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Surface Orientations in Vietnam: Beyond Histories of Nation and Region

K. W. TAYLOR

Three Problems

If we can clear our minds of “Vietnameseness” as the object of our knowledge and instead look carefully at what the peoples we call Vietnamese were doing at particular times and places, then we begin to see that beneath the veneers of shared fields of sounds and marks, or of however one may refer to mutually intelligible languages and writings, lay quite different kinds of peoples whose views of themselves and of others was significantly grounded in the particular times and terrains where they dwelled and in the material and cultural exchanges available in those times and terrains. If we speak of these peoples as oriented toward the surfaces of their times and places rather than as oriented toward an imagined unifying depth, we will shift the effects of our ideological intent upon the archive away from the figurations both of univocal national narratives and of multivocal regional narratives contextualized by the nation. In this essay, I am interested in how the archive can be read to disperse the coherencies of Vietnamese histories as epistemological or hermeneutical categories, whether they be conceived as national histories or as regional histories. Rather than simply opposing regional histories to a dominant national narrative, I believe that regional and national narratives are “cofigured” in ways similar to how Naoki Sakai has written of desires for Japanese originality in realms of language, literature, and national identity being mimetically cofigured with desires for the West (Sakai 1997,

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Map

15–16, 21–22, 51–52). Posing a regional identity does not erase or diminish the potency of a national identity but rather mimetically reinforces it in a schema of configuration. I endeavor an orientation toward the surface of time and place as a way of thinking beyond histories of region and nation.

At least three problems immediately arise. First, in an orientation toward the surface of time, how can we avoid timeless categories implied in regional stereotypes attached to place names and instead sustain the historical specificity of stereotyped expressions? For example, some Vietnamese speakers have been taught to say: “Quảng Nam hay cãi, Quảng Ngãi hay lo, Bình Định hay co, Thừa Thiên ních hết.” This ditty refers to four adjacent provinces along the coast of central Vietnam

(see map) and can be translated as: “Quảng Nam knows how to argue, Quảng Ngãi knows how to worry, Bình Định knows how to fight, Thừa Thiên gobbles everything up.” The stereotypes associated with these provincial names, enshrined in this ditty, appear to be rhetorically authorized as enduring marks of regional identity. What can be restored to a reading of the ditty are marks of historical specificity, most obvious being the toponyms, which do not predate the early nineteenth century. The reference to everything being gobbled up in Thừa Thiên is a strong indication that this statement can be contextualized in the nineteenth century prior to the French conquest, for Huế, where kings ruled during that time, was in Thừa Thiên. The ditty was produced at a particular moment in the past, but as a linguistic creation it continues to pose a model for perceiving and exercising presumed regional differences. I consider such imagined stereotypical differences as optional rather than as predetermined; giving them credence is a matter of choice.

Second, in an orientation toward the surface of terrain inhabited by Vietnamese speakers, how can we avoid slipping into a spatial linearization of movement from north to south? The category of “nam tiến,” “the march to the south,” has been established in modern Vietnamese historiography to cover an imagined event extending across many generations and hundreds of kilometers and commonly essentialized as something inherent in a presumed Vietnamese character, a process that has operated throughout Vietnamese history. I do not believe that such an event ever took place and I will speak no further of it. Instead, I will speak of specific episodes at different times and places that have no apparent relation to one another as part of a single historical process of movement from north to south; I will speak about different ways of acting Vietnamese in different times and places without a logic of connecting them as one event. The spatial linearity of north to south that prevails in Vietnamese rhetoric and rhetoric about Vietnam can be broken by paying attention to linguistic and historical detail: for example, by noting that the Vietnamese language spoken at Huế is closer to that spoken at Hà Nội than it is to that spoken in the provinces of Nghệ An and Hà Tĩnh, which lie between, or that the first man to rule all the Vietnamese-speaking territories as they exist today did so by marching from south to north. We can also observe that the list of province names in the ditty mentioned above are not in a north-to-south order but rather reflect a circuitous orientation toward the place where political power was held.

Third, what are the implications of this analysis for the larger north-south binary of China and Vietnam, which is so prominent in Vietnamese studies? The study of Vietnam cannot be done in ignorance of the study of China, but neither are the study of Vietnam and the study of China in a zero-sum binary relation in which any move beyond a Vietnamese national narrative leaves Vietnam at a conceptual disadvantage before an imagined unitary China. The schema of configuration as discussed by Naoki Sakai is particularly helpful here by pointing out how the constitution of a national subject (Vietnam) depends upon the constitution of another, alien subject (China), and that deconstituting one necessarily deconstitutes the other. I will return to this problem at the end of the essay and endeavor to place it in a larger Asian context.

Theorizing Regionalism

Studies of regionalism in China have remained within the context of a unitary China. G. William Skinner’s study of regional markets in China (Skinner 1964/5)

inspired Jonathan Spence to propose nine Chinese macroregions, each with its own “internal economic logic.” Yet, for Spence the logics of these macroregions remain within the logic of a unitary China, the “modern China” for which he is in search, and for him there is no doubt that, in his words, “The task of the state . . . was to bond the macroregions together by ideological and administrative means—backed if necessary by military force” (Spence 1990, 90–93). Richard von Glahn, in his study of the southern Sichuan frontier in Song times, used social and administrative as well as economic variables to classify three types of frontier areas (borderland, periphery, and hinterland), which are even more dependent upon a unified notion of China than Spence’s macroregions (Von Glahn 1987, 216–20). More recently, Prasenjit Duara has theorized possibilities for regionalism in China as failed but potentially redeemable alternatives to the modern narrative of the Chinese nation.

Duara’s way of theorizing the possibility of a “federal,” as opposed to a centralized, China, in which narratives of provincial identities can arise, is to release provincial voices from the past that have been silenced by the dominant national narrative. He wants to disperse the dominant narrative and find a way to rescue the silenced voices. To do this, he coins the term “bifurcation” as a way of talking about dispersion of some meanings in the past without relinquishing the linearity necessary for rescuing other meanings. He writes: “The past is not only *transmitted* forward in a linear fashion, its meanings are also *dispersed* in space and time” [his emphases] (Duara 1995, 5). He also writes: “while we seek to grasp with one hand the dispersal of the past, we must, with the other grasp the reality of the transmission of the past” (Duara 1995, 71). This is Duara’s formula for “rescuing history from the nation,” and what indebts him to retrieve a rescuable past is also what guarantees the discursive coherency of what is being rescued: in his terms, it is a commitment to intervene against the intolerance of national narratives of cultural authenticity with bifurcated histories that reveal identity claims as already containing “the Other within them” (Duara 1995, 234–36). Duara’s model for the “Other” of a centralized China is federalism, which enables “provincial narratives of the nation,” and it is, among other things, the possibility of Chinese federalism that he seeks to reveal and to rescue. He mends his bifurcated rhetoric (transmission, rescuing, and revealing, on the one hand, and, on the other, multiplicity, dispersion, and nonlinearity) with the coherencies of narratives. I am interested in what is left over after the operation of narrative appropriation has marked closure.

It seems to me that Duara’s binary scheme of linearity versus dispersion limits the potential of the past to resist narrativizing appropriation, whether by those who speak for the nation or by those who resist the nation. I endeavor to imagine the past as if the nation is not the subject of history, whether to be honored in itself or by appeal to its regions. Duara endeavors to “rescue history from the nation” with a notion of transmissible nonnational historical narratives, which, as it seems to me, differs from a totalizing national narrative in being opposed to it but not in denying it; in a certain sense, it is not history that Duara is rescuing but rather he is appealing to history to rescue his commitment to oppose the nation. As long as we are tied to an imagined relation of transmission between past and present, then we are appealing to the presumed depths of origin and authenticity, however defined, rather than to the surface of experience. I will pause to discuss briefly this thought because it gets close to my intent in writing this essay.

Duara seeks to theoretically enable his practice of bifurcated history by overlapping at least three moves: Paul Ricoeur’s idea of traces or sign-effects as the material presence of the past; Mary Hobson’s idea of responding to these traces as if

returning a telephone call; and Tejaswini Niranjana's critique of Walter Benjamin that conflates the task of the translator with the task of the historian and makes of translation a process of historical transmission, of responding correctly to the initiating framework of the past (Duara 1995, 72–73). What I query is the implied attribution of agency to the trace in sending a message that indebts us to respond with a return call that presumes an original meaning. Such an agency, capable of being awakened by a return call from the present, is in excess of the materiality of the trace, of the archive; it is necessarily imagined as resistant to the appropriations and repressions of the return call, which nevertheless by definition must silence any thought of the past as radically heterogeneous, else it could not be a return call. This supposes that something beyond the echoing voice of the return caller is being transmitted from past to present. This something beyond is for Duara the imagined roads not taken that inspire a “what if” mode of historiography, for which bifurcation theorizes an identification between an imagined failed agency in the past and a potential radical agency in the present.

Duara believes that a committed scholarship needs this kind of theory to intervene against the appropriations of the narrativized nation as an evolving “subject of History” (Duara 1995, 28–29). I believe that such a committed scholarship is cogenerated, in Naoki Sakai's terms, with what it opposes, in fact confirms and strengthens what it opposes. For the purposes of this essay, I want to suggest a different kind of committed scholarship. What if we should read archival traces without the resisting ideological excess of failed yet redeemable narratives needed to “correct” the dominating ideological excess of national narratives, without an agenda of identifying roads not taken in the past that may represent or stand for roads proposed for the future, without a schema of configuration that confirms national narratives by probing beneath them? Is it possible to survey the debris of surviving traces without being indebted to them, without answering their call, without needing to narrate them in a particular way in order to rescue them or in order to rescue one's own commitments?

