo" (Process of opening the Mekong delta and of forming some characteristics and customs of southern peasants), in *May dac diem Dong bang Song Cuu Long* [Some characteristics of the Mekong Delta] (Hanoi: Vien Van Hoa, 1984), p. 121.

²⁴Hickey, "The Vietnamese Village Through Time and War", *The Vietnam Forum* 10 (1987): 18.

Such circumstances prompted people to be more open and spontaneous, to be risk takers like Nguyen Hoang, whom Keith Taylor has perceptively described as daring “to risk being pronounced a rebel, because he had found a place where this no longer mattered”.²⁵ It was a larger world, and gave people a greater sense of freedom.

Social Aspects of Vietnamese Localization

The immigrant character of Dang Trong was further modified by its environment in its early days. The population was scattered and food and resources were abundant and easily available, a pattern resembling Dang Trong’s Southeast Asian neighbours rather than the Dong Ngoai area in the north. It was natural, therefore, for them to adopt the ways of material life of other people in the region.

We know, for example, that up to the late eighteenth century most of the common people’s houses in Dang Trong were raised on poles as in other Southeast Asian countries, and a Malay type of ship, the *ghe bau*, was widely used between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. This ship-building technique was almost certainly borrowed from the Cham by the Vietnamese, for the Chams traded extensively with the Malays, and the region of its use extended from Hoi An southward to Thuan Hai,²⁶ the area once occupied by the Cham. Some Vietnamese scholars even suggest that not only the technology but also the words *ghe* and *bau* were borrowed from Malay. They point out the similarity of Vietnamese word *ghe* and Malay *gai* (a rope or stay used to hold a mast), and suggest that *bau* was a corrupt pronunciation of Malay *prahu* (a small boat).²⁷ The similarity was striking enough for John Barrow to observe in 1793 that vessels in the Tourane region resembled the common proas of the Malays, both as to their hulls and rigging”.²⁸

Cham influence is also seen in Vietnamese farming tools. The plough used by Vietnamese in the northern Red River and Ma River deltas is not strong at its base and has a small tongue, but it is light and easy for one animal to pull. This kind of plough is suitable for earth which is not compacted, and where the grass is not thick. The features are characteristic of the lands in the north — cultivated for thousands of years by a dense population — and the plough is only found north of the Gianh River, which marked the border between Dang Ngoai and Dang Trong. In Dang Trong the Vietnamese encountered land that was thick with grass and hard to farm. To turn the soil here the Vietnamese adapted the Cham plough, which was stronger, especially at the base, but added a *nang* (follicle) to adjust the angle. Parts of this new plough taken from the Cham model have Cham names, while the parts that have to do with the *nang* have Vietnamese names. This new plough was brought south by the Vietnamese as they moved to the Mekong delta.²⁹

²⁵Keith Taylor, “Nguyen Hoang”, p. 64.

²⁶Thuan Hai is an old name for Phan Rang Province.

²⁷Nguyen Boi Lien, Tran Van An and Nguyen Van Phi, “Ghe bau Hoi An — Xu Quang” [Ghe bau junks in the Hoi An-Quang Nam area], paper given at the International Symposium on the Ancient Town of Hoi An, March 1990, pp. 2–3.

²⁸John Barrow, *A Voyage to Cochinchina, in the years 1792 and 1793* (Kuala Lumpur: reprinted by Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 319.

²⁹Ngo Duc Thinh and Nguyen Viet, “Cac loai hinh cay hien dai cua dan toc o Dong Nam A” (Types of ploughs in Southeast Asia), *Tap Chi Khao Co Hoc* (Journal of Archaeology) 4 (1981): 55–56.

