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The Tây Sơn Uprising

Society and Rebellion in Eighteenth-Century Vietnam

George Dutton

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Introduction

In the spring of 1773, a small army of upland tribesmen and lowland peasants made its way down from the An Khê highlands of what is today south-central Việt Nam to attack the walled provincial capital of Qui Nhơn. At their head was a part-time betel-nut trader and minor tax collector named Nguyễn Nặc. Lacking the resources for a direct attack on the citadel, the rebel forces employed a ruse. They feigned their leader’s capture and turned him over to the provincial governor, who brought the caged Nặc into the citadel as a prisoner. That night Nặc released himself and opened the fortress gates to his waiting troops. The rebels made short work of the citadel’s defenders, burned down its barracks, and sent its governor into panicked flight.1 Their confidence bolstered by this success, the rebels soon moved on to other targets along the coast. As it moved about the countryside, marching under a massive red banner, its soldiers wearing red kerchiefs and making loud hissing noises to intimidate their opponents, Nặc’s army seized the goods of the uncooperative rich and distributed them among impoverished peasants, who acclaimed these new rebels as “virtuous and charitable thieves.”2

This sequence of events marked the beginning of one of the most significant eras in Vietnamese history, one whose political and social upheaval would last for the better part of three decades and reverberate into the nineteenth century. The conflicts of the late eighteenth century played out in the rice fields and on the coastal waters of the Vietnamese territories, as well as in the centers of political power that already existed or would emerge over the course of the uprising. Before the rebel armies were finally defeated in 1802, they had overthrown two ruling families, briefly unified a territory that had long been governed as two distinct kingdoms, and brought a three-hundred-year-old dynasty to an end. Under the command of Nặc and his younger brothers—Nguyễn Huệ and Nguyễn Lữ—the rebels also provoked and then repulsed large-scale
invasions from Siam and China, even as they themselves engaged in military adventures in the neighboring Khmer and Lao kingdoms. As the uprising and its attendant wars dragged on, French, Portuguese, Chinese, and Southeast Asian mercenaries entered the fray, and hundreds of thousands of people were killed by warfare and famine. Many more were displaced from their homes and farms as Vietnamese society—from the peasantry to intellectual and political elites to religious and ethnic minorities—was confronted with a kingdom in turmoil.

The uprising came to bear the name of the hamlet from which its leaders had emerged—Tây Sơn. Meaning “western mountains,” the name referred to the village’s location near where the uplands rise from the coastal littoral near Qui Nhơn in a kingdom then known to the Vietnamese as Đặng Trống (the Inner Region), to the Europeans as Cochin-china. The Qui Nhơn area’s population was one of transplanted Vietnamese settlers and former prisoners captured during the seventeenth-century wars between the southern Nguyễn and northern Trịnh governments, which had been contesting for political authority over the entire length of the Vietnamese territories. The Vietnamese in Qui Nhơn and its hinterlands were living in close proximity to an array of upland groups whose allegiance to the Nguyễn rulers was nominal at best. The Qui Nhơn region was also home to remnants of the mighty Cham empire that had once dominated the coastal regions of what is today south-central Việt Nam. The area became a flashpoint for hostilities that were to engulf the Vietnamese territories for more than thirty years.

The brothers who led the rebellion became known to their contemporaries by many names. The rebel chief was called “crazy biến Nhạc” by the Trịnh army commander who invaded the south in 1774, “bưng” being a reference to Nhạc’s position as a Nguyễn tax collector. To others he was known as the “chief of brigands,” describing his military coalition with its many bandit allies. Some European missionary witnesses called him “that apostate Nhạc,” convinced he had been born into a Christian family. His brother Nguyễn Huệ similarly came to bear a wide range of sobriquets. To the Chinese pirates whom he recruited for his navy, Huệ was the “big boss of Yueh-nan” and “the rebel protector of pirates.” To northern Vietnamese literati confronted by this larger-than-life figure who invaded their realm in 1786, he was “Chế Bồng Nga”—a reference to the fourteenth-century Cham ruler who had similarly seized Thăng Long (modern Hà Nội). For European missionaries he similarly conjured up images of ancient military adventurers, and they called him either “another Attila” or “Alexander the Great.” And, as we have seen already, to some Vietnamese peasants the brothers collectively were “virtuous and charitable thieves.” It was these chameleon-like figures, representing many things to many people, who led this remarkable uprising. The numerous labels applied to the rebel leaders highlight the complex and overlapping social groups involved in the events of this era. Brigands, pirates, thieves, Chams, Christians, military adventurers, and local officials were all part of the social fabric that would be severely tested by the thirty years of Tây Sơn warfare.