Duara avoids the possibility that the past never speaks unambiguously, for this would appear to make history useless for any effort to disorganize the nation; rescuing history would then be to no effect at all, for it could not be put to work without admitting that it is the coherencies of one's own ideological commitments that are, in fact, doing the work. This is why Duara must resort to collapsing the binary of a linear and causal History, on the one hand, and a denial of history altogether, on the other hand, a binary that underlies so much of his analysis and provides the framework for his bifurcating narratives. With a move he calls ironic, he collapses this binary by saying that both extremes are necessary for the nation-state narrative and that they both participate in the project of modernity. But, what happens to the material traces from the past in this binary and its collapse? What happens to the historical specificities of the archive? These have been denied any possibility of radical or uncontrolled dispersion, a dispersion that Duara equates with the same totalizing narrative of modernity that he seeks to critique. Duara imagines bifurcated history as a way to arouse a dispersed past against narratives of national history without performing an act of appropriation similar to what is effected by those very narratives. But, if the binary upon which bifurcated history depends can so easily be collapsed into modernity, then bifurcated history itself also collapses into that same project of modernity. Can the traces be acknowledged without narrativizing their historical specificities? The intent of this essay is to disperse the traces in time and terrain with a rhetoric of surface orientation.

In citing Tejaswini Niranjana's reading of Walter Benjamin, which conflates historicity and translation (Niranjana 1992, ch. 5), Duara endeavors a move similar to what Niranjana calls "translation as disruption" (ch. 6), which aims to disrupt a colonial or, for Duara, national translation of the past with what is imagined to be a more correct, recuperated, rescued translation of a suppressed past to enable a politics of resistance in the present and future. Rey Chow's critique of Niranjana's move is that it is simply a "revalorization," or "rescue" in Duara's terms, of a presumed "original," which in the depths of its imagined authenticity forms a cruelty equal to that against which its powers of disruption are deployed (Chow 1995, 189–92). Chow's reading of Benjamin's essay on translation moves not from language to history, as Niranjana's does, but rather from the fixed depths of elite culture to the fluid surface of mass culture. Chow is interested in the celluloid surface of cinema and in the fluidity of contemporary global cultural practice, which softens and fables the foundations of domination (Chow 1995, 192–98). I am interested in another kind of surface, the surface of fluid human experience in time and terrain, which softens and fables the coherencies of historicized regions and nations.

Six Episodes of Conflict

In the twentieth century, representations of Vietnamese history and culture have mostly affirmed unity and continuity. In this essay, I suggest an alternative by exploring correlations between the specificities of time and place and the vicissitudes of human thought and practice, in particular thought and practice labeled Vietnamese. My aim is to ground particular formations of thinking and practicing Vietnamese at the specific sites where, and when, they arose. I will speak in relatively general terms to discuss events distributed over five centuries and five places; for the purpose of this argument I will use the term surfaces to mean particular times and terrains upon which human activity took place. I entertain visions of temporal and spatial coherencies that may be productive of future work by way of stimulation or provocation, but these are ultimately arbitrary and intended heuristically, as a means for unfolding an argument in its most simple form, without prejudice to the certainty of there being other temporal and spatial coherencies that ought also to have a place in the argument.

One way to perceive surface differences is to look closely at episodes of conflict. Warfare is not necessarily an unambiguous marker of difference, but I will treat it as if it were for the purpose of this argument. I have chosen to discuss six military conflicts (the conquests of Lê Lợi in the early fifteenth century, the Lê-Mạc wars of the sixteenth century, the Trịnh-Nguyễn wars of the seventeenth century, the Tây Sơn wars of the eighteenth century, the conquests of Nguyễn Ánh Gia Long at the turn of the nineteenth century, and the French conquest in the late nineteenth century) involving five spatial surfaces (which, for the convenience of this essay, I am calling Đông Kinh, Thanh Nghệ, Thuận Quảng, Bình Định, and Nam Bộ; please consult the map) and temporal surfaces over a span of five centuries. These conflicts offer opportunities to think about traces from the past in reference to time and terrain rather than narrative, whether the narrative be of the nation, of a region, or of a historical process.

There is evidence of conflict in the territories thought to have been inhabited by ancestors of the modern Vietnamese from the very earliest times to which textual

evidence has been attributed, whether it be tales of the legendary Hùng Kings in antiquity, accounts preserved in China, or events recorded in the Vietnamese annals (Taylor 1983a, 6, 21–22, 57–66, 78, 89–91, 94–95, 99, 110, 112–13, 151–55, 226, 228–29, 240–48, 265–68, 275–80; Taylor 1983b; Taylor 1995a). During the final years of Lê Hoàn's reign, at the beginning of the eleventh century, royal expeditions repeatedly attacked the inhabitants of what are now the provinces of Vĩnh Phú, Thanh Hoá and Nghệ An, all located on the fringe of or beyond the large deltaic plain of the Hồng (Red) River where royal authority was then anchored (*Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* IV, bản kỷ I:23a–24a). Lê Hoàn's son and successor, Lê Đĩnh, continued to send soldiers against the peoples of Thanh Hoá and Nghệ An and built a road through these southern provinces to facilitate his expeditions (*Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* IV bản kỷ I:29a–30a). Lê Đĩnh's successor, Lý Công Uẩn, also campaigned against these southern provinces, announcing that he could not refrain from attacking the people of Nghệ An because they “did not honour civilizing instructions” (*Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* IV, bản kỷ II:5a–b; Taylor 1986, 163–64). These indications of warfare in the early eleventh century, when a local monarchy was in ascent, can plausibly be imagined as being between the ancestors of what in modern times are commonly distinguished, linguistically and sociologically, as the Kinh (lowland) and Mường (upland) variants of the Việt peoples. They are not isolated episodes.

The first two of the six conflicts I wish to mention are between places I will call Đông Kinh (Tonkin), being the Hồng River plain centered upon Hà Nội, and Thanh Nghệ, located to the south and comprised of the provinces of Thanh Hóa, Nghệ An, and Hà Tĩnh. It is not widely known that even today the language spoken in the southern part of Thanh Nghệ, the so-called Nghệ Tĩnh (Nghệ An and Hà Tĩnh) dialect, is closer to Mường than to Kinh. In Hà Nội government and academic circles today there is an awareness of the relative influence and power of people from Hà Nội and its surrounding provinces in comparison with people from Thanh Nghệ (variously Thanh Nghệ Tĩnh or Nghệ Tĩnh). It is not commonly remembered that these regions were at war with each other in the early fifteenth century and for virtually the entire sixteenth century.

The Conquests of Lê Lợi

The first episode of warfare I have chosen to discuss is nearly invisible behind the historiographical screen of resistance to Ming rule during the first three decades of the fifteenth century, when Đông Kinh and Thanh Nghệ responded differently to Ming. It will be useful to recall that at the end of the fourteenth century Hồ Quý Ly gained ascendancy at the Trần court and in 1400 proclaimed his own dynasty. While the Trần were from the Hồng River plain, Hồ Quý Ly was from Thanh Nghệ, and he built a new capital in Thanh Hóa. His inability to gain the loyalty of Đông Kinh was a prominent factor in his failure to overcome the Ming invasion of 1406/7, in which he abandoned most of Đông Kinh and attempted to defend the southern bank of the Hồng River; there is abundant evidence that most educated people in Đông Kinh readily accepted Ming rule and that many prominent families of the region, chief of whom was the Mạc, loyally served the Ming. It was claimed by Ming officials in 1407 that over 1,100 local men of prominence declared their allegiance to Ming and requested that their lands be incorporated into the empire. Ming records indicate that over 9,000 local men subsequently made the journey to the Ming capital to be confirmed as officials in the provincial administration. Ming rule, to the extent that

it became effective, would have been impossible without local acceptance and participation on a large scale (Woodside 1963, 12–21; Whitmore 1985, 91–116).

It is not difficult to read the anti-Ming campaigns of Lê Lợi as, in large measure, a conquest of Đông Kinh by Thanh Nghệ, with the Ming perceived by many Đông Kinh worthies as protectors against the rustics of the southern provinces. Nguyễn Trãi, the famous Đông Kinh literatus who went south to join the entourage of Lê Lợi in Thanh Nghệ, was not a typical or representative figure of his natal place. His poems written during the Ming era, but before he went south to serve Lê Lợi, reveal, in the words of O. W. Wolters, “a stranger in his own land” (Wolters 1986). Many of his prose writings after he went south are letters to his contemporaries who served the Ming, urging them to change their loyalties to Lê Lợi (Nguyễn Khắc Viện and Hữu Ngọc n. d., 241–44; O’Harrow 1979, 164–73). Nguyễn Trãi’s ultimate isolation and elimination—he was accused of regicide and executed in 1442—was surely facilitated by his having been alienated from both his regional compatriots in Đông Kinh, from whom he turned to serve the interests of Thanh Nghệ, and the ascendant powers of Thanh Nghệ, who disliked his self-righteous preachments about good government and his efforts to enroll Đông Kinh people into government service.

As someone reputed to have successfully challenged Ming Chinese forces on the battlefield and to have founded a dynasty, Lê Lợi has been assimilated into a unified national identity that masks the local nature of his leadership. There is nothing particularly remarkable about this. It is a pattern common to most “national heroes.” What is noteworthy, however, is the image of Nguyễn Trãi as the loyal minister who served the man with kingly virtue. Nguyễn Trãi, who produced most surviving information about Lê Lợi, portrayed Lê Lợi with the narrative marks of Liu Bang, founder of the Han dynasty; furthermore, Nguyễn Trãi wrote himself into Lê Lợi’s biography as Zhang Liang, Liu Bang’s famous advisor (O’Harrow 1997). Nguyễn Trãi was indeed Lê Lợi’s propagandist, but the image of Nguyễn Trãi as the strategic genius behind the martial prowess of Lê Lợi, of Nguyễn Trãi and Lê Lợi as a “team,” although contradicted by the evidence of Nguyễn Trãi’s marginal position in Lê Lợi’s entourage, has nevertheless been nurtured for centuries. Why? Đông Kinh and Thanh Nghệ were regions that had fallen out of sympathy with each other during the political violence of the early fifteenth century. The idea that Nguyễn Trãi and Lê Lợi were two essential parts of a leadership team was a way to affirm a natural and necessary link between the most typical and representative figures of these two regions at that time. The Lê Lợi–Nguyễn Trãi duo was a metaphor for unity of the kingdom, an urgent metaphor in the fifteenth century because Đông Kinh and Thanh Nghệ continued to look in different directions.