In central Vietnam, Cham culture was so ubiquitous that it has survived in Vietnamese customs there up to the present: from the consumption of raw food (*an goi*) to the way hair is wrapped into a piece of cloth (*doi khan*)³⁰ to burial in Cham style graves, although the Vietnamese themselves are not necessarily aware of the origin of these practices.³¹ Amazingly, even *mam nem*, the fish sauce that typifies Vietnamese cuisine, according to some Vietnamese scholars may actually have a Cham origin. One Vietnamese scholar of southern customs has even pointed to the great similarity between the so-called “traditional” Vietnamese women’s dress, the *ao dai*, which every Vietnamese woman wears for special occasions today, and the dress of Cham women (*tah* in Cham); only the addition of a collar distinguishes the *ao dai*. This style is very different indeed from the *ao tu than*, the long, open and sleeveless garment that was formal wear for northern Vietnamese women before the twentieth century.³²

Perhaps the most important characteristic which made the new southern Vietnamese different from Vietnamese in the north was their attitude towards overseas trade. Dang Trong was born in an “age of commerce”.³³ The weak agricultural base available to seventeenth-century Dang Trong could hardly sustain a desperate struggle with the superior forces of the Trinh north, and the early Nguyen were compelled to flout the practice of all previous Vietnamese states and allow fairly free trade. Although this was unusual in itself, what quickly followed was previously virtually unknown: the Nguyen themselves became enthusiasts for foreign trade, and for foreigners. When the opportunity arose, they lost no time in linking Dang Trong with Chinese and Japanese trade routes. The fact that one-quarter of all officially licensed (Red Seal) Japanese ships traded with Dang Trong, and 30 per cent of Chinese junks travelling from Southeast Asian countries to Japan between 1647 and 1720 departed from Dang Trong, shows that in the seventeenth century the region became a key Japanese trading partner, and a significant player in wider Asian commercial relations.³⁴ Cochinchina’s independent existence, and the Nguyen’s own power and wealth, rested largely on this overseas trade, a situation unique in all pre-colonial Vietnamese history. By following the Cham example, seventeenth-century Cochinchina found the resources and vitality to undergo a great period of expansion in population, wealth and land, despite having to fight a war with the north that lasted for 50 years. This characteristic of Dang Trong alone draws a line between itself and earlier traditional Vietnam, which had a weak commodity economy.

The southern Vietnamese also adopted other Cham practices like piracy and elephant fighting.³⁵ In particular, the slave trade, which would have seemed deviant in the north,

³⁰This Cham way of decorating their hair is recorded in the fifteenth century by Fei Xin in his *Xing Jue Sheng Lan* (Beijing: Zhong Hua Shu Ju, 1954), p. 3.

³¹The graves around the Hue area are quite different from those elsewhere in Vietnam, both to the north and to the south. I am grateful to Prof. Do Van Ninh, who kindly pointed out to me that they are exactly in old Cham style.

³²Phan Thi Yen Tuyet, *Nha o, trang phuc, an uong cua cac dan toc vung Dong bang song Cuu Long* (Housing, clothes and food of the peoples in the Mekong delta region) (Hanoi: Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi, 1993), pp. 92, 290.

³³Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450–1680*, vols. 1 & 2 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988, 1993).

³⁴For details, see Li Tana, *Nguyen Cochinchina*, chs. 3 and 4.

³⁵In 1749 Poivre saw 12 tigers killed by 40 elephants in a single day for the amusement of the king and his officials.

was a normal part of Vietnamese life in the new environment, as Poivre discovered in 1750:

I asked the king to give me at least several savages or slaves to be craftsmen (because the slaves in this region are only those barbarians who were caught by Cochinchinese from the mountains). The king answered that it was not difficult, but he suggested I wait until the next year, and he promised me that he would supply me with as many slaves as I wanted by then. He added that this year I could only manage to buy two kinds of slaves: one kind was uncivilised since they were only caught lately and were not well trained and could therefore do nothing useful, the other kind were the ones who had become familiar with this region and trained in certain techniques. But soon after I bought them they would escape, because they desperately wanted to go back to their wives and children.³⁶

Clearly the Nguyen Ruler was familiar with slavery, and the trade in uplanders was so accepted that the court taxed it at the same rate as the trade in elephants in the Thuan Hoa area.³⁷ In this as in other sphere of life, the Nguyen must have found that adopting local cultural practices was both convenient and advantageous. Perhaps it would not be too far from the truth to say that the Nguyen's strength actually lay precisely in their localization.

