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Vietnam

The Tây Sơn uprising: Society and rebellion in eighteenth-century Vietnam

By GEORGE DUTTON

Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006. Pp. 293. Maps, Illustrations, Notes, Bibliography, Index. doi:10.1017/S0022463408000143

This book gives us an unprecedented look into one of the most significant episodes in early modern Southeast Asian history. By delving deep into Nguyễn court records, contemporary accounts, and missionary accounts of the Tây Sơn uprising (1771–1802), George Dutton gives us a subtle and sophisticated thematic history of this critical period. He argues that modern Vietnamese historians have erred in simplistically labelling the Tây Sơn as an ideologically driven peasant rebellion or a popular movement. Instead, he paints a complex picture of an uprising led by three brothers possessing pragmatic rather than ideological goals, and supported by factions with different and sometimes competing interests. The result is an intricate vision of the Tây Sơn uprising that thoroughly refutes the more romantic views held by recent Vietnamese historians.

The book is organised thematically in four chapters. In the first chapter, Dutton explains the complex political dynamic in eighteenth-century Vietnam that led to the uprising. He examines the brothers who organised the uprising in the small hamlet of Tây Sơn, in what is now Vietnam's central coast, and then details how the uprising became institutionalised into two separate regimes. The remaining chapters are rich in well-crafted social history. Dutton devotes Chapter 2 to analysing the way in which the Tây Sơn brothers used titles, Cham regalia and associations with influential scholars to lay claim to political authority in Đại Việt. In Chapter 3, which is devoted to peasant life under the Tây Sơn leaders, Dutton explains the effort to control the rural population of Đại Việt through the use of identity cards and new classification schemes that would allow the Tây Sơn regimes to more efficiently recruit peasants into their armies or fulfil their labour or tax demands. Finally, Chapter 4 examines Tây Sơn relations with bandits, pirates, ethnic minority populations and Christians, groups that Dutton collectively terms 'the social margins'.

Each of these chapters is intended to debunk the exceptionalism, uniqueness, simplicity and ideological purity ascribed to the Tây Sơn by what Dutton calls 'Vietnamese communist historiography' (p. 17). Instead, he sees the Tây Sơn as rulers who had 'multiple, often conflicting objectives' and whose 'extremely complex' alliances 'do not allow for the simplified renderings that historians have heretofore presented' (p. 14). To illustrate this point, Dutton marshals evidence from an array of source materials with a minimum of authorial guidance or intervention, organises it thematically, and presents it to the reader. This strategy is advantageous in that it permits Dutton to analyse the interactions of average Vietnamese with the Tây Sơn in a manner that goes well beyond any current study and makes this book among the most innovative studies of premodern Vietnamese history to date.

On the other hand, Dutton's choice to operate thematically does have a few shortcomings. For example, Dutton distinguishes between the regimes of Nguyễn Nhạc

and Nguyễn Huệ, and points out that 'the political structures mobilized or utilized by the Tây Sơn were constantly evolving' (p. 230). Yet his thematic, social history approach in the later chapters tends to collapse these distinctions by eschewing chronology and by intermingling evidence about the various Tây Sơn regimes. Also, using 'Vietnamese communist historiography' as a foil from which to argue about the complexity of the Tây Sơn dynasty does not do justice to the equally complex politics that surrounded the work of DRV historians of the period. Finally, in certain instances, the manuscript would benefit from more guidance on the nature and purpose of Dutton's primary sources. For example, an explanation of the nature of schisms between missionaries whose letters Dutton relies upon, or the different genres and purposes of the diverse Vietnamese primary texts that he uses, such as the Nguyễn court records and the *Hoàng Lê Nhất Thống Chí*, would be useful.

That being said, Dutton has clearly written an authoritative work which will be a staple in both undergraduate and graduate classes on Vietnam for quite some time to come. He has done more than write a compelling account of the events of late eighteenth-century Vietnam. He has also given us a rare glimpse into the lives and hardships of average Vietnamese during this period.

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