Lê Thánh Tông (r. 1460–97) is customarily regarded as the greatest king in Vietnamese history because he is supposed to have established a Chinese-style bureaucratic government and to have presided over the conquest of Champa; but his most significant achievement is not generally recognized: his success in assembling an entourage that mediated the interests of Đông Kinh and Thanh Nghệ. His reign, and the echoing reign of his son who immediately succeeded him, briefly submerged surface tensions in an accommodation of interests. One side of this accommodation was the conquest of Cham territories down to the Cù Mông Pass, on the southern border of what became Bình Định Province, which gave the Thanh Nghệ clans new scope for their ambitions. The other side of this accommodation was a scheme of examinations providing access to the royal entourage for Đông Kinh people whose families had served Ming (Cooke 1994, 277–81). Yet the degree to which Lê Thánh Tông’s achievement was a factor of his own personality became apparent within a

decade of his death when the royal entourage began to break up into warring factions that eventually initiated three generations of warfare between Đông Kinh and Thanh Nghệ, the so-called Lê-Mạc civil war of the sixteenth century, which is the second episode of conflict I have chosen to discuss in this essay.

The Lê-Mạc Wars

The disorders of the early sixteenth century were characterized by vast rural uprisings in Đông Kinh, of which the most spectacular was led by Trần Cảo, a Buddhist monk claiming to be an incarnation of Indra and a descendant of the Trần royal clan. These disorders can be easily read as revealing a Đông Kinh Buddhist reaction to change associated with the Lê monarchy of Thanh Nghệ and its Confucianist rhetoric (Cooke 1994, 288–93). The man who reestablished order in Đông Kinh, Mạc Đăng Dung, was a member of the same Mạc family that had supported Ming a century earlier. He assembled a royal entourage open to Đông Kinh to families and succeeded in rallying wide local support (Cooke 1994, 284–88). A remarkable but seldom-noted fact is the profound loyalty of Đông Kinh to the Mạc family during the sixteenth century and the stubbornness with which Đông Kinh resisted being conquered by Thanh Nghệ armies at the end of that century.

Trịnh Tùng, who led the Thanh Nghệ conquest of Đông Kinh in the 1590s, organized a military occupation of Đông Kinh that was still in evidence when Alexander de Rhodes dwelt there in the 1620s and 1630s; de Rhodes reported, with seeming hyperbole, that fifty thousand soldiers from Thanh Nghệ were permanently stationed in the “royal city” of Đông Kinh to protect the rulers and to suppress uprisings in the provinces surrounding Hà Nội, in addition to which were large naval forces that patrolled the rivers “to render the Prince strong and formidable to all the rebels” (de Rhodes 1651a, 16–17). As late as 1630, Mạc raids from the northern valley of Cao Bằng, where the Mạc family continued to rule until the 1670s, elicited an echoing uprising against the Trịnh among the inhabitants of the eastern parts of Đông Kinh (Cadiere 1906, 138). It was not until the 1650s, under the pressure of military defeats in the south, that the Trịnh began to bring large numbers of Đông Kinh people into their entourage; the result was prolonged factional conflict based on rival local interests (Cadiere 1906, 11–12; Taylor 1987). Similar tensions are also apparent in the rebellions that spread through nearly every part of Đông Kinh in the 1740s, 1750s, and 1760s, when local peasant armies were suppressed by soldiers from Thanh Nghệ after many years of fighting.

What I hope to have established is that conflict between Đông Kinh and Thanh Nghệ is a salient feature of what we imagine to have been Vietnamese historical experience in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Đông Kinh is a broad rice-growing plain with a relatively dense population along rivers and the sea, for whom mountains are mostly a feature of the horizon. Thanh Nghệ spreads into the south with rice fields scattered amongst hills and mountains, which extend in many places all the way to the coast; rice-growers live as close neighbors and kinspeople of upland groups with a less agricultural way of life. Đông Kinh had for centuries been densely strewn with temples and palaces; governors of imperial dynasties in the north (China) and kings of local clans ruled in Đông Kinh for generations. Thanh Nghệ had for centuries been a relatively uncultivated frontier between Đông Kinh and the Cham territories further south. Beginning with Hồ Quý Ly and then with Lê Lợi, Thanh Nghệ became the home of kings and warlords who aspired to rule Đông Kinh; it was the recruiting

ground for royal armies and the home of those who thought it their task to labor amidst the northern corruptions of Đông Kinh. Đông Kinh, despite more intensive contact with Chinese culture, could not compete militarily with Thanh Nghệ, because beyond Thanh Nghệ stretched an expanding zone of Vietnamese speakers, a restless reservoir of potential soldiers, men unreconciled to and undisciplined by the rice-growing routines of a peasantry. In its turn, Thanh Nghệ could not dominate this zone as it expanded beyond Thanh Nghệ's reach; in the seventeenth century, the prolonged effort of Thanh Nghệ to gain control of territories further south ended in failure. What kind of region appeared beyond Thanh Nghệ?

The Trịnh-Nguyễn Wars

Ngang Pass and the Mount Hoàn massif, at the southern border of Thanh Nghệ, had been the meridional extremity of the Vietnamese realm for centuries. Just beyond lay a narrow coastal plain, roughly thirty kilometers wide between the mountains and the sea, stretching out for around 250 kilometers to Hải Vân Pass. This place, the modern provinces of Quảng Bình, Quảng Trị, and Thừa Thiên, was called Thuận Hóa by Vietnamese rulers in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; it contained territories that had been intermittently claimed, conquered, and occupied by Chinese and Vietnamese rulers for generations, but, until the fifteenth century, it remained a zone contested by Cham and Việt kings. In the 1470s, King Lê Thánh Tông sent armies through Thuận Hóa and beyond, conquering and garrisoning the coastal territories that extended for three hundred kilometers beyond Hải Vân Pass as far as Cù Mông Pass, territories which were at that time called Quảng Nam and which are today the modern provinces of Quảng Nam, Quảng Ngãi, and Bình Định. This opened these lands to an unprecedented immigration of Vietnamese speakers. For the purpose of this argument, I will talk about the formation of different ways of acting Vietnamese, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in three places newly inhabited by Vietnamese speakers beyond the Ngang Pass: Thuận Quảng, Bình Định, and Nam Bộ.

The first of these places I call Thuận Quảng, a common abbreviation of the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century toponyms Thuận Hóa and Quảng Nam, but redefined for my purposes to exclude the southernmost area, Bình Định, which assumed a distinct momentum of its own in the eighteenth century (see map). Thuận Quảng came to be focused on a political center at Huế and a commercial center at Hội An and Đà Nẵng. The emergence of Thuận Quảng as a new power in the scheme of Vietnamese politics, society, economy, and culture began with the arrival of Nguyễn Hoàng and his entourage in 1558 (Cooke 1998 and Li 1998b). Nguyễn Hoàng was from Thanh Nghệ and was allied with the other Thanh Nghệ clans against the Mạc of Đông Kinh. In the 1590s, Nguyễn Hoàng led military forces from Thuận Quảng to participate in the final campaigns that expelled the Mạc from the Đông Kinh lowlands. Trịnh Tùng's efforts to subordinate Nguyễn Hoàng to his authority failed, however, and in 1600 Nguyễn Hoàng returned to Thuận Quảng and consolidated his family's power there (Taylor 1993).

In the 1620s, tension between the sons of Trịnh Tùng and Nguyễn Hoàng erupted into warfare, and fighting continued for over fifty years. The vernacular terms that were applied to the two sides reveal a sharp sense of spatial differentiation. The northern realm, ruled by the Trịnh clan, was called Đàng Ngoài, meaning "outer road" or "outer direction," and the southern realm, ruled by the Nguyễn clan, was

called *Đàng Trong*, meaning “inner road” or “inner direction.” The terms “outer” and “inner,” often misunderstood as no more than peripheralizing and centralizing southern rhetoric, are illuminated by another pair of expressions that came into usage in the fifteenth century to express movement along a north-south axis, using the word “axis” in its meaning of “a main line of direction, motion, growth, or extension” (*Webster’s* 1965, 62): *vào nam* meaning “to go into the south” and *ra bắc* meaning “to go out to the north.” This notion of going “in” to the south and “out” to the north, of the south being “inside” and the north being “outside,” has been analyzed by Professor Nguyễn Tài Căn as having arisen from the experience of traveling back and forth between the broad open plain of the Hồng River, with Hà Nội at its center, and the narrow southern territories tightly constricted between mountains and the sea (Nguyễn Tài Căn 1991). Based upon the human experience of terrain, this theory is plausible, and it is also in accord with the only dictionary that survives from that time.