The Tây Sơn period is significant not merely because of the complex social dynamics that so profoundly shaped it, or its duration and enormous impact on the Vietnamese peoples. It is important for marking a point of historical rupture, even as its internal dynamics recapitulated fundamental themes that had long served to shape the trajectory of Vietnamese history. As a point of disjuncture, the Tây Sơn period is notable for representing the final drama in the gradual shift of political and economic power away from the northern Red River Delta region, southward across the Hải Vân pass and toward the Mekong Delta. This was a shift that had been under way for more than two centuries, represented by the growing strength and influence of the Nguyễn lords and the expansion of their influence over territory south of their capital at Phú Xuân (near modern Huế). It was a shift that effectively created politically autonomous states—what Li Tana has referred to as the “two Đại Việts”—with the Nguyễn controlling the southern territories and the Trịnh family the northern region, known as Đặng Ngọai to the Vietnamese and Tonkin to the Europeans. The eventual Tây Sơn conquest of Đặng Ngọai, which began in 1786, brought an end to that region’s political autonomy and commenced the process whereby southern power would come to ascendance, represented first by the new rebel-created regime and then by the Nguyễn who eventually defeated them.

This period also accelerated the involvement of Europeans (most particularly the French) in Vietnamese internal politics and of the Vietnamese in mainland Southeast Asian affairs. Although European contacts with the Vietnamese had begun in the sixteenth century and were well established by the late eighteenth, the involvement of French missionaries and mercenaries in Vietnamese politics was greatly heightened during the Tây Sơn conflicts. This paved the way for future French political and military involvement throughout the Indochinese Peninsula, which would of course have enormous consequences in the mid-nineteenth century. At the same time, the Tây Sơn years also saw increased Vietnamese engagement in the
political affairs of its neighbors, including the Khmers, the Siamese, and the Lao principalities. The Siamese became sometime allies of the Nguyễn during the struggle against the Tây Sơn, while Tây Sơn envoys sought to gain Siamese support for their own cause. Tây Sơn armies also invaded both Cambodian and Lao territories, drawing them into the Vietnamese conflicts. Consequently, the events of this era precipitated a greater Vietnamese involvement in mainland Southeast Asian politics that was to stretch well into the nineteenth century.

While one can read the Tây Sơn era as one of rupture, it nonetheless evinced numerous elements of continuity with the longer trajectory of Vietnamese history. These are to be found in the ways in which Vietnamese political leaders established their legitimacy through supernatural and institutional claims, the nature of the contentious relationship between the state and its people, lowland Vietnamese interactions with various ethnic groups, including uplanders, Chinese, and Chams, the role of Confucian precepts and rhetoric in governing the state and controlling society, and the real limitations thereof. The Tây Sơn leaders created alliances with numerous ethnic groups, and carefully appropriated elements of the historical Cham legacy, even as they made reference to Confucian principles to legitimate their rule. In these ways the Tây Sơn period can be viewed simultaneously as a transformative epoch culminating in the emergence of prominent new forces that would come to shape the Vietnamese experiences of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and as a microcosm of fundamental aspects of long-standing Vietnamese historical experience.

