

Resistance, Rebellion, Revolution

Popular Movements in Vietnamese History

Truong Buu Lâm

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by

Truong Buu Lâm
with the collaboration
of
Maivân Lâm



INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

Preface

Although the writing of a thematic history of Vietnam is a somewhat intimidating task, I have embarked on it wilfully because the subject of Vietnam's response to foreign intervention has kept me infatuated ever since I started studying Vietnam's past. Foreign interventions in Vietnam have been many. They have also resulted in a variety of outcomes: some developed into lengthy occupations, others remained short-term invasions, while yet others simply aborted. It goes without saying that invasions provoke resistance and that occupations produce, sooner or later, independence movements. These — the resistance and independence movements — in their turn, meet with variable endings: some explode only to fizzle out while others actually manage to rid the country of foreign occupation.

In order to understand the dynamics behind these different outcomes, I have found it useful to view them as a single set of phenomena, or problems, in Vietnamese history — phenomena to be analysed and explained in terms of one another. The present study, therefore, is in the nature of a comparative survey of this subject. Although the current state of Vietnamese studies somewhat restricts the thoroughness of this survey, its pursuit has nevertheless yielded to my satisfaction certain unmistakable patterns or clues concerning the conditions that govern the success or failure of foreign interventions and, conversely, the failure or success of movements born in opposition to them.

As my study unfolded, it also became clear to me that the conditions which I mentioned controlled not only the fate of foreign interventions and resistance movements but also the fate of all other popular movements or uprisings in Vietnam. The determinative conditions, or factors, have to do primarily with the political organization, social structure and what might be called moral values of the country, and the interrelationships between them. I argue here that, in a significant way, the course and consequences of foreign intervention parallel those of domestically generated uprisings. Once past the admittedly unique act of invasion, foreign attackers typically become enmeshed in the intricacies of internal struggles that pit resisters against collaborators, and one breed of resisters against another. The role

of the invaders subsequently begins to look very much like that of any other faction embroiled in a civil strife. Correspondingly, the independence movements that rise up to meet and repel foreign occupation also typically play out the process of mass mobilization that characterizes domestic rebellions. Xenophobia only adds an additional, albeit potent, issue to which movement leaders can direct their attention, and also rivet their propaganda. Beyond that, resistance and independence movements engage forces which are also present in domestic uprisings. They are, therefore, to be viewed alongside each other. Revolution belongs to a class of its own. As presented in this study, revolution makes use of all the motive forces present in other types of mass movements — such as xenophobia, perceived political oppression, economic inequality, and social injustice — and rounds them off with an explicit call for fundamental change in a society where such a change is already a felt need.

This monograph is based mainly on secondary sources. References consulted include not only those giving the general history of Vietnam but also those which discuss certain universal problems of methodology encountered in the study of similar phenomena in other countries. Innumerable works have been published in the field of social mobilization by political scientists and anthropologists. I have consulted a number of them and have sometimes been well rewarded for the effort. I am also sure that I have missed others which might have contributed still more to my topic. The only excuse for such omissions is that this monograph represents but a tentative attempt to present a scheme for viewing certain facts in Vietnamese history. I would have liked it to be heavier in facts and lighter on theory. Other students of Vietnamese history may one day elaborate on this same topic and confer on it a more perfect and complete status.

My debts in this project are heavy. The late Harry J. Benda went through a very rough draft of this paper and provided me with many precious suggestions. We subsequently discussed this topic on so many occasions that when I last presented it in one of his late night seminars at Yale in 1970, Harry simply dozed off. He woke up as soon as the lullabying drone of my voice came to a halt. Unflustered, he immediately fired at me a string of pertinent questions. With much affection and the fondest of memories, I dedicate this humble work to him. This monograph would never have seen the light of day had it not been for a fellowship that the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore granted me. There, for one blessed year, 1977–78, I found the warmth of friendship and the stimulation of thought that allowed me to finish a task begun more than a decade earlier. Kernial