The Vietnamese-Portuguese-Latin dictionary of Alexander de Rhodes, published in 1651, indicates a vernacular organization of space that associates “north” with “out” and “south” with “in” while not prejudicing these terms with a presumed southern political bias. In this dictionary, *Đàng Ngoài* and *Đàng Trong*, with related expressions, appear in several places. *Đàng Ngoài* is defined as the provinces surrounding Hà Nội (de Rhodes 1651b, columns 201, 531), while *Đàng Trong* is defined as the provinces extending southward from the Kingdom of Đông Kinh (Tonquin) to the Kingdom of Champa (Ciampa), being the domain of the Nguyễn lords (de Rhodes 1651b, columns 201, 806). Furthermore, the dictionary notes that *Đàng Trong* is a term that can also be applied to the kingdoms of Champa and of Cambodia; this observation is followed by the comment: “On the other hand, the northern provinces with respect to the southern provinces are called *Đàng Ngoài*.” The entry ends with two significantly related expressions: “*vào trong* [to go in]: to enter, meaning to go from the northern provinces to the southern provinces; and contrariwise, *ra ngoài* [to go out] is to go from the southern provinces to the northern provinces” (de Rhodes 1651b, column 806). I have featured these indications from de Rhodes’s dictionary to emphasize that these vernacular expressions were geographical and did not carry the political weight of the Sino-Vietnamese terms for inner (*nội*) and outer (*ngoại*). They enabled a spatially-ordered rhetorical connection between Vietnamese speakers who went “in” to the south and those who remained “out” on the northern plain. Sino-Vietnamese *ngoại*, with low tone, is easily confused with the vernacular *ngoài*, with falling tone; in de Rhodes’s dictionary, these are two words with distinct meanings: *ngoại* is a kinship term for one’s mother’s family while *ngoài* means “outside” in contrast to “inside” (de Rhodes 1651b, columns 531–32). Furthermore, the fact that, according to de Rhodes, *Đàng Trong* could refer to Champa and Cambodia as well as to the Nguyễn domain demonstrates that the term was not exclusively applied within some imagined Vietnamese polity but had larger spatial significance.

How were the Vietnamese speakers living “in” the narrow southern space able to prevail against repeated invasions by the more numerous people living “out” upon the wide northern plain? Not only did the “insiders” prevail against six major campaigns by the “outsiders” from the 1620s to the 1670s, but they also counterattacked and occupied parts of Thanh Nghệ for several years in the 1650s while at the same time sending the first large Vietnamese-speaking armies to enter the Mekong Plain. Did being “inside” confer an advantage? Apparently it did, for

the southerners improved upon their “insidedness” by building a network of walls between the sea and the mountains in the basin of the Nhật Lệ River at Đông Hối, a short distance south of the border between Đàng Ngoài and Đàng Trong at the Gianh River. Behind the walls, soldier-farmers were thickly settled in self-sustaining garrison-villages. During all the warfare of the seventeenth century, the northerners never once broke through this place. They never got “in.” Why not?

One explanation is that the southerners were defending their own territory while the northerners were far from home in unfamiliar terrain. Furthermore, only a relatively short time each year was available for battle due to the limitations of the dry season when armies could move, of suitable winds to facilitate naval operations, and of the extenuated northern supply lines. However, considering the scale of effort expended by both sides in attacking and defending, these strategic considerations were obviously not considered to be insurmountable. The magnitude and frequency of northern campaigns is comprehensible only if one imagines that there were reasonable expectations of success, and the huge investment made in southern defenses is comprehensible only with the assumption that the threat was real.

A close examination of the terrain at Đông Hối and of human efforts to enhance it with walls reveals a relatively small space between mountains and the sea through which were only two practicable routes: a “mountain road” on the west that crossed along the foothills and a “coastal road” on the east that crossed along the edge of the dunes at the seashore. Between these two routes lay an expanse of river and swamp. It is clear that the northerners did not have the capability to move beyond this place with naval forces only; without land forces, their ships posed no serious threat south of Đông Hối. Part of this may have been due to the superiority of southern naval forces, which had learned from the Portuguese how to mount and use large cannon on ships; but even aside from this, southern coastal defense was apparently beyond the northern ability to overcome without the assistance of land-based forces. This consideration made the terrain at Đông Hối the prime focus of battle, lying just south of the border and at a place where the options for land transport were restricted to two narrow lines of movement. The application of human intelligence to this terrain produced a system of walls extending from the mountains at two different places and included ramparts along the shore at the top of the dunes (Cadiere 1906, 138–40).

I have lingered at Đông Hối because it was here that three generations of rival Vietnamese-speaking leaders repeatedly met in battle, where Đàng Ngoài and Đàng Trong tested and defined their continued separation. Why were these surface orientations and ambitions played out with arrow, cannon, sword, and war-elephant rather than with more benign means of interaction such as negotiation and accommodation? It is, in fact, not surprising that Đàng Trong resisted the authority of Đàng Ngoài at Đông Hối for so many generations and by so many battles when we recall that peoples we call Cham had previously resisted northern authority at this same place for hundreds of years. And it is not unreasonable that people we call Vietnamese who came to dwell in this place should have adopted an attitude toward the northern power in some ways analogous to that of prior inhabitants. The new inhabitants worshiped the deities of the old inhabitants (Nguyễn Thế Anh 1995, 42–50). That they should also have inherited the enemies of their predecessors is not astonishing. Rather than the southward expansion of the Vietnamese people, the archive suggests the formation of new ways to act Vietnamese in terrain previously inhabited by speakers of Cham and other languages (Taylor 1993, 64–65). Family records in the vicinity of Đà Nẵng reveal that some families who now identify

themselves as Vietnamese trace their ancestry to Cham speakers who inhabited that locality before the arrival of Vietnamese armies (Võ Văn Thắng 1987). Further study may illuminate the extent to which there was an actual change of population beneath the change of language.

Indications of differences among ways of doing Vietnamese may lie in the area of poetic, literary, and religious sensibility. The politics of Vietnamese speakers became increasingly and irreconcilably local and decentralized during the course of the sixteenth century, but later “Vietnamese” memories of that time feature a moral center in the person of Nguyễn Bình Khiêm (born 1491). His role as teacher and clairvoyant was activated by retirement to his home village, east of Hà Nội in 1542. Subsequently, his voice was heard, at least posthumously, as a source of moral authority no longer possible in the political realm, and all the aspiring rulers of his age have been portrayed as having sought and received his blessing upon their individual ambitions. After his death in 1585, however, even a moral or cultural center for the increasingly dispersed Vietnamese-speaking peoples no longer existed. (On Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, see Bùi Văn Nguyên 1988, 1989, 1992; Chu Thiên 1954; Đinh Gia Khánh 1983; Hoàng Xuân 1959; Lê Trọng Khánh and Lê Anh Trà 1957; Nguyễn Huệ Chi and Ngô Đăng Lợi 1991; Nguyễn Quân 1974; Trần Khuê 1991; Trinh Kim Chi 1992.)

The poetry of Nguyễn Bình Khiêm portrays the world as a dangerous place, full of human greed, violence, confusion, and competition (Huỳnh Sanh Thông 1979, 50–52, 88–90, 147–48, 175–77). In his poems, Nguyễn Bình Khiêm repeatedly poses as one paralyzed by the contradiction between his desire to serve in government and his moral rectitude (for example, see poems #135, #218, and #221 in Huỳnh Sanh Thông, 1979, 51, 88, 89). At a more poetic, religious, or philosophical level, Nguyễn Bình Khiêm moves this perception of dismal human events into statements of cyclicity and self-cultivation. He uses Buddhist rhetoric to affirm an impersonal cyclicity in human affairs. Time constantly moves in fixed cycles of florescence and impoverishment. The correct human response is introspection, and nature simply provides an agricultural or gardener’s metaphor for self-cultivation (see poem #68 in Huỳnh Sanh Thông 1979, 23). The following poem attributed to him expresses an equanimity achieved only through a difficult and lifelong discipline of self-cultivation:

It is not yet easy for anyone to be [like] the Buddha Sakyamuni;
Toward all thoughts of [distinguishing] other and self, exercise forbearance and go
beyond them.
Intentionality (*lòng*) at peace [is like] a moon printed on water;
Wealth coming by chance [is like] a wind blowing blossoms.
Of those mortals who flourish as springtime green in youth,
How many are left as grey heads in old age?
This leisure [in old age] is certainly a sojourn in bliss;
Having received [this] pleasure, I already have my [own full measure of] pleasure.
(My translation from Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, 34)

At the beginning of the third line, I translate the Vietnamese word *lòng* as “intentionality.” In de Rhodes’s dictionary, *lòng* is defined in Portuguese with the words *vontade* (volition, desire, intention, purpose) and *coracao* (heart, both anatomically and figuratively); the Latin gloss does not respond to *coracao* but simply has *voluntas*, which

reproduces the semantic field of Portuguese *vontade*.¹ The Vietnamese word *lòng*, literally “entrails” and figuratively what is “inside” a person, has a common etymological root with *trong*, the more abstract concept of “insidedness.” Today, Vietnamese *lòng* covers a semantic field that includes what in English are distinguished as “head” and “heart” or “rational intent” and “emotion”; in modern Vietnamese there has been a tendency to extend the emotive possibilities of the word, and, an emphasis on “will, intention, purpose,” while generally assumed in Vietnamese, is not always represented in Western-language translations. I linger over this word because I want to compare Nguyễn Bình Khiêm’s use of it with the way it is used in a poem of Đào Duy Từ that I will cite below. In the above poem Nguyễn Bình Khiêm seeks to stop the operation of *lòng*, to bring it to restful immobility. Đào Duy Từ, as we will shortly see, makes *lòng* the source of enlightenment and salvation. Where can this striking reversal of value given to the word *lòng* be located? One sharp difference between the poetry of these two men is about the rhetoric of spatial orientation. One poem of Nguyễn Bình Khiêm’s expounds the wisdom of the stay-at-home and ends with these lines:

Why trail along behind others and dissolve in fatigue?
 Why pray to any and all Sakyas [but] scorn the Buddha at home?
 (My translation from Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, 60)

Here there is disdain for those who run off to other places looking for what the poet believes can be found only at home. Đào Duy Từ, a younger contemporary of Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, was such a person (on Đào Duy Từ see: Dương Tự Quán 1944; Đinh Gia Khánh 1962, 599–627; Nguyễn Diên Niên 1993; Trần Thị Liên 1992).