This study explores the dynamics of the Tây Sơn era by analyzing the relationship between the Tây Sơn leaders and the multiple social, ethnic, and economic groups that constituted eighteenth-century Vietnamese society. The emphasis is in some ways more on continuity than on rupture as I examine the long-standing patterns that shaped interactions between political leaders and various groups nominally under their authority. And yet, some of these groups, Christians and ethnic Chinese for instance, constituted newer social categories within the greater Vietnamese territories, ones that confronted the Tây Sơn authorities with largely unprecedented challenges. Moreover, I suggest that the Tây Sơn leaders and their uprising (and later regimes) straddled the new realities of the southern realm and the long-established patterns set down when Đại Việt was still a more circumscribed place, geographically and demographically. It is clear that the Tây Sơn uprising was the product of a specific place and time in a
dynamic Nguyễn realm. However, its broader impact and encounters with various groups in the realms of Đàng Trong and Đàng Ngoài revealed many elements that transcended the place and time of its origins.

The events of the Tây Sơn period were politically complex because of the wide array of political and military actors involved and because of the terrain in which they took place. What had been territories separated for more than a century were brought back into contact in the mid-1770s when a northern Trịnh army invaded the southern regions of Đại Việt. The subsequent Tây Sơn counterattack in 1786 then brought the larger Đàng Trong and Đàng Ngoài areas into still closer political contact. And yet, for political and geographical reasons, the two regions remained largely separated throughout the period. Their experiences of the Tây Sơn turmoil were frequently very different from one another, a function of different social structures and historical experiences, and of political divisions that existed both before and during the Tây Sơn era. There were, however, numerous shared experiences, ones imposed by the Tây Sơn leaders and their armies, whose demands on populations rarely respected geographical divisions. In this study I will generally treat these regions as discrete entities, highlighting aspects of their unique circumstances and experiences, though there are times when commonalities will be emphasized. The Tây Sơn era could profitably be studied from either geographical vantage point even as I have chosen, foolhardily perhaps, to examine both.

THE TÀY S ÔN IN WESTERN-LANGUAGE HISTORIOGRAPHY

In 1971 Alexander Woodside argued, in his pathbreaking study of early-nineteenth-century Việt Nam, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model*, that “modern Vietnamese history opens with the Tây Sơn Rebellion.” Despite the truth contained in this observation, the Tây Sơn uprising has remained a blank spot in Western scholarship, which has failed to address the complexities of this period. Woodside’s own work, for instance, although it acknowledges the importance of the Tây Sơn in its preface, begins its account just after the Tây Sơn defeat, describing the manner in which the Nguyễn dynasty developed its political and administrative institutions during the first half of the nineteenth century. The year 1971 also saw the publication of another pioneering work on pre-twentieth-century Vietnamese history, David Marr’s *Vietnamese Anticolonialism*, which took up the historical thread in the late nineteenth century, as Việt Nam came to terms with its status as a French colony/protectorate. A decade later with *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial* (1981), Marr brought the story up to the middle of the twentieth century, describing the height of the French colonial period from 1920 to 1945. In each of these seminal works of English-language scholarship the Tây Sơn period lurks in the background, acknowledged for its historical and historiographical significance, but essentially unaddressed.

Recent English-language scholarship has continued the trend of studying pre- and post-Tây Sơn era events, although several works have finally started to address at least some elements of the period directly. Most notably, Li Tana’s *Cochinchina: Southern Vietnam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (1998) approaches the Tây Sơn period from the seventeenth century by examining the emergence of a Nguyễn polity in southern Việt Nam (Đàng Trong). She devotes an entire chapter to the early years of the uprising, marking the first detailed consideration of the Tây Sơn in English and very importantly placing the uprising within the context of its geographical and sociopolitical origins in Đàng Trong. Li argues that this was not a “peasant movement,” launched by lowland Vietnamese peasants, but rather a “provincial revolt,” characterized by the substantial involvement of disaffected upland groups. Her account looks only at the early years of the uprising, and thus highlights the Tây Sơn as a local phenomenon, but does not address the nature of the movement as it expanded beyond its point of origin. As I will suggest, once the uprising moved beyond its Qui Nhơn roots, its course was substantially transformed through engagement with the wider world of Vietnamese society and politics, and it became much more than a provincial revolt, both in scope and impact.