Sandhu, Huynh Kim Khanh, Patricia Lim, Sharon Siddique, M. Jayaretnam and Ng Shui Meng have all, in their own way, contributed greatly to this work. Benedict Kerkvliet read the final draft and suggested many changes. An anonymous reader to whom the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies sent my manuscript also lent excellent suggestions. Jagdish Sharma's constant encouragement helped me greatly through the tedious task of revising the manuscript. My wife, Maivan, has done more than make the manuscript readable. With her training in anthropology, she has opened my eyes to many more possibilities in the analysis of historical phenomena than I was accustomed to seeing. My work has gained tremendously in form and in substance from her assistance. To all mentioned above, I express my heartfelt thanks. I must also offer gratitude to the University of Hawaii and its History Department for granting me the sabbatical leave I badly needed to complete this writing. Finally, I offer thanks to those other architects of this monograph, the women who make up the secretarial staff of the History Department, whose patience through the many retypings of this manuscript leaves me humble.

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I Introduction

The role of rural communities in the political life of a state has been much discussed in the past decades.¹ While it has seemed evident that in the relationship between the peasantry and the state, it is always the state that manages to both propose and dispose of the terms of that relationship, yet successful revolutions in agrarian countries such as China and Vietnam, largely because of the participation of their rural masses, have necessitated a re-evaluation of peasant political power. In this monograph, I should like to contribute additional material for that reassessment, not by studying the power of the peasant *vis-à-vis* the state as such, but by examining the related subject of the involvement of the rural masses in the political struggles of the Vietnamese nation. Specifically, I shall look at the historical occasions on which the Vietnamese populace participated actively in national political movements and, I hope, point out some of their features.

The most noteworthy political struggles in Vietnamese history have usually been of four types: rebellion, dynastic change, resistance to foreign interventions, and revolution. It is clear that these types of upheavals differ according to their goals which are, variously, independence, social change, or simply change of personnel.

Political movements may also be characterized by the manner in which they were carried out. For example, many popular revolts developed, matured, and then dissipated in single circumscribed localities. Equally circumscribed in scope, although located at centre-stage, were the several dynastic changes that were clandestinely plotted and executed at court, without the benefit of popular involvement. Other movements, such as those against the Chinese invasions of the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, were conceived at court, but carried out jointly by the government and its subjects. Then there were movements which had their beginnings in the political periphery of the nation, so to speak, among elements that had cause for complaint against the central power, but which then grew and gathered strength still apart from the centre of things, until eventually they became powerful enough to converge on the centre and alter it. The Le Loi, Tay Son and Viet Minh movements belong to this category. Because these three movements represent, *par excellence*, historical cases in

which the power of the masses was successfully harnessed for a national struggle, they will receive the main attention of this monograph. In order that their special features may become apparent, they will be compared to other movements of similar ambitions which had far less fortunate outcomes.

Some terms are used somewhat idiosyncratically in this text for the sake of convenience and they need to be explained. In this monograph, any organized campaign against foreign military intervention is called a "resistance" or "a resistance movement". Where a foreign power has already succeeded in establishing itself in the country, and a campaign is subsequently launched to uproot and expel it, that resistance will be designated by the special name of "independence movement". Rebellions are internal matters which may be roughly divided into two types: local and national. The first refers to the spontaneous uprisings that the masses stage against an ongoing exploitation that they suffer and which, every now and then, given the right catalyst, prompts them into an all-out effort to banish their immediate tormentors from earth. In the second type, a special figure steps into the local fray who, armed with ambition rather than despair, seeks to channel outraged energy into a well thought-out strategy to gain national power, thereby sometimes managing to replace villainous rulers, although not usually their villainous practices, which almost always return. According to this perspective, revolution may be seen as a special case of rebellion, in which the impetus for change goes all the way: sweeping out old personnel, programmes, as well as political, economic, and social structures. The terms "peasantries" and "rural communities" will be used rather interchangeably and quite loosely in the following pages to refer not only to Vietnam's cultivators of rice and other crops, but also to those persons who live and work in the villages alongside these cultivators. The justification here is that the overwhelming majority of the Vietnamese people, from the time of the country's independence (AD 939) until modern times, did indeed reside in the countryside, and were in fact peasants, so that the terms "peasant", "rural" and "popular" (in the sense of "characteristic of the masses") denote approximately the same group of people. This use of the term "peasant" is not designed to negate the social differences between the various strata of people that can be found in most Vietnamese villages. Rather, it is used to suggest that the political behaviour of a Vietnamese village community entitled it to be viewed as a cohesive whole. It did, in fact, so view itself, especially *vis-à-vis* the central government which, in terms both recognized, conferred upon the village a remarkable degree of autonomy.