Đào Duy Từ (1572–1634) was the first *Đàng Trong* poet. Born in Thanh Hóa, he was excluded from the competitive race for position and wealth in the north because the *Trịnh* lords categorized and disdained him as being from a family of entertainers, so he went south and served the Nguyễn lords, for whom he designed the system of walls at *Đồng Hới*; he was determined to put an insurmountable barrier between himself and what he had left behind in the north (Phạm Đình Hổ and Nguyễn Án 1962, 56–61, and 1972, 40–44). His poetry is in a very different rhetorical mode from the poetry of Nguyễn Bình Khiêm. Time, rather than being cyclic, is empty and open. The metaphor for human character is not the carefully tended garden plot, but rather nature untouched by human hands.

Compared with the cyclic, competitive, and duty-bound images found in the poetry of Nguyễn Bình Khiêm and northern poetry in general, the poetry of Đào Duy Từ suggests freedom and self-confidence, the assertion of one’s will without regard for convention, history, or ancestors. This has been noted by Vietnamese literary specialists, who have contrasted the “joy and faith in the future” of southern poetry with the “passive . . . feeble, life-weary ideology” of northern poetry (Bùi Văn Nguyên

¹The prefatory “to the reader” at the beginning of the dictionary explains that Latin words were added to what was initially a Vietnamese-Portuguese dictionary to aid Vietnamese who were learning Latin, so it is reasonable to surmise that the choice of Latin words represented to some extent ecclesiastical efforts to control the semantic gates between Vietnamese and Latin for Vietnamese Christians. With this in mind the elision of Portuguese *coracao* in the Latin gloss may have been an explicit effort to limit the emotive aspects of the Vietnamese word *lòng* for Vietnamese Christians moving into Latin. On the other hand, it may represent an emphasis that was felt to more correctly account for usage current at that time or it may even represent semantic shifts that occurred in Vietnamese as it was spoken in *Đàng Ngoài* and *Đàng Trong*.

1963, II:199–200). We need not make such stark contrasts to appreciate the definite shift in literary and psychological mood from *Đàng Ngoài* to *Đàng Trong* that is apparent when we pass from the poetry of Nguyễn Bình Khiêm to the poetry of Đào Duy Từ:

A horizon's extremity is the pleasure of the most remote forest;
 Spiralling incense goes up to the gate of the highest heaven.
 Quiet days echo the rustling bells of Prajna;
 Clear nights follow along reciting verses of Amida.
 Now legato now lento, rivulet music when rain stops;
 Melodious birdsong when light declines.
 It is not at all true that the Way is somewhere distant and wearisome to find;
 The result of Bodhi is in our intent (*lòng*).
 (My translation from Dương Tự Quán 1944, 121; Đinh Gia Khánh 1962, 605;
 Trần Thị Liên 1992, 53)

The first couplet gives a sense of movement to the most remote places imaginable; the poet positions his imagination as far from home and altar as possible. The second couplet marks the passage of time with a succession of days and nights filled with meditational sounds designed to empty the mind; time simply passes with no thought of cyclicity. The third couplet turns from temple sounds to the music of nature. The expression “now legato now lento” is what we might expect of Đào Duy Từ, who came from a family of opera performers and was trained as a musician in his youth, but he applies it not to music of the temple yard but to the sounds of mountains and forests. Vietnamese credit Đào Duy Từ with having introduced opera into *Đàng Trong* (Nguyễn Lộc and Võ Văn Tường 1994, 16), but this poem has no human musicians. The final couplet appears to contradict the first couplet’s movement to far places and to coincide Nguyễn Bình Khiêm’s admonition to stay at home, but the wearisome distance here can be read as referring to the kind of lifelong self-cultivating discipline taught by Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, and Đào Duy Từ’s assertion of *lòng* as the motor of enlightenment at the end of this poem extends the images of beckoning horizon and rising incense at the beginning of the poem. Đào Duy Từ seeks not to quiet his desire but to follow it; for him, human intention is the means, rather than an impediment, to enlightenment. In other poems of Đào Duy Từ, there is a turning away from human society toward unspoiled nature. (See Dương Tự Quán 1944, 124; Đinh Gia Khánh 1962, 606; Trần Thị Liên 1992, 54.) Nature untouched by human hands provides the best of everything. The trappings of human culture can be sloughed off without loss. The pleasure of living “naturally,” without the discipline of culture and social convention, does not need to be learned and is not easily contradicted in the place at the edge of the horizon where Đào Duy Từ found scope for his ambition. (See Dương Tự Quán 1944, 131; Đinh Gia Khánh 1962, 608; Trần Thị Liên 1992, 56.) Đào Duy Từ lived in an age of war; he departed a realm where he was despised and travelled south in quest of a ruler who could appreciate his talent and offer him the joy of a peaceful and honored life. His poetry expresses his delight in finding himself in a bright new world, far from the violence, corruption, and injustice of the regime he regarded as having oppressed him. (See Dương Tự Quán 1944, 126; Đinh Gia Khánh 1962, 607; Trần Thị Liên 1992, 55.)

Near the end of his life, Đào Duy Từ designed and built a wall to protect the south from the miseries of war. His poetry expresses intoxication with being in the south. Going “into” the south was not for him a mere extension of preexisting forms of culture, society, or politics. It was a fundamental “departure” from “out there,”

the exploration of possibilities that could not be imagined on the “outside.” In what is perhaps his most famous couplet, Đào Duy Từ features the distinctive combination of sea and mountain that composed the “inside”; I translate these lines in a surface style to emphasize the sense of energy and conviction that they carry in Vietnamese:

Mountains green green, water blue blue;
 Have mountains, have water, only then both clear.
 (My translation from Dương Tự Quán 1944, 115; Đinh Gia Khánh 1962, 602;
 Trần Thị Liên 1992, 51)

The poet rests his joy in a sense of clarity, simplicity, transparency, and purity that is associated with the breathtaking natural scenery of the southern coastlands, which becomes a metaphor of escape from all that is complicated, opaque, and corrupt “out north.”

The Tây Sơn Wars

I now turn to the province of Bình Định and the rise there of a political center in the late eighteenth century. When he first went south, before he gained recognition from the Nguyễn ruler, Đào Duy Từ is said to have spent twenty years living in relative obscurity in Bình Định (Nguyễn Diên Niên 1993, 22–25). Bình Định, in particular the region adjacent to the modern city of Qui Nhơn, had long been a royal seat for kings of Champa. This place was plundered by Vietnamese armies twice in the eleventh century but never permanently conquered until the late fifteenth century. It was the southernmost outpost of the Vietnamese frontier from then until 1611, when Nguyễn Hoàng conquered the basin of the Đà Rằng River, just to the south, as far as Cà Pass, which came to be known as Phú Yên Province. In the mid-seventeenth century, Bình Định became the staging area for expeditions further south and into the Mekong plain. By the 1690s, Bình Định had become the center of a communication and transportation network that linked the Đàng Trong heartland of Thuận Quảng with the Mekong plain. It had also become a center for recruiting soldiers and corvée labor to sustain military operations further south.

Another significant feature of Bình Định was its location as the coastal terminus of the most well-traveled route across the central highlands to the Mekong valley, passing through An Khê, Plây Ku, and reaching the Mekong at Stung Treng in what is now northern Cambodia, where it connected with the trading network radiating from Ayudhaya/Bangkok. Trade moved along this route, linking Bình Định with Siamese commerce. Upland peoples and Vietnamese participated in this trade, but the Chinese communities in Ayudhaya/Bangkok and in Qui Nhơn provided the capital investments and contacts to activate it. Qui Nhơn became a major commercial center at the junction of an excellent seaport, the road west over the mountains, the road north to Thuận Quảng, and the road south to the Mekong plain (Manguin 1973, 166–67; 1984, 172–73).

During the eighteenth century, the rulers in Thuận Quảng increasingly took an interest in Bình Định, regarding it as the hinge that attached their authority to the frontiers beyond. In her book, Li Tana analyzes the beginning of the Tây Sơn (Tây Sơn, “west mountain”, was located at the watershed between Qui Nhơn and An Khê; see map) movement in the 1770s as a local response to the demands placed upon this hinge by the Thuận Quảng rulers (Li 1998a, ch. 7). Furthermore, the site of Qui Nhơn offered a certain possibility as a seat of power. Nguyễn Nhạc, the eldest of

the Tây Sơn brothers, who initially led the uprising, made a career of being an “emperor” at Qui Nhơn. In the 1780s, rivalry between Nhạc and his younger brother Huệ erupted in fraternal warfare for control of Qui Nhơn. And, at the end of the century, control of Qui Nhơn was obsessively contested by the Tây Sơn forces and their enemies, repeatedly changing hands and being besieged and re-besieged for years at a time; as the homeland of the Tây Sơn, it was still being fought over well after the balance of war had rendered it militarily insignificant.

To this day, Bình Định retains a stereotyped reputation among Vietnamese speakers as the most warlike of provinces and is commonly thought to produce soldiers who excel in the martial arts. For one brief moment in the late eighteenth century, people from Bình Định seized center stage in the spectacle of war and politics among Vietnamese speakers. The Tây Sơn movement, beginning as an amalgam of upland tribespeople, lowland peasants, and Chinese merchants, exploded in Bình Định, sending armies marching northward and southward and initiating thirty years of warfare among the lands inhabited by Vietnamese speakers. Although Bình Định did not have the resources to become a center capable of dominating the other territories for any length of time, it nevertheless revealed a surface orientation toward possibilities for acting Vietnamese. It produced a man, Nguyễn Huệ, who led armies from one end of the Vietnamese-speaking territories to the other and who tried to unify all Vietnamese speakers under his authority. His failure is usually attributed to his untimely death. But perhaps not enough attention has been given to how the surface orientation of Bình Định may have shaped the ambitions of both him and his ineffectual successors and made them vulnerable to a rival with a different surface orientation. So long as a voluntarist military prowess and simply winning battles was the key to political power, Bình Định people could prevail. But when confronted with an opponent who lost battle after battle yet always came back, an opponent with an eye for the long-term campaign rather than a single confrontation, for whom success came not from armed combat but was the result of organization, training, the marshaling of resources, preparation, planning, and waiting, waiting, waiting, the Tây Sơn genius, against such an opponent, became a kind of provincial derring-do. And where did this opponent come from? From Nam Bộ.