Other recent scholarship has also dealt with the Tây Sơn, though still in limited fashion. Choi Byung Wook’s *Southern Vietnam under the Reign of Minh Mạng (1820–1841): Central Policies and Local Response* (2004), like Woodside’s earlier account, focuses on the early Nguyễn period. Choi does open his study by looking at the late eighteenth century and exploring the emergence of a Gia Định–based policy during the course of the Nguyễn wars against the Tây Sơn. His emphasis, however, is not on the Tây Sơn, but on their Nguyễn rivals and ultimate successors, and their creation of an anti–Tây Sơn alliance within the heterogeneous realm of southern Đàng Trong. Two other recent English-language studies have also touched on the Tây Sơn. Liam Kelley’s *Beyond the Bronze Pillars: Envoy Poetry and the Sino-Vietnamese Relationship* (Hawai’i, 2005) includes
the Tây Sơn era and some of its prominent literati as part of a larger study that examines the representations of the greater East Asian thought-world found in Vietnamese poetry. Wynn Wilcox’s recent dissertation “Allegories of Vietnam: Transculturization and the Origin Myths of Franco-Vietnamese Relations” (Cornell, 2002) is a historiographical study that looks more directly at the Tây Sơn period, using it as a lens through which to examine depictions of the relationship between Nguyễn Ánh and his European missionary supporters. Wilcox’s focus, however, is less on the events of the Tây Sơn era and more on the later representations of its major historical figures. While both of these works are significant for bringing greater attention to the issues of the late eighteenth century, neither engages specifically with the Tây Sơn uprising and its larger implications for Vietnamese society.

Surprisingly, and with a few exceptions, French-language academic work on precolonial Việt Nam has similarly tended to overlook the Tây Sơn. Charles Maybon’s 1919 study, _Histoire moderne du pays d’Annam_ (1592–1820) devotes several chapters to the Tây Sơn period, though from a distinctly Nguyễn perspective and, unsurprisingly, with a heavy emphasis on the role played by the French. In 1955, Lê Thành Khôi published _Le Vietnam: Histoire et civilisation_, which offers a sustained analysis of the Tây Sơn era within the context of a textbook history of Việt Nam. Khôi describes the economic and social dislocations that provoked popular unrest in both regions of the country and then provides a balanced description of the rise and ultimate fall of the Tây Sơn regimes. Revised as _Histoire du Vietnam_ (1983, 1992), Khôi’s remains among the best summaries of the uprising, its course, and the dynamics that shaped it. Much more recent French-language scholarship includes Philippe Langlet’s _L’ancienne Historiographie d’état au Vietnam_ (1990), which although chiefly a meticulous study of the nineteenth-century Nguyễn historiographical project, also considers the Nguyễn understanding of their own historical antecedents including the Tây Sơn and the Lê. Langlet demonstrates that the Nguyễn historians had to wrestle with the question of how to portray the Tây Sơn while at the same time seeking to reinforce their own legitimacy, which was clouded by their irregular path to power. Finally, Yang Baoyun’s 1992 monograph _Contribution à l’histoire de la principauté des Nguyễn au Vietnam méridional_ (1600–1775) is another example of recent scholarship that approaches but does not directly address the Tây Sơn. As the title suggests, Yang’s account stops just as the Tây Sơn began their uprising, and only briefly foreshadows what was to follow.

In this manner, the Tây Sơn movement has been neatly bracketed chronologically by important scholarly work in English and examined in slightly greater detail in French, even as it has escaped detailed study by most scholars working in European languages. In some regards, the movement may have fallen victim to the systematic efforts by the Nguyễn dynasty to obliterate (to the extent that it was possible) traces of the Tây Sơn regime. As David Marr has pointed out, “the Nguyễn court forbade its historians from compiling an account of the short-lived Tây Sơn dynasty (1788–1802), normally a routine function associated with maintaining for posterity chronological continuity from the distant past.” This prohibition inevitably rendered study of this period more difficult than of those that preceded and followed it, for which substantially more conventional historical documentation was produced and survived. Blame may also be laid at the doorstep of the colonial era itself, which has drawn much more scholarly attention, in part because it served to tie Việt Nam directly to the European world, and, of course, because it was seen as immediate prelude to the dramatic revolution and wars of the twentieth century. Whatever the reasons, Việt Nam in the late eighteenth century remains virtual terra incognita among Western scholars.