The Nguyen also radically differed from the Trinh in their policies toward the Chinese. Having lived in the shadow of China and its invasions, Vietnamese rulers in the north were always extremely wary of the Chinese, but the Nguyen had a remarkably relaxed attitude towards the Chinese, and allowed significant Chinese trading communities to take shape in Hue, Hoi An, Quy Nhon, and later in Saigon. By the end of the eighteenth century the Chinese population in southern Vietnam was perhaps between 30 and 40 thousand.³⁸ At the end of the seventeenth century, the Nguyen secured control of the Bien Hoa and My Tho areas in the upper Mekong delta from Cambodia, largely due to the efforts of some 3,000 Ming refugees from Guangdong who had been directed to settle there when they arrived in 1679 seeking asylum from the Qing. Ha Tien, another strategically important port area on the Khmer-Viet border, came into Nguyen hands through the activities of Mac Cuu, a Ming refugee from Guangdong, in the early eighteenth century. All three locations developed prosperous towns and attracted foreign trade at the expense of Cambodia, formerly the dominant power in the area. In these townships the Chinese were the merchants and artisans, and some were appointed to official positions as custom officers, a situation unique in Vietnamese history. In 1698, the Nguyen ended the semi-autonomous position of the Chinese in the Mekong delta by establishing Gia Dinh prefecture. They registered the resident Chinese population in two villages of "Ming

³⁶See Poivre, "Journal", p. 439.

³⁷Le Quy Don, *Phu Bien Tap Luc* (Miscellaneous records of Pacification in the Border Area), written in 1776 (Saigon: Phu Quoc Vu Khanh Dac Trach Van Hoa, 1973), vol. 4, pp. 5a-5b.

³⁸The Vietnamese official source gives 20,241 Minh Huong Chinese in Quang Nam alone in 1805. Chau Ban, Vol. 1, *Trieu Gia Long* (the files of the Gia Long reign) kept in the National Archives no. 1, Hanoi. Crawford estimated Chinese population in Saigon in 1822 as between two and three thousand. See John Crawford, *Journal of an Embassy to the Courts of Siam and Cochin China* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 214. In Hoi An alone the Chinese population was estimated at four to five thousand in 1642. See "A Japanese Resident's Account", in *Southern Vietnam under the Nguyen*, ed. Li and Reid, p. 31.

loyalists" (*Minh huong*), treating them as permanent residents rather than regarding them as merchant sojourners. This made the Nguyen the earliest administration in Southeast Asia to adopt such a localization policy.³⁹ Under such favourable conditions, the Chinese played an intricate role in the Tay Son period, with both the prince Nguyen Anh and his enemy the rebel Tay Son brothers turning to the Chinese as a source of manpower and economic strength.

Conclusion

The development of a localized Vietnamese identity in Dang Trong seems to have been a successful response to a new environment. This is not to say that the Vietnamese in Dang Trong became "non-Vietnamese". Rather, as Keith Taylor has suggested, the area allowed for the creation of an alternative "version of being Vietnamese distinguished by relative freedom from the Vietnamese past",⁴⁰ particularly from the immediate past of the Confucian model that had been in operation since the Le dynasty in the north. The two-century Nguyen period shaped many traits characteristic of southerners, such as their curiosity and tolerance towards new things and new ideas, their more open and spontaneous character, and their willingness not to be fettered by history and tradition.

Although the changes during this period no doubt played a constructive role in Vietnamese culture, they also created disruptions in communal solidarity which the nineteenth-century Vietnamese literati who wrote the official history of these centuries found unacceptable. A manuscript kept in the Han-Nom Institute of Hanoi says that in the second year of Ming Mang's reign (1820) the emperor ordered the Historical Board of the Kingdom (*Quoc Su Quan*) to compile a history of the kingdom, specifying that "the style, the way of expression and the facts are to be weighed and considered before being recorded".⁴¹ Much information was omitted in this process of weighing and considering. Throughout the nineteenth century, historians tended to ignore or play down unorthodox or non-Confucian aspects of Dang Trong society, such as slavery and contacts with the Cham, Japanese, and Khmer, no doubt in an attempt to achieve the desired compromises and balances.