The Conquests of Nguyễn Ánh Gia Long

Nam Bộ, meaning “southern region,” is a contemporary term for the Mekong plain, the ultimate Vietnamese frontier. A long-established Khmer population was joined in the late seventeenth century by thousands of Ming Chinese refugees arriving by sea; by the end of the century there was a steady stream of Vietnamese immigrants from the north. Between Nam Bộ and Cà Pass on the southern border of Phù Yên, the rice-growing coastal enclave just south of Bình Định, lay 350 kilometers of semi-arid, even desert territory (the modern provinces of Khánh Hòa, Ninh Thuận, and Bình Thuận, with the cities of Nha Trang, Phan Rang, and Phan Thiết). Here was relatively small scope for agriculture; the few people who settled turned to fishing. This was where the remaining Cham-speaking population was concentrated. In the scheme of Vietnamese immigration, this was simply a thoroughfare between Bình Định and Nam Bộ. The rich alluvial plains of Nam Bộ beckoned beyond the sand and cactus.

By the middle of the eighteenth century, one hundred years after the first Vietnamese armies had begun to appear in the Mekong plain, the six Vietnamese

provinces of Nam Bộ had been constituted from Khmer lands with the active participation of highly-organized groups of Chinese immigrants. When Bình Định erupted in the 1770s, Nam Bộ became the refuge of the Nguyễn clan that had ruled Đàng Trong during the previous two centuries. The member of this clan who survived to become the leader of the Nguyễn entourage, Nguyễn Ánh, eventually built up his base of power at Sài Gòn in Nam Bộ and from Nam Bộ there went north to conquer all the lands inhabited by Vietnamese speakers, assembling a kingdom at the beginning of the nineteenth century that had never before existed and taking the royal style of Gia Long. Superficially, this may appear to be a case of the frontier turning back against the heartland. But such a view requires the doubtful assertion that there was such a thing as a “heartland.” Rather than seeing eighteenth-century Nam Bộ as a periphery that forced a shifting of the center, I prefer to see Nam Bộ at that time as simply another Vietnamese-speaking surface that began to compete for ascendancy with all the other places inhabited by speakers of the Vietnamese language.

I will discuss Nam Bộ ways of doing Vietnamese by referring to three considerations: terrain, human diversity, and human experience. I say “doing” rather than “being” to mark Vietnameseness with praxis rather than with ontology. First of all, Nam Bộ, unlike all other Vietnamese places, has no apparent geographical boundary; it is not defined by terrain. The western border of Nam Bộ runs across the Mekong plain from the Central Highlands in the northeast to the sea in the southwest. It is the result of warfare and negotiation rather than of any feature of terrain. The one place where the contemporary border follows an earthen mark is at the Vĩnh Tế Canal, built in the early nineteenth century, between the Mekong and the sea, but this is a case of human engineering applied to terrain to produce a border. What I want to observe is that the geographical aspect of Nam Bộ is one of openness, vulnerability, possibility. There is relatively little sense of fixity, boundedness, orientation. The chief feature is the constant flow of water through the region from the Cambodian basin to the sea and its encounter with the ebb and flow of tides. These characteristics, along with the fertile soil and wealth of river and sea products, encourages an expectation of change, movement, and options rather than any sense of limitation and attachment more typical in the bounded terrain of the other Vietnamese places.

The diversity of human settlement in Nam Bộ added a further dimension to the openness of terrain. Khmers, Chinese, and Việts were all there in sufficient numbers to require mutual acknowledgment. Nam Bộ was a place of cultural and ethnolinguistic encounter. Functional relationships, personal loyalty, and expectations of the future counted for more than ancestry or appeals to the past. Here was a greater experience of, familiarity with, and appreciation for, contact with non-Vietnamese peoples and places than existed in any other Vietnamese region. Nam Bộ was connected to the Vietnamese world by a thin 350-kilometer coastal road through relatively barren, sparsely inhabited lands. On the other hand, it was located at a potential center for an emerging international crossroads. Nam Bộ was the place with greatest prospect for incorporating new perspectives into a formation of Vietnameseness (Graw 1995; Đỗ Thiên 1995).

It is critically important to my purpose that this Nam Bộ formation not be seen as something “less Vietnamese,” as is often implied in Vietnamese discourses on national origins, authenticity, and tradition. None of the ways of posing as Vietnamese that I am discussing is more “authentically” Vietnamese than another. Only if we can accept Nam Bộ as a Vietnamese site as equally authentic as any other can we begin to see what happened at the turn of the nineteenth century as a historical event and

not, as often asserted in recent decades, simply a corruption or fulfillment of some imagined historical process.

Nguyễn Ánh was the first person to organize Nam Bộ as a region capable of participating successfully in war and politics among Vietnamese speakers. His career is a tale of repeated defeat and exile, but also of persistence and of learning from failure; it reveals a human experience of the potential of Nam Bộ as a Vietnamese place. Nguyễn Ánh's qualities as a leader began to find scope for expression in the 1780s when, after having served as a vassal of the King of Siam, he established himself at Sài Gòn and mobilized Nam Bộ as a new kind of Vietnamese military power.² Twenty years later he was the master of all the Vietnamese-speaking lands. Nguyễn Ánh prevailed through naval supremacy and the capability of transporting whole armies by sea. He did this by assembling an international cadre of skilled warriors and technical specialists. His entourage included Burmese, Chams, Chinese, French, Khmers, Laotians, Malays, and Siamese. Anyone with skills in shipbuilding, sailing, artillery, manufacturing, and fortification was welcome at Sài Gòn.

Another aspect of Nguyễn Ánh's ascendance was the vitality of the commercial link between the Chinese communities of Sài Gòn and Bangkok, against which Bình Định could not compete. The founder of Bangkok, Rama I, had campaigned in Cambodia, and his 1784 expedition down the Mekong against Bình Định armies in Nam Bộ was surely more than a gesture of friendly regard for Nguyễn Ánh, with whom he was allied in that adventure; commercial interests were at stake. A few years later, when Nguyễn Ánh shifted from Bangkok to establish his base at Sài Gòn, these commercial interests were not aloof. Portuguese witnesses attest to the presence in large numbers of Chinese merchants at Sài Gòn during the last decades of the eighteenth century (Manguin 1984, 22–45, 73–81).

In addition to anchoring a Vietnamese pivot for the overseas Chinese commercial network centered at Bangkok, Nguyễn Ánh's move to Sài Gòn brought a new style of warfare among speakers of Vietnamese, a style of warfare that Nguyễn Ánh had learned while campaigning with Rama I against the Burmese. Warfare practiced by Vietnamese speakers had tended toward territorial goals, whether in acquisition or in defense, in contrast to control of manpower, as was more explicitly practiced among the Siamese. Rather than simply gaining territory to defend, Nguyễn Ánh attracted and governed an entourage of aspiring, competing individuals, all seeking to demonstrate their worthiness for advancement; in his "seasonal campaigns" of the early 1790s, he accumulated men more effectively than he did territories, and one wonders if that was not then his immediate priority. Entourage politics was nothing new among Vietnamese speakers, but Nguyễn Ánh's ability to open his entourage to non-Vietnamese, and to people acting out a certain kind of Nam Bộ Vietnamese-ness, was unprecedented. Indications of how this particularity achieved poetic representation may be found in literary compositions attributed to the first Nam Bộ poet, Mạc Thiên Tích (1706–80).

Mạc Thiên Tích was the son of Mạc Cửu, a Chinese emigrant who in the late seventeenth century established an entrepôt and local ascendancy at Hà Tiên, on the gulf coast of what became Nam Bộ's border with Cambodia; in the early eighteenth century, Mạc Cửu announced his allegiance to the Nguyễn lords of Đàng Trong, and

²French colonial, and certain strains of modern Vietnamese, historiography has favored the idea that Nguyễn Ánh was incompetent and that his successes were primarily due to the energy and initiative of the French missionary Pigneau de Behaine, a view that I find difficult to reconcile with the archive.

upon his death in 1735 was succeeded by Mạc Thiên Tích. In the 1770s, warfare in Nam Bộ led to Mạc Thiên Tích taking refuge in Bangkok, where intrigue led to his death in 1780.

Poems of Mạc Thiên Tích (Mạc Thiên Tích n. d.; Huỳnh Lý 1963, III:47–49; Huỳnh Sanh Thông 1979, 24, 124–25) suggest how a literate Nam Bộ prince viewed his land at the time when it was about to become the headquarters for an unprecedented conquest of all Vietnamese-speaking lands. There is a sense of expectancy, change, variety, possibility, freedom, and nondiscrimination. In a poem on the clichéd theme of dawn, the poet describes the scene of an awakening countryside and releases a sharp awareness of change and movement (Mạc Thiên Tích n.d., 47b). In this poem, the typical mark of dawn, the crowing cock, comes last, after the poet has already noted a series of awakening signs that mark the arousal of the natural and human world; the poet is positioned prior to the conventional indication of dawn, prior to the clamor of domesticated fowl that ordinarily inaugurates the activity of a day in literary formulations. Subtle signs of dawn alert the watcher and listener to impending change, transition from night to day, from slumber to action; the moment that precedes and moves into this time of change is where the poet rests his desire for expression, rather than the actual achievement of daybreak as an accomplished fact, which is added almost as an afterthought at the very end of the poem with the authenticating seal of crowing cocks. It is tempting to read in this poem a savouring of Nam Bộ's predawn moment, before its awakening into a consciousness of being some kind of Vietnamese place. The reference in the last line of this poem to "dawn news" spread by domestic fowl likely had an intrusive and ominous resonance in a time and place of marching armies and contending warlords such as Nam Bộ was in the eighteenth century; those who strutted and crowed were about to appear.