VIETNAMESE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE TÀY SƠN ERA

In contradistinction to their Western counterparts, Vietnamese historians have subjected the Tây Sơn period to extensive historiographical scrutiny, even as interpretations of the uprising have generated considerable and often contentious debate. Indeed, this period and the events that defined it have been crucial to the historical narratives that were to emerge in all subsequent historiography. At issue have been questions of political legitimacy, of national division and unification, of social conflicts and confrontations. The involvement of “outsiders” in Vietnamese political struggles, from Nguyễn Ánh’s alliance with the Siamese in the early 1780s to his later reliance on French mercenaries to the massive Chinese invasion on behalf of the Lé dynasty in the last years of that decade, has also sparked clashes centered on questions of nationalism. These historiographical struggles began even before the dust from the conflicts had settled and have continued to the present, and it is this contentious historiographical tradition with which my study engages. In this study, I seek to strike a balance between the two interpretive extremes that constitute
existing analysis of the Tây Sơn: demonization and vilification at the hands of the Nguyễn regime that was their political successor and glorification and veneration by twentieth-century Communist historians who viewed their revolution as spiritual successor to the Tây Sơn uprising.

During the nineteenth century, the Nguyễn dynasty, whose founder fought against and eventually toppled the Tây Sơn regimes, depicted the Tây Sơn as "bandits" (độc) or "rebels" (giặc), rejecting any notions of the Tây Sơn as having constituted a legitimate dynasty. The dynasty's court historians argued, moreover, that popular participation in the movement had been a product initially of Tây Sơn deception and later of coercion. This historiographical project was explicitly designed to legitimate Nguyễn rule, which itself had emerged largely as a product of military success. The Nguyễn legitimacy that emerged in their historiography combined the defeat of the Tây Sơn with what Nola Cooke has called the "myth of restoration," the idea that the new Nguyễn rulers had restored a polity established by their ancestors, rather than having continued the imperial tradition laid down by the Lê.

At the official level the new dynasty was able to ensure the dominance of this interpretation, even as popular lore surrounding the Tây Sơn began to shape an idealized account of the rebel movement and as denizens of the Bình Định region sought to recuperate what were seen as local heroes. Furthermore, the Nguyễn marginalization of the former Lê realms provoked some northern literati who wrote private accounts of the Tây Sơn regime that were far less critical of a short-lived dynasty officially characterized as illegitimate. Consequently, the nineteenth-century historiography of the movement was already complex and conflicting, the result of differing perspectives and political purposes.

These two unofficial interpretive threads began to emerge more directly in the early twentieth century as Nguyễn political decline under French colonial domination opened a space for further reinterpretations, both those of early nationalist historians and those of later Marxist historians seeking to examine the Tây Sơn in light of the Vietnamese revolution. The early twentieth-century scholarship began to elide references to the Tây Sơn as "bandits" or "rebels." Instead, these historians, less constrained by the ideological concerns of the enfeebled Nguyễn court, suggested that the Tây Sơn brothers had made legitimate claims to political authority. Even as this shift occurred, these early-twentieth-century accounts did not address the question of popular support for the movement. Indeed, references to peasants were almost completely absent in the writ-ings of two prominent early-twentieth-century historians, Phan Bội Châu and Trần Trọng Kim, who were more comfortable in discussing the political and military leaders of the Tây Sơn period. It was not until 1938 that Đào Duy Anh, in his Việt Nam Văn Hiến Sử C zgét (An Outline History of Vietnamese Culture), ascribed the strength and successes of the Tây Sơn to peasant participation. Even so, it was not until after World War II, in the wake of the Communist revolution and its strong connections to rural Việt Nam, that characterizations of the Tây Sơn as a "peasant uprising" or "peasant movement" began to emerge in Vietnamese scholarship. It is these representations, most often promulgated by Communist historians of the second half of the twentieth century, that now dominate discourse pertaining to the Tây Sơn period.