II Rebellions

As with civilizations everywhere that discriminate between producers and rulers, Vietnam saw its share of rebellions. Although frequent enough in number, these rebellions were characteristically limited in impact. For example, of the ten dynastic changes that occurred in the course of the ten centuries of Vietnamese independence, all (except one) were occasioned by intrigues originating at court, or at any rate among high officialdom, and owed nothing to popular sentiment.²

Soon after independence, Vietnam's first dynasty, the Ngo (AD 939-944), began to lose control over the country. The many chieftains who had united in the struggle against China now reasserted their feudalistic claims to the extent that eventually a Ngo heir, Ngo Xuong Xi, was reduced to the status of a mere war-lord in a pack of twelve war-lords known as "*su quan*", who ruled in as many separate domains (944-968). The second dynasty, the Dinh (968-980),³ lost the throne to the commander of its armed forces when the latter, known as General Le Hoan, became partial, while serving as regent to a six-year-old king, to both absolute power and the queen mother. The general went on to found the first Le dynasty which lasted twenty-nine years (980-1009). The manner of its demise remains somewhat mysterious. The chronicles record only that court dignitaries found the Le heir too young and crowned a certain high official named Ly Cong Uan who was supported by the Buddhist hierarchy which then held power at the Le court.⁴ The Ly dynasty sat on the throne of Vietnam for over two hundred years, until 1225, when queen Ly Chieu Hoang, having reigned a mere two months, ceded the throne to her husband, Tran Canh. The Tran dynasty lasted until 1400 when a regent named Ho Qui Ly usurped the throne. The dynasty bearing his family name lasted only until Ming troops arrived from China to establish their rule over Vietnam from 1407 to 1427. Then, following a decade of resistance, Le Loi expelled the Chinese, ascended the throne and inaugurated the second Le dynasty in 1427. His dynasty's rule was interrupted when a certain Mac Dang Dung, who had been nothing more than a petty officer until he suddenly achieved prominence at court for his many campaigns against various rebels, decided

to usurp the throne. Mac governed from 1527 to 1543, when power was restored to the Le family who then ruled continuously, at least in name, until 1789, when they were overthrown by the Tay Son brothers. The latter ruled from 1790 to 1802, in which year the throne passed to Nguyen Anh, an heir of the Nguyen lords whom the Tay Son brothers had earlier defeated. The Nguyen dynasty lasted until 1945, although from 1883 onwards it ruled without real power, on borrowed time and at the mercy of the French colonial authorities. In August 1945, the last emperor, Bao Dai, abdicated the throne and transferred the authority vested in him to the republican government set up by the Viet Minh.⁵

Thus did dynastic fortunes rise and fall in Vietnam, quite independently of popular sentiment. Not that the common people necessarily remained indifferent to dynastic changes. Their involvement in a number of bloody campaigns in support of deposed dynasties bears this out. The call to rally behind legitimacy was particularly effective with the population when things were going badly in the country and responsibility for them could be laid at the door of the new "illegitimate" ruler.