The Nguyen regime has not fared much better at the hands of modern Vietnamese scholars. As David Marr has pointed out, twentieth-century Vietnamese historians have often been "asked to balance the elements of continuity in their story against the elements of change".⁴² National unity and resistance to aggression are two themes seen as central to Vietnamese experience, and the Nguyen regime contravened both principles. First, Dang Trong destroyed national unity for two hundred years. Second, writing about the aftermath of the massive Tay Son rebellion which destroyed the Nguyen regime in 1774, Hanoi historians credit the victorious Tay Son general Nguyen Hue (emperor Quang

³⁹Wang Gungwu, "Sojourning: The Chinese Experience in Southeast Asia", in *Sojourners and Settlers: Histories of Southeast Asia and the Chinese*, ed. Anthony Reid (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1996), p. 7.

⁴⁰Keith Taylor, "Nguyen Hoang and the beginning of Viet Nam's southward expansion", in *Southeast Asia in the Early Modern Era*, ed. Anthony Reid (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

⁴¹See Han Cac Tap Luc, Shelf No. A.1463, Han-Nom Institute, p. 18.

⁴²David Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885–1925* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971), p. 4.

Trung) with reuniting the country when his rebel armies went on to defeat the Trinh, and then with suppressing a Chinese invasion in 1789. However, Nguyen Anh, the last survivor of the Nguyen lords, subsequently defeated the much-praised Tay Son heroes with the help of foreigners, among them French missionaries and military officers, whom Hanoi historians regard as the forerunners of Western colonialism. Possibly because of this, official Hanoi historians have devoted little attention to Dang Trong on grounds that it represented merely a local variant of a common history whose referent was the Le/Trinh north.⁴³ They have treated the northern kingdom of “Dai Viet” in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a single entity spanning all Vietnamese regions and displaying general “Vietnamese characteristics”. This representation of “a single Vietnamese past” was accepted for many decades by modern scholars both in and outside Vietnam.⁴⁴

The present article argues that two “Dai Viets” existed at the time, and that the southern one had a significant effect on Vietnamese history because it exhibited “a far more multidimensional consciousness of Vietnamese identity”.⁴⁵ The Nguyen experiment opened an alternative door of development for Vietnam. It provided a new space in which the styles of the Vietnamese newcomers and their neighbours could interact, and suggests that Vietnamese society, even as late as the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, could thrive more or less outside a Confucian framework. And it marks a rare historical moment when the Vietnamese had an opportunity to reinterpret their tradition in a fresh and lively way. Eventually this door was shut when order became a paramount social concern of the Nguyen dynasty after 1802, established on the ruins of a generation of civil war. From Minh Mang’s reign onward, the dynasty strove to present an orthodox, stable, and grander image of Vietnam to the outside world. The seventeenth- and eighteenth-century history of Vietnamese society in Dang Trong was re-written by Confucian scholars in the nineteenth century out of a need to “tell right from wrong”, and to set “good examples” for the future according to Confucian tradition. But if the society that took shape in Dang Trong during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was deliberately overlooked by the official historians of the nineteenth century, this omission has left a fascinating space for later historians to explore. The present article, I hope, makes a small contribution to this effort.

⁴³For political reasons during and after the Vietnam War, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Dang Trong received almost no mention in Vietnamese history textbooks published in Hanoi, while scholars in the south such as Ta Chi Dai Truong and Phan Khoang made spectacular efforts to incorporate information on Dang Trong in *Lich su noi chien o Viet Nam* and *Viet su xu Dang Trong* during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

⁴⁴Keith Taylor, “Preface”, in *Essays into Vietnamese Pasts*, ed. K.W. Taylor and John Whitmore (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 5.

⁴⁵A. Woodside, “Political theory and Economic Growth in Late Traditional Vietnam”, paper read at the conference on “The Last Stand of Autonomous States in Southeast Asia and Korea” (Bali, 1994), p.15.