These scholars enthusiastically portrayed the Tây Sơn uprising either as a "revolution"—a cách mạng—or more neutrally as a "peasant movement"—a phong trào nông dân. Both interpretations suggested that the Vietnamese peasantry supported the Tây Sơn movement's leaders and their subsequent regime. Historians working and writing under the Communist regime argued that there was eager peasant support for the Tây Sơn leaders in the uprising's early stages, followed by unified peasant cooperation in heroic efforts to unite the nation and drive out foreign invaders—the Siamese in 1785 and the Chinese in 1789. This analysis succumbed to the flawed logic of post hoc ergo propter hoc, as peasant motives were imputed from the results of their actions. Thus, the fact that peasant armies fought off Siamese (or Chinese) invasions was interpreted as representing a struggle to defend national independence. Similarly, the Tây Sơn army's crossing of the former Nguyễn-Trịnh dividing line in 1786 was characterized as having been guided by a passionate desire to see national reunification, rather than the prosaic pursuit of wealth, power, and even revenge.

In this overdetermined Communist historiography on the Tây Sơn, peasants emerged as heroic figures, marked as noble and unafraid, committed to economic and social justice and to a unified nation free from foreign interference. If this sounds suspiciously like the agenda of the Vietnamese Communist Party in the second half of the twentieth century, it is of course precisely because that is what it was. The Tây Sơn-era peasants were portrayed as forerunners of the twentieth-century peasant-supported revolution, even as their ultimate failure to transform the political and economic structures was seen as an indication of the severe restrictions placed on them by their historical moment. Only the Party, it was
argued, could ultimately overcome the conceptual limitations that had so long constrained the peasant imagination. Such characterizations of the eighteenth-century peasantry as noble and determined subalterns and loyal supporters of the Tây Sơn appear to have made them complicit in their own oppression, for the Tây Sơn era was unquestionably a time of immense hardship and difficulty for the peasantry. It was also a period in which the benefits of rising up, if they were at all discernible, rarely outweighed the staggering costs borne chiefly by this same group.

Peasants in many of these accounts were conflated with their leaders, suggesting that the motivations of the leaders (not themselves peasants) somehow represented or coincided with those of their (often reluctant) followers. Consequently, the term “the Tây Sơn” came to be used as a referent for the movement as a whole, leaders and followers alike, whose interests were assumed to have coincided, or at least largely to have overlapped, when in reality the leaders often did not address the concerns of their followers, and the supposed followers frequently came along grudgingly or under great duress, if at all. Although a few recent Vietnamese historians have begun to look somewhat more critically at the Tây Sơn period, no systematic reexamination of the period or the uprising has yet been published. Writings of the late 1980s, which represented the last wave of major narrative histories of the movement, continued to characterize it as a heroic effort, strongly guided by nationalism, to defend the nation and to defend the interests of an oppressed peasantry.

**SOURCES AND OBJECTIVES**

This study is based on a wide range of materials, including archival and print material in Việt Nam and Europe. I have relied extensively on Vietnamese materials contemporary to the Tây Sơn and on latenineteenth-century court chronicles for the broad outlines of the uprising and its main events. I have complemented these materials with an extensive reading of eyewitness accounts by European (primarily French) missionaries, who lived through the events of this era. Many of these accounts are preserved in the Archives des Missions Étrangères de Paris (MEP), where I spent several months reading through thousands of pages of letters from this period. The reports written by these missionaries are particularly valuable for providing a village-level perspective on events often described only in outline fashion in Vietnamese chronicles. Although
European sources have distinct biases and reflect the vantage point of an outsider, many missionaries were long-term residents who spoke Vietnamese and who had a remarkably clear sense of both village-level and national political developments. These missionary materials in particular enable me to provide a relatively detailed account of the impact of the Tây Sơn uprising on ordinary Vietnamese, and their responses to it.