The most well-known example of this was the struggle to restore the Le dynasty after its emperor had been expelled from the capital by Mac Dang Dung who installed the new Mac dynasty in 1527. Almost immediately, the supporters of the Le family gathered in the western and northern provinces and, in the name of the deposed emperor, started a civil war which lasted almost until the end of the century. They finally pushed the usurpers against the frontier with China, and seized the capital in favour of the Le emperor.⁶ Again in 1738, Le Duy Mat, a member of the royal family, sparked an important mass movement in the provinces of Thanh Hoa and Nghe An against the Trinh lords who had, by then, usurped almost total power from the legitimate Le rulers.⁷ More recently, in the nineteenth century, when the Nguyen dynasty had already entrenched itself in Vietnam, after having quelled the Tay Son rebellion which itself had toppled the Le dynasty, there still periodically appeared Le pretenders — false or real — who contrived to generate a great deal of popular support for their cause.⁸ If it were so for calls to protect or restore a usurped dynasty, attempts to unseat a manifestly legitimate incumbent were another matter, however, and received very little support. This popular hesitancy in challenging authority is usually attributed to the so-called innate rural caution, conservatism, or fatalism, which is a way of calling the problem another name. In Vietnam, the population at large seemed to have continually vacillated between an acceptance and defiance of the status quo. And a single

doctrine, that of the Mandate of Heaven, made right both this attachment to order and the occasionally radical attacks launched against it.

Not every rebellion, certainly, addressed such lofty issues as the Mandate of Heaven, or the legitimacy of the emperor. Most, rather, decried crooked officials, unpopular policies, or the ravages of nature. When drought, flood or pestilence struck an area, bands of people, quite leaderless, would typically roam the adjoining districts in search of food, or whatever other necessities they needed to tide them over until the next crop came in.⁹ In times of such calamities, the central authorities generally did what they could to minimize the suffering of the people by setting up granaries, reducing taxes, and freeing people from corvée labour. As for corrupt officials and unpopular policies, it is surprising to see how often popular protest could bring redress, if only for a short while. Most uprisings, then, started from local issues; the government for its part could usually defuse them by granting local relief.

Once in a while, perhaps because the government did not grant relief, or because the relief came too late or too skimpily, protest might linger on and develop into a force to be reckoned with nationally. The metamorphosis from local protest to national rebellion seemed to depend upon the presence of the following factors: a skilled and attractive leadership; concrete issues affecting a wide geographical area; an ideology that persuasively sanctioned rebellion; and an effective network of local organizers, recruited preferably from among village scholars.

The last factor was necessitated by certain peculiarities in Vietnamese society. Being a fundamentally rural society, ninety-five per cent of its population lived in the countryside. The remaining five per cent were in the capital or the few urban centres scattered throughout the country. In these cities could be found most of the Confucian scholars, who staffed the bureaucracy, and their families. The masses, on the other hand, were gathered in small rural communities that enjoyed a remarkable degree of self-rule. Being also nearly self-sufficient, most of the villages found little cause for contact with either the government or other communities. In other words, the relevant social and political concerns of most Vietnamese were concentrated within the village itself. Even in the twentieth century, when almost a century of colonization, modernization, and centralization had already passed, the politics of the central administration could engage the attention of the people only when the village bamboo hedges that shielded them physically and politically had been somehow breached. In the course of the Franco-Vietnamese war of 1946–54,

for example, while the French clearly controlled the major urban centres, they, nevertheless, finally yielded to a force that had a much firmer hold on the country's villages. Following the Geneva Convention in 1954, the same contest, but with somewhat different actors, was played out again. The many Saigon regimes encountered great difficulties in the countryside, such as when "the village, which had been the cradle of a Jeffersonian type of representative government in the country was deprived of its elected officials by Ngo Dinh Diem's fiat in June 1956".¹⁰ Conversely, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam's survival and triumph over the intense American bombings of 1965-72 may in part be attributed to "massive decentralization, a wholesale movement away from the towns and cities... the process of which has been facilitated by the communal tradition of village life...".¹¹ A recent press report (1978) shows that even now villagers in Vietnam are given the authority to settle problems arising from conflicts with the Chinese over border demarcation: "Usually the old men from our villages came along to sort things out and urge moderation."¹²