In another poem, Mạc Thiên Tích treats a stereotypical literary occasion, viewing the moon reflected in water, in an unconventional manner (see Mạc Thiên Tích n.d., 48a–b). Absent from this poem are conventional meditations on the reflection of the moon upon the water and a hackneyed concern about which image is real and which an optical illusion. All sense of primacy or hierarchy is lost with the poet's "pair of images" suspended in the vast immensity of indiscriminated sky and water. In this poem, "fish and dragons," metaphors for rulers and their entourages, are full of dreams and schemes, but the process of awakening and activation is incomplete; their efforts to "break through" into consciousness and realization are obstructed and their dreams are ephemeral. The effect of this poem is a perception of nature and the universe as a unity beyond the discriminatory tropes of poets or the schemes of rulers, and of a norm for human behavior that does not need "literature" or "government." This effect is more explicit in the last four lines of a poem entitled "The Cloud-Swallowing Grotto," which meditates upon a rocky peak:

Life's vicissitudes have passed through many years, so elegant literary compositions
are heterodox;
Human affairs incessantly change, so appearances are many.
Most of all, this place has both inner essence and outward splendor, is high and
inaccessible;
Follow the wind to breathe from lofty heights.
(My translation from Mạc Thiên Tích n.d., 48a)

Unlike the cultivated garden-like nature, subordinated to human effort, of Nguyễn Bình Khiêm and many other northern poets, and unlike the celebration of human joy amidst uncultivated nature in the poetry of Đào Duy Từ in Đàng Trong, Mạc Thiên

Tích sees nature as an active agent that inspires and limits human effort. The first line above suggests that literary habits are bound to change when transplanted to Nam Bộ; no apology is necessary for heterodoxy. The second line implies that unifying plans of would-be kings are constantly thwarted and forced to change in Nam Bộ; no apology is necessary for diversity. In the last two lines, we are tempted to read “this place,” the “cloud-swallowing grotto,” as a metaphor for Nam Bộ, a place with its own view of the world where outsiders are inevitably changed as they learn to exercise the freedom of those who “follow the wind,” a sign for pursuing the possibilities of one’s own ambition that are revealed from “lofty heights.” I have paused at Mạc Thiên Tích’s poetry because Nguyễn Ánh may have been the first Vietnamese to “follow the wind” in Nam Bộ and to look north from Nam Bộ’s “lofty heights.”

Nguyễn Ánh’s victory stroke in 1801 was transporting an entire army by sea, bypassing Bình Định, where his forces were besieged by the Tây Sơn, and taking control of Thuận Quảng; thereby, in one deft move, he stranded the Tây Sơn forces in Bình Định and gained the open road to the north. He was further assisted in his northern campaign by the coordinated arrival of Laotian allies across the mountains from the west into Thanh Nghệ and the fact that Đông Kinh was not mobilized against him. But it must be remembered that these events came after years of preparation, disappointment, careful planning, patient waiting, and a vision of sea power and far-flung coordinated activity unmatched by any rival. Nguyễn Ánh’s vision of victory was conceived in Nam Bộ. When he made the decision to rule from Huế, near the tombs of his ancestors in Thuận Quảng, he deprived his successors of the perspective that had enabled his success and left Nam Bộ vulnerable to other powers. Within forty years of his death in 1820, Nam Bộ became the headquarters of France in Asia.

The Nguyễn monarchy at Huế in the nineteenth century was an unprecedented experiment in trying to rule all the places we have discussed. The flaw in this experiment was that unless a ruler be able to dominate at least one of the two largest places, either Đông Kinh or Nam Bộ, he would not be able to rule the other. In attempting to rule from Thuận Quảng, the Nguyễn kings were unable to control either Đông Kinh or Nam Bộ. By the time France was prepared to occupy Huế in the 1880s, the Nguyễn court had no effective control over either Nam Bộ or Đông Kinh. Nam Bộ had become the French colony of Cochinchina and Đông Kinh had become an anarchy of Chinese irregulars, local militias, and European adventurers. At this moment occurred what I want to discuss as my final example of conflict, a conflict between Thuận Quảng and Thanh Nghệ, cloaked in the guise of the French conquest and of resistance to it.

The French Conquest

The Huế royal entourage never incorporated people from Nam Bộ or Đông Kinh to any significant degree. By the middle of the nineteenth century, it was comprised almost exclusively of people from Thuận Quảng and Thanh Nghệ (Cooke 1995). The people from these two places came to hold different attitudes toward the royal house and the question of how to respond to France. In 1874, after an aborted French conquest of Đông Kinh, the royal court in Thuận Quảng signed a new treaty with the French that acknowledged French sovereignty over all of Nam Bộ, gave legal and economic concessions to the French in Đông Kinh, and gave new rights and protections to Vietnamese Catholics; in opposition to this settlement, local leaders in

Thanh Nghệ led an uprising against Catholics and the authority of the royal court that briefly spread through the provinces of Nghệ An and Hà Tĩnh and was suppressed by Huế with French assistance (McLeod 1997). Ten years later, when the issue of the French protectorate arose, the Thuận Quảng elite favored accommodation and collaboration to save the monarchy while Thanh Nghệ leaders favored resistance (Cooke 1991, ch. 3). The factional conflict at the royal court after the death of King Tự Đức in 1883 can be interpreted as a struggle between Thuận Quảng leaders willing to accommodate French demands and Thanh Nghệ leaders who preferred armed resistance. It was the initiative of Thanh Nghệ men that produced the royal “escape” from Huế and “call to arms” in 1885. The response to this appeal was large and prolonged in Thanh Nghệ, continuing until the death of Phan Đình Phùng nearly ten years later, while Thuận Quảng leaders quickly made peace with France against their Thanh Nghệ rivals (Marr 1971, ch. 3).

Interpreting the French conquest of Annam and the resistance movement of the late 1880s and early 1890s as in some degree a conflict between two Vietnamese places clarifies certain features of contemporary Vietnamese affairs, particularly when we consider that Thanh Nghệ (twentieth-century Nghệ Tĩnh) contributed the bulk of Vietnamese volunteers to fight in France during the First World War, violently resisted French colonialism in the early 1930s, and produced a large number of nationalist leaders, including Hồ Chí Minh. In modern Vietnamese national discourse, Thanh Nghệ Tĩnh people have a reputation for “nationalist” and “patriotic” fervor; is it possible that these terms euphemize a local desire for ascendancy? On the other hand, in the early twentieth century, other Vietnamese and interested French romanticized Huế as the “ancient imperial capital” to symbolize a particular vision of “traditional culture” constructed in complicity with the French colonial project (Taylor 1996).

The Surface of Time

Those who strive to rule all Vietnamese peoples will insist upon a single Vietnamese history and culture with a single origin and a single driving force through time and space. In this essay, I have argued against this insistence with an analysis of five Vietnamese places that in particular times by warfare defined themselves against other Vietnamese places. But this will not be enough if each of these places is then conceived as an essentialized identity with its own continuous development through time, as if it is not itself a convenient fiction to screen an array of localities lacking discernible evolutionary momentums. Aspects of what may be imagined as surface viewpoints may appear to persist when reinforced by bounded terrain, but my reading of the archive convinces me that human experience is ultimately episodic, not evolutionary, and that all histories, whatever the surface upon which they are formed, are equally discontinuous.

Đông Kinh was the home of kings and, in historical narratives, bears the countenance of a coherent and dominant place from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries; thereafter, it repeatedly fell subject to the ascendancy of places further south. Thanh Nghệ’s ambitions, turning first north and then south, seem to have claimed moral precedence in pan-Vietnamese discourse for centuries, although the contents of its moral claims have changed radically from era to era. In the fifteenth century, Lê dynasty apologists claimed a secular rationalism based on moral patterns announced

in the ancient classics. In the sixteenth century and later, the Lê restoration cause and subsequent Thanh Nghệ enthusiasms were announced with appeals to loyalty, ancestral merit, and righteousness on behalf of a symbolic, quiescent monarchy. In the twentieth century, Thanh Nghệ posed as the champion of Marxism-Leninism and the modern nation-state.

Thuận Quảng governed the southern lands for two centuries, then endeavored to rule all the Vietnamese-speaking lands for eight decades; its relative success as a local center could not be translated into pan-Vietnamese dominance through limitations of terrain and parochial regard for the Huế imperial pretense. Bình Định's moment of glory, resting upon the force of rustic valor, was episodically related to its time and place in a larger context of dynamic spatial relationships. Nam Bộ, an international entrepôt, powered the ascendancy of Nguyễn Ánh with its wealth and heterogeneity, but subsequently was repeatedly abandoned as nonessential by rulers caught in the grids of other surface orientations; Nam Bộ consequently made its own way among the powers of the world, learning to bear the consequences of that.

None of the five places I have fabricated for my analysis has attained or ever will attain a definitive identification; to the extent that they can be named as Vietnamese places, they will jostle each other while repeatedly being redefined. There is no pan-Vietnamese village morphology, family system, pattern of religious practice, or model of material economy to provide the convenience of a hierarchy defined as Vietnamese, but from place to place can be found many varieties of these, undergoing constant change, not according to any timeless logic or even the heuristic convenience of my analysis, but following the arbitrary turns of human experience.