Drawing on such sources, this study challenges existing characterizations of the Tây Sơn by suggesting that the uprising and the regimes it produced were extremely complex in their composition and that participants’ multiple, often conflicting objectives do not allow for the oversimplified renderings that historians have heretofore presented. The uprising, which later transformed itself into a series of political regimes, involved not only peasants, but a wide range of social and political groups, each of which was in some way profoundly affected by the events set in motion in the spring of 1773. What I suggest then, is that the Tây Sơn uprising was not only about peasants, however central their participation in its long course. Indeed, the movement’s leadership itself—the three brothers from Tây Sơn—were not simple farmers or rural laborers, despite their repeated claims to peasant roots. They might better be characterized as belonging to a rural lower-gentry class, with the eldest, Nguyễn Nhạc, a betel-nut trader and part-time tax collector for the Nguyễn court. Furthermore, all three brothers had received a considerable amount of education from a respected scholar who had fled the political infighting of the Nguyễn court and who later encouraged the brothers in their rebellion. Their background makes it clear that the Tây Sơn brothers, while relying on peasants to fill their armies, and addressing some peasant concerns, were not peasants themselves.

Once the uprising began, the Tây Sơn leaders quickly found themselves engaging with the broad spectrum of Dàng Trọng society, and later, as the movement spread into Dàng Ngoại, its leaders were forced to deal with social complexities there as well. The Tây Sơn leaders successfully recruited supporters that ranged from lowland Vietnamese peasants and ethnic Chinese coastal merchants to members of the Cham royal family and highland tribal groups. Each of these groups had different objectives, being united primarily in their dislike for the manner in which the Nguyễn lords were mishandling the southern economy in matters of trade, taxation, and coinage. The Tây Sơn brothers were able to attract such an eclectic group of followers precisely because they appealed to the specific interests of each group and made each group’s particular grievance part of their own agenda. These multiple constituencies forced the Tây Sơn leadership to articulate an ambitious and frequently contradictory agenda. Consequently, it is not surprising that the Tây Sơn leadership was unable to meet the expectations of many who had initially joined their uprising.

Ultimately, the chief beneficiaries of the Tây Sơn uprising appear to have been its leaders and their elite supporters. Although some of the subaltern groups benefited at times and in certain places from the Tây Sơn actions—for example, brief periods of restored order or the possibilities of plunder offered by numerous military campaigns—these benefits were rarely systematic or enduring. The early property redistributions and ritual abolition of tax burdens that had led to the sobriquet “charitable thieves” soon gave way to demands from the rebel administration that were at least as onerous as those made by the regime it had replaced, and perhaps more so, for these demands were frequently made in the context of protracted military campaigns that rendered taxes and labor service particularly vexing.

The Tây Sơn leaders never carried out any sweeping changes that might have improved the lot of the peasantry, such as major land reforms or redistributions. Even in the movement’s early days, the rebel leaders were far more likely to redistribute smaller items of value, or perhaps rice, than actually transferring titles to land. There were brief adjustments to tax rates in Dàng Ngoại and efforts to stimulate trade, but these were expediency deals with existing crises rather than systematic reforms. Whatever convergence of interests may have existed between the movement’s leaders and their followers in the very early years of the movement quickly disappeared, and what was only partly a “peasant movement” in its early days soon transformed into a more complex and diffuse political entity that increasingly represented the interests of particular political elites, seeking to gain power for its own sake. It should then be clear that the Tây Sơn uprising, like many other putative “peasant movements,” cannot be read as the expression of a collective peasant will. In its very early stages the movement may have had some egalitarian strains at a time when its followers were few and its leaders still striving to establish themselves, but this egalitarianism soon gave way to conflicts between the aspirations of the leaders and the expectations of the peasants serving in their armies.
Put another way, just because an uprising is begun by (and even for) peasants, does not mean that it will remain a “peasant movement.” As Michael Adas has rightly pointed out,

A careful scrutiny of many of the rebellions that have been attributed to peasant unrest or labeled as agrarian risings often leads to the conclusion that these conflicts were, in fact, inter elite feuds or dynastic struggles in which peasant conscripts and peasant communities became unwillingly involved. . . . With important exceptions of risings in which the peasantry rallied to messianic figures or charismatic leaders struggling to overthrow inept or tyrannical rulers, the origins and outcomes of the struggles had little or nothing to do with the peasant concerns or conditions of the cultivating classes.  