The institution of the Vietnamese village occupies a category all its own, quite unlike that of the rural communities in neighbouring countries. In contrast to its southern Chinese counterpart, the Vietnamese rural community was not ordained along family lineages. In no Vietnamese village, for example, could one see "communities composed of the male agnatic descendants of a single ancestor together with their sisters and their wives".¹³ Again, unlike many rural communities of the Philippines and Thailand, for instance, relationships in a Vietnamese village were not primarily based upon a patron-client system. Instead, Vietnamese villagers related to one another on an essentially personal rather than an institutional basis, reserving special deference only for the Confucian scholars who resided in their midst and dominated their Council of Notables.¹⁴ The Confucian scholars in fact had so much power that no transaction of importance could take place in the village without their knowledge and consent.

The organization of Vietnamese society into virtually discrete villages also meant that the political perceptions and goals of persons living in them could not easily coincide, at least not over a wide terrain. A hardship, no matter how dire, suffered by one village or district usually concerned its victims alone. If the authorities cared to help, well and good, for they were the only structural link a village had with the wider society. No particular aid was to be expected from the surrounding communities since such neighbours were not, either through economic or kinship ties, organized into co-operative entities. Blatant corruption in the administrative ranks of a whole

region might indeed provide a basis for common action, as would massive disasters of nature. But even these had to be perceived as generalized evils, in some way caused and aggravated by the powers that be, before different villages would take up a common cause. The separatist tendencies of rural Vietnam were built into its structure and it always took a particularly astute leadership and a singularly powerful ideology to overcome them.

Any rebel leader who would lead many men immediately faced the problem of blending their different frustrations and hopes into a workable whole. Sensitivity, intelligence, and knowledge of the social terrain were tremendous assets here. But so were connections, especially of a kingly or divine nature. The Vietnamese expected their radicals to conform to the traditional configurations of success. In this respect, it was believed that the measure of a man was to be taken not only from his manifest deeds, good and bad, but also from the circumstantial signs surrounding his life history. For this reason, many folk-leaders went to great lengths to display arresting body stigmata, or to publicize unusual encounters with the supernatural. These things suggested that here was a man, and a set of plans favoured by fate and therefore worth supporting. A claim of blood relationship to a previous dynasty was also effective. What these various claims sought to allay was the otherwise inhibitive fear of challenging authority that resulted from equating established authority with the will of Heaven, which after all commanded mortal destinies.

This identification of secular and supernatural authority is, of course, known as the Mandate of Heaven and it was brought to Vietnam by the Chinese along with the rest of their Confucian traditions. Although most villagers lacked a formal education, they knew and accepted certain Confucian tenets meted out to them by the village literati. Foremost among these was the notion of loyalty, especially to the emperor, whom Heaven itself had chosen. Heaven was known to have ordained that the universe, including the Vietnamese nation, be administered according to certain hierarchical principles. And what Heaven ordained was what secured the harmony so necessary to man and nature. If, therefore, Heaven saw fit to place a certain individual at the top of the hierarchy, it was certainly because he deserved it, and because the people would benefit thereby. The latter, in turn, should demonstrate their attitude to Heaven by serving its chosen officer with loyalty. It should be noted here that the allegiance given was not directly to the emperor himself but to the power of which he was the instrument. Viewed otherwise, the emperor was, in fact, little more than the greatest magician of the

land whose task it was to channel the munificence of Heaven onto mortal earth. As with all magicians, his credibility lay in the efficacy of his magic. If the emperor was pre-eminently responsible for translating celestial harmony into secular order, it followed that he might also be the one most at fault when disturbances arose. An emperor could, therefore, at different times, be thought of as the most legitimate, that is nurturant, or the most illegitimate, that is disruptive, member of society. The ultimate diagnosticians of his status were those who, in their daily life, experienced the effects of his reign. Good crops, respectable officials and a secure order — these presaged Heaven's pleasure with the ruler. The opposite set of circumstances, on the other hand, probably signified Heavenly displeasure, the withdrawal of the Mandate, and the licence for others to put themselves forward.