In this essay, I have not given much attention to Vietnamese relationships with Chinese, Chams, Khmers, Laotians, or Siamese. Each of these relationships was distinctive and particular to vicissitudes of threat, opportunity, and terrain; furthermore, they changed with the passage of time. There is no single conceptual scheme that can account for all of these relationships or for even one of them at all times. The possibilities for analyzing the variety of contexts in which linkages can be affirmed between inter-Vietnamese relations and relations between Vietnamese speakers and non-Vietnamese are large and deserve detailed and careful study; there are no national characteristics that can explain the questions that arise from such a study. For example, there is no such thing as the Sino-Vietnamese relationship as a single definable model of engagement; dynasties and governments have through time entertained a succession of relationships that cover the full spectrum between war and amity.

The topic of Sino-Vietnamese relations often inspires speculation about where, in the scheme of contemporary institutionalized knowledge, the Vietnamese-speaking territories "belong": in East or Southeast Asia. It is easy enough to argue that Đông Kinh can be seen as part of East Asia while Nam Bộ can be seen as part of Southeast Asia. But what does this mean for a "common history" of the Vietnamese-speaking peoples? And what does it mean for East Asia and Southeast Asia as categories of academic knowledge?

The idea of a "common history" is contrived, taught, and learned generation by generation; it depends upon ideology and politics. For example, Đông Kinh schoolchildren in the twentieth century have been taught that the Mạc were "usurpers," although in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries this was a Thanh Nghệ point of view. In the 1960s, the northern assertion that Nguyễn Huệ Quang Trung unified the Vietnamese peoples and the southern assertion that Nguyễn Ánh Gia Long unified the Vietnamese peoples were based on rival narratives of national

unity that drew on both local viewpoints and ideology. Đông Kinh's quixotic attachment to the Lê dynasty in the nineteenth century was the only available way to claim a voice in the politics of a new dynasty that ignored Đông Kinh's local interests. A "common history" lies in the realm of mythology and indoctrination.

The most that can be said is that the various peoples we have discussed understood each other's speech, but even here the shared origin and shared development necessary to hypothesize a "common language" at some deep level of classification violates the actual practice of language on the surfaces of pronunciation, vocabulary, and syntax, where local orientations have arisen in response to unshared experiences, aspirations, and creativities; this goes beyond a distinction between written and spoken language. *Nôm*, the writing system that came into use during the centuries we have discussed, is notoriously unsystematic and full of variations and obscurities. A single character can refer to as many as a dozen different words, depending upon the time and place it was written; and a single word can be written with as many as a dozen different characters, again depending upon the time and place it was written. This was a writing system with a high degree of sensitivity to regional pronunciations and to phonetic change from generation to generation. *Nôm* is a precious document of the varieties of regional speech and of how language changed through time. The more I have worked with *nôm*, the more skeptical I am of theories about what it means to have a "common language," a "common history," a "common culture."

The Surface of Space

Related to the question of defining a "common history" of the Vietnamese peoples is the difficulty of reaching a consensus on the jejune problem of assigning them a position vis-à-vis China and other neighboring peoples. If the epistemology of our age requires a boundary between East Asia and Southeast Asia, then, as I have already suggested, it certainly falls amidst the speakers of Vietnamese, and the emphasis upon Vietnamese surfaces that I have made necessarily implies a larger topic of Asian surfaces. Vietnamese speakers do not unambiguously belong to either East or Southeast Asia, but are groups of peoples sharing a field of oral sound that straddles what is for us an epistemological watershed. To the extent that we can talk about the Vietnamese-speaking peoples as a category of knowledge, the coherence of East Asia and of Southeast Asia as imagined larger categories of knowledge are in question.

If pressed to draw a line between East and Southeast Asia, I would draw it at Hải Vân Pass, between Huế and Đà Nẵng exactly through the middle of the place I have been calling Thuận Quảng. From there southward can be observed the single most palpable change anywhere on the Vietnamese coast in climate, speech, and lifestyle. Arguments can also be made for drawing such a line at Ngang Pass or the Gianh River, the last river between Hà Nội and Sài Gòn to be bridged, or at Đồng Hới. The territories between the Ngang and Hải Vân Passes are in fact the ancient Han Commandery of Nhật Nam, the southernmost extension ever achieved by the Han empire or any other Chinese dynasty. Drawing at this place a boundary between East and Southeast Asia is not a factor of Han conquest in antiquity; rather, I believe the extent of Han conquest in the south was a factor of climate, terrain, distance, and the consequent possibilities for social organization, cultural practice, and economic activity.

It may appear curious that when I discuss Vietnamese surfaces I speak of Thuận Quảng as a single unit, but when I discuss Asian surfaces I draw a line through the

middle of Thuận Quảng. I believe that this curiosity is an indication that the more our analysis is grounded in the debris of actual human experience, the less it will serve categories of history and culture conceived either globally, nationally, or regionally.

The Surface of Here and Now

In a recent article, Edward Friedman has proposed a contemporary choice between a northern and a southern national identity for China: “The conflict between north and south is imagined as a conflict between closed and open, intolerant and tolerant, the failed project of a self-wounding Leninist anti-imperialism and the rising project of a successful nation” (Friedman 1994, 86). It is easy enough to take Friedman’s analysis of differences between a northern and southern version of the Chinese nation and to simply lay it down upon not only Vietnam but also, with adjustments, upon the larger zone of a combined East and Southeast Asia, or perhaps even of Asia as a whole. Friedman’s exercise suggests that while the category of nation may not be easily discarded, the contents of the category are subject to negotiation. In this essay, I want to suggest that attention to the surfaces of times and places enables such negotiation, at the very least, while at the same time posing the even more radical possibility of imagining Asian surfaces as something other than parts of nations.

Partha Chatterjee, speaking of Indian history, meditates upon the prospect of alternative histories “for the different regions of India” and proposes that in such a case there would no longer be any question of “national” and “regional” histories: “the very relation between parts and the whole would be open for negotiation. If there is any unity in these alternative histories, it is not national but confederal. . . . Until such time that we accept that it is the very singularity of the idea of a national history of India which divides Indians from one another, we will not create the conditions for writing these alternative histories.” Chatterjee imagines that regional histories would negotiate a “confederal” unity and “the very centrality of Indian history would then become largely uncertain” (Chatterjee 1993, 114–15). He implies a kind of “third place” of contemporary possibility between nation and region, which for me brings to mind Rey Chow’s “third term” between the subjectivity of a presumed original and the subjectivity of whatever resists such an original, a mode of orientation between two sets of claims “most likely equally corrupt . . . participants in contemporary world culture.” Chow finds this third place on the “surface,” where the fluidity of contemporary multimedia communication and the commodification of the global marketplace can make transparent the cruelty and violence that arise from the depths of both national origins and “other” versions of those origins (Chow 1995, 192–202). This reminds me of Thongchai Winichakul’s idea about the “geo-body” of Siam, which proposes that “a map created a nation,” that through being mapped upon the surface of the modern world Siam could present itself, both to itself and to the world, as the most commodifiable item in the twentieth century: a nation (Thongchai 1994).

All of these efforts to resist or critique national identities begin and end with efforts to represent or respond to the binary comprised of what enforces and what resists the nation, or of the binary of competition between a nation and other nations; I wish to dispel this fixation upon the nation and the binary relations it produces with the thought that all of these formulations of historical agency are contrived from

the same random workings of human activity on the surface of time and place. We cannot appeal to history to be rescued from the nation as Duara imagines, because narratives of the nation return calls from the past no less than do his bifurcated histories. Only by renouncing ownership over the past and by abandoning a role of saviour of the past can we be fully alert to the shifting surfaces of our own times and places and to the possibilities for making our own contributions to the trajectories of these surfaces.

In a recent article, Sheldon Pollack suggests a way of thinking about the “cosmopolitan vernacular” that avoids the kind of binary relations we have noted. He writes that “‘indigenous’ cultures are produced in the course of long-term translocal interactions by the very same processes that produce the global itself. The local/global dualism, therefore, needs to be historicized out of existence.” His point is that “nothing is globally self-identical” and that the local is in a state of perpetual change so that the global and the local “each becomes the other in constantly new ways”; furthermore, according to him, the local/global dualism contributes both to people being disarmed by a “false understanding of the larger forces at work in their lives” and to “their arming themselves—to recreate some ‘local’ that never existed in the first place” (Pollack 1997, 34). Pollack appears to say that the relation between what is imagined as local and what is imagined as global is politically neutral since it has the potential for both oppression and resistance. This strikes me as resonant with Naoki Sakai’s discussion of the schema of configuration, mentioned at the beginning of this essay, in which the desire to resist by mimicking the oppressor can ultimately only confirm the binary structure in which oppression and resistance are locked in mutual confirmation. This does not disable politics but rather enables it with the intent of our own time and place rather than with the authority of what is thought to have happened in the past. Instead of seeking to be rescued by something below the surface, we may better serve our own commitments by taking responsibility for acting at the surface of our own time and place.

I have discussed Vietnamese surface orientations to turn away from the depths upon which are erected the national and local identities that justify the violence of dominance and resistance, a violence configured in a scheme of mutual reinforcement where, in Pollack’s words, “each becomes the other in constantly new ways.” What the past has to teach us is that we are on the surface of our own time and place and appealing to another time and place will not cancel our responsibility for the choices we make. As I have written elsewhere, the past belongs only to those who lived it, and anything more than that is the presumption and cruelty of making the past into a pretext and weapon for our own choices: “The past . . . is a beautiful confusion, and it is beautiful precisely because it is confusion; when it stops confusing us, we can be sure that we have understood it into something dangerous” (Taylor 1995c, 6).

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