While in some respects the Tây Sơn movement belonged to Adas’ exceptional category—movements led by “charismatic leaders struggling to overthrow inept or tyrannical rulers”—it also manifested elements of what Adas termed “inter elite feuds or dynastic struggles.” As will become clear in this study, the Tây Sơn became very much involved in disputed successions that took place in both Nguyễn and Trịnh territories. And although it could be said that the Tây Sơn leaders used these opportunities to their own ends, it might equally be said that they were manipulated by contestants in these power struggles and in turn manipulated the peasants to assist in their own involvement in those contests.  

The emphasis of this work is on the underlying social dynamics of the Tây Sơn uprising and so is largely organized around chapters that examine different social groups in turn. To establish a context for this analytical approach, the first chapter provides a broad historical background to the Tây Sơn period, examines the major causes of the uprising, and then sketches an outline of the course of the uprising itself. Chapter 2 begins a close examination of the multiple facets of the uprising, starting with its leadership—the three brothers from the hamlet of Tây Sơn—and the ways in which this leadership defined what coherence the movement was to have. In chapter 3 I argue that the promise with which the movement began—an end to official corruption, the abolition of unjust taxation, and the redistribution of wealth—soon gave way to the gloomy realities of life under a regime almost constantly at war. I explore the question of how the peasantry, broadly speaking, were affected by and responded to this “peasant movement.” Finally, chapter 4 turns to a consideration of the various peoples living at what I term the margins of Vietnamese society during this era—Vietnamese Christians, ethnic minority groups, outlaws, and pirates—and their complex relationship with the Tây Sơn leadership.  

What this analysis suggests is that central to the Tây Sơn uprising was a series of interactions between the rebel leaders and various groups in Vietnamese society. Sometimes these interactions took the form of accommodations between the two sides; at others they were negotiated relationships. In yet other instances the Tây Sơn leadership co-opted certain groups or their leaders, and in many instances, depending on circumstances, the Tây Sơn relied on coercion to achieve their objectives. Thus, through accommodation, negotiation, co-optation, and coercion, the leaders of this rebel movement were able to transform themselves—to a certain degree—into rulers of “Việt Nam,” even as the country remained divided and at war.  

My study also challenges the notion of Tây Sơn exceptionalism which is often found in Vietnamese communist historiography, and suggests that the Tây Sơn regimes and their policies toward or treatment of the peasantry were better than those of the regimes they displaced or those that followed. There were a very few instances in which the Tây Sơn regime deviated from the actions of its predecessors—most notably in its selection of titles for various government positions, and to a lesser extent its use of the vernacular script nôm in some (though hardly all) government documents. But the Tây Sơn were generally not innovators, and their new regime unsurprisingly adopted the modes and forms of its predecessors, including both their administrative structures and many of their ritual trappings. The hardships that the peasants faced—corvée labor demands, increased and unpredictable tax demands, incessant military obligations—were magnified under the Tây Sơn government, but they were similar to those faced under the Trịnh and then later under the Nguyễn in the nineteenth century.  

Ultimately, I argue that rather than seeing the Tây Sơn uprising as representing the triumph of a long-suffering peasantry, one should understand it as a challenge for power in the face of a vulnerable political regime, launched by men who were encouraged by indications that such a challenge might meet with success. The uprising was not an ideologically coherent movement seeking to articulate a uniform political agenda. Rather, it was an event whose course was guided by constantly changing circumstances, the whims of its leaders, and the reactions of a wide range of challengers. This study will suggest some of these complexities, though it cannot document them all.