Contenders for the throne thus had to try, through means as diverse as myth-making, battle-field victories and lineage, to substantiate their claims to a new Mandate. Nothing, however, propels a candidate so fast to the throne as the accumulation of political and military successes. A Vietnamese saying reveals the opportunism involved here: "He who wins is king, and he who loses becomes outlaw".

It was relatively easy for senior officials to found a new dynasty. It was, however, rare that an ordinary man, at the head of a popular rebellion, would find his way to the throne, for there were in his case too many persons and factions sharing one theory but holding diverse interpretations of it to convince of his legitimacy. Most of the time, the concept of the Mandate of Heaven functioned as a conservative restraint against frivolous or premature attacks on the throne. Occasionally, in the course of Vietnamese history, the Mandate did manage to transform itself into a powerful rationale for change.

A rebel leader with national ambition could break down the skepticism of constituencies that did not know him only if he first won over their scholars. That, naturally, was not an easy task as scholars generally occupied a favoured position in traditional Vietnamese society, and so were disinclined to wish for change. Their conservatism could be superseded only if the gravity of local conditions forced their hand or, if their ambitions had seen no fruit under the current regime.¹⁵ Whatever their motive, no rebel message could get very far until the scholars agreed to carry it, for the villagers typically mistrusted unfamiliar messengers and propagandists, and gave them no hearing. This phenomenon resulted simply from the self-imposed isolation of the rural communities.¹⁶ It is not that novel ideas could

not be introduced, but they were best done by fellow villagers and particularly by those who commanded respect because of their trustworthiness, or wisdom, or learning. The Confucian scholars who sat on the village's Council of Notables were perceived as having at least some of these qualities. Almost every village in Vietnam had one or two learned men in residence. They ranged from retired mandarins to scholars, and students who could not, or would not, seek high office. Such persons frequently earned their living by running the village school and serving as village scribes. These occupations acquainted them intimately with the problems and aspirations of their fellow-villagers. At the same time, they were the community's most worldly-wise men, being those rare few who were acquainted with officialdom. In short, ideas entering and leaving the village passed through them; there was no other avenue.

Thus, for a rebellion to become a challenge to the throne it had to have the following requirements: sufficient grievances, a popular ideology, a convincing leadership, and good local organizers. Very few rebellions managed to satisfy all these requirements. A rather recent example from the nineteenth century will show how a rebellion can fail.

In 1854, under the Nguyen dynasty, in the province of Son Tay, a certain Le Duy Cu, who claimed kinship with the former Le dynasty, together with a renowned man of letters from the neighbouring province of Bac Ninh, named Cao Ba Quat, plotted to topple the monarchy. They agreed that afterwards Cu would become king and Quat, his supreme adviser. Their plan appealed to Le loyalists as well as to others who pointed out that the Nguyen did not deserve to rule since for the past two years, grasshoppers had eaten the crops in Son Tay and Bac Ninh, thus reducing their populations to near starvation. Quat brought with him into the rebellion a large number of scholars, friends, students, and petty chieftains. In spite of the presence of such respectable men in the movement, and considering the severity of the famine, the revolt attracted few recruits beyond the two provinces of its origin. The reasons for the failure are many. The campaign may have been launched a bit late, at a time when the Le dynasty was beginning to fade from the memory of a new generation. True enough, there were still some old folk who reminisced fondly of this or that member of the defunct dynasty but they were too few to lend weight to the bid for its restoration, which was otherwise Confucian and legitimate enough. The inhabitants of Son Tay and Bac Ninh indeed took up arms, but it was to ease their hardship rather than to restore anything. As for the majority of the scholars, including those who disapproved of the Nguyen, they shied away from a Le

pretender who was unable to demonstrate evident signs of royal predestination. Nature having punished two provinces only, there too, in effect, the rebellion remained. Not many months after declaring their opposition, Cu was arrested, and Quat was killed in battle. The rebellion quickly disintegrated.¹⁷

Most uprisings that tried to take on the Vietnamese monarchy suffered similar consequences. Some lasted longer, spread more widely, but only one actually overthrew a government. That was the Tay Son rebellion of the eighteenth century. Here, massive unrest, skilful leadership, a usurpation made legitimate by Chinese backing of the opposition, and the support of local scholars all combined to thrust the rebel leader to the very pinnacle of power.

The Tay Son Rebellion

The Tay Son movement originated in the southern part of Vietnam at a time when the national territory was divided into two rival principalities.¹⁸ The Trinh lords governed the north while the Nguyen lords ruled the south. Both did so, with much mutual dislike, in the name of the Le emperor who resided powerless in Hanoi. This abnormal partition of the national territory, and of power, produced an instability, divisiveness and mismanagement which the Tay Son brothers astutely exploited. Their rebellion was first announced in their native village of Tay Son, in the province of Binh Dinh, in 1771.

The oldest of the three Tay Son brothers, Nguyen Nhac, had been sufficiently educated to have held a minor position in the provincial administration. He had apparently been dismissed from that position for embezzlement, which incident only reinforced the image he later projected of one who dared to defy unpopular authority. The few years he had spent in the civil service had acquainted him with certain scholar-officials on whom he later called to lend support to his movement. The Tay Son brothers also went about carefully acquiring and publicizing supernatural sanctions for their undertaking. It is said that, before launching their drive, they had withdrawn into the mountains for three full days and nights during which time the sacred mission of restoring order to the realm had been revealed to them.¹⁹

The specific issues addressed by the Tay Son changed considerably in the course of the campaign, but were always kept in line with sentiments current among the population. At first, the three brothers declared that they wished to see the legitimate heir of the Nguyen lords, Prince Duong, ascend the "southern throne" of Hue.²⁰ He had been prevented from doing so by a high official named Truong Phuc

Loan who, in 1865, had placed on the throne a younger Nguyen whom he could control. Loan, as regent, then proceeded to dismantle some of the institutions and power blocks that the Nguyen lords had built up for almost two hundred years in the south. His actions meant that a number of scholars suddenly found themselves ejected from political power. As a consequence, the people in the south, due no doubt to these now bitter scholars, came to identify Loan with much that was amiss in the physical, social, and moral order. The regent was reputedly engaged in high-handed extortion and embezzlement; lesser officials, naturally, followed suit. And as always, corruption must eventually end up as additional demands imposed upon the population.²¹ The Tay Son brothers took note of these abuses and began to urge the people to retaliate by "seizing the property of the rich and distributing it to the poor". A slogan based upon this admonition quickly became one of the most successful slogans of the movement.

Not content with only outlaw justice, the brothers withdrew with their entourage to the hills to prepare a sustained campaign. One of the brothers, Nguyen Nhac, had formerly traded among the hill tribes of southern Vietnam. He now turned to them for an absolutely essential requirement of the rebellion: a well-sheltered base. He found one in the highlands where government troops rarely ventured. There, the brothers began to recruit and train supporters.²² In order to open wide the movement, the Tay Son at first relied upon a collective leadership of three. Only one of these, Nguyen Nhac, was a Tay Son brother. The other two were Huyen Khe, a man of great wealth, and Nguyen Thung, a powerful local chieftain. There were also men of importance in the province of Quang Nam which, because of its port of Faifoo (Hoi An), controlled much of the wealth of the entire South.²³ Large colonies of Chinese merchants dotted the province's coastal plains and to these the Tay Son movement turned. The merchants had grown restive under what they considered to be the Nguyen authorities' restrictive trade policies and so rallied to the Tay Son banner.²⁴ In this way, rich and poor, scholar and merchant, gravitated to the cause of the Tay Son movement.

An army comprising all types of sympathizers was put together in the hills. Once launched, the army took great pains not to suffer a major setback, especially in the beginning, when psychological stakes were high. As luck would have it, the second Tay Son brother, Nguyen Hue, made this possible by unexpectedly metamorphosing into a military genius.

In mid-1773, after two years of intensive preparations in the highlands of Binh Dinh, the Tay Son partisans seized the provincial