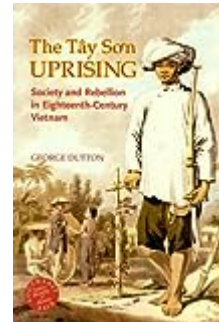


George Edson Dutton. *The Tay Son Uprising: Society and Rebellion in Eighteenth-Century Vietnam.* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006. ix + 293 pp. \$52.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8248-2984-1.



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Overrated Rebels

The present study explores the dynamics of the Tay Son era, 1773 to 1802, by analyzing and focusing on the relationship between the Tay Son leaders and the multiple social, ethnic, and economic groups that constituted eighteenth-century Vietnamese society. George Edson Dutton challenges the popular interpretations by Vietnamese Communist historians that the Tay Son uprising was an expression of collective peasant will and that it was a prelude to the establishment of modern Vietnamese society. By employing a great variety of Vietnamese and European primary and secondary sources, he develops a new picture of the Tay Son uprising: the cause of the uprising was economic hardship, not political discontent. The Tay Son brothers' rule did not improve the lot of the Vietnamese peasants, and while they did help to shape the borders of modern Vietnam, they never reunified the country under their rule. The four chapters of the book are organized around the three Tay Son brothers, the protagonists of this era, and the different social groups that supported them and shaped the Tay Son period.

In his first chapter, Dutton outlines the geographical, economic, and political landscape of Dai Viet prior to the

Tay Son uprising, underscoring the factors that led to the uprising and giving a brief summary of the Tay Son era. Dai Viet, under the nominal rule of the Le dynasty, was actually ruled by two powerful clans, the Trinh clan in the north and the Nguyen nobility in modern central-southern Vietnam. The sharp decline in overseas trade and exorbitant tax burdens under Nguyen rule prepared the setting for the uprising. This originated in the Western Mountains or Tay Son in central Vietnam and was led by a discontented betel nut trader and tax collector named Nguyen Nhac. Nguyen Nhac, his younger brother Nguyen Hue, and to a far lesser degree Nguyen Lu became actors on a crowded political and military scene and were more driven by the events than in control of them.

The second chapter focuses on the leaders of the movement and the way they conceptualized their actions and legitimized their claims to power. It provides thorough insight into the movement and its rather traditional ways of legitimizing itself by reading omens, by discovering mighty portents like magical swords, and by applying Confucian rhetoric. To overcome their *parvenu* status they allied themselves with the house of Trinh, who

rewarded them with high-ranking military and civilian titles. Still dissatisfied, Nguyen Nhac established himself as Emperor Thai Duc and ruled over modern central Vietnam. His younger brother proclaimed himself Emperor Quang Trung after a decisive victory over the Chinese army and ruled over modern northern Vietnam. The surprising aspect is that the brothers fought successful military campaigns beyond the borders of Dai Viet, but returned to their home provinces as soon as the skirmishes were over. The means they employed to attract followers from all strata of Vietnamese society, e.g., prophecies and Confucian rhetoric, were hardly distinguishable from those used in any prior peasant uprising. The course of the uprising shows that brothers largely reacted to events rather than shaping them.

The third chapter examines the lives and welfare of the Vietnamese peasants under Tay Son rule. The author argues that peasant lives under Tay Son leadership did not improve and that both Tay Son governments were plagued by the same problems as their predecessors. Emperor Quang Trung introduced an identity card system which the population deeply resented. To keep track of all citizens in their realms, the Tay Son expanded the village hierarchy by two levels: the old and the infirm. Several large-scale military campaigns required a higher conscription quota. Excessive forced corvee labor, and tax burdens which coerced women and children to toil for the regime, tainted the popular image of honorable and righteous rebels. Once again, Tay Son leaders followed traditional patterns, trying to establish a Six Board administration. Uneducated, cruel, and avaricious officials, who cared little about orders from political centers, foiled any attempts to establish a grassroots judicial and administrative system.

The fourth chapter is especially noteworthy because it analyzes the fate of peoples at the margins of Dai Viet society, namely the Chams, ethnic Chinese, Vietnamese Christians, pirates, and vagabonds. The support and cooperation of the Tay Son regimes with the Chams was also characterized by mutually selfish goals of each party.

Bandits and vagabonds filled the rank and file of the Tay Son troops. The fates of Vietnamese Christians and ethnic Chinese became more difficult under Tay Son rule. Their welfare and survival depended largely on which brother's rule they found themselves subject to. Chinese pirates constituted the Tay Son navy and remained faithful to the movement until its end.

George Dutton's book is the first English-language analysis of the Tay Son uprising and the ensuing course of events. He mercifully refrains from forcing the rebellion into just another ideological framework, but returns to the roots of the uprising, employing a great variety of sources. These include classical Vietnamese as well as French missionary accounts of the events, modern Vietnamese Communist interpretations, and recent scholarship on eighteenth-century Vietnam.

The chapters are arranged around the main protagonists and antagonists of eighteenth-century Vietnam, as mentioned above. The contents of the chapters are closely arranged around the thesis introducing each chapter. Dutton eloquently and elaborately works with the sophisticated Confucian concepts of Heaven, Virtue, and Righteousness to provide the necessary background information. Those who would like to know more about the political and social background presented in his book can turn to Dutton's website, "The Tay Son Rebellion," where they will find links to "Tay Son poetry," "Tay Son edicts," and additional maps to complete the picture. Special attention should be paid to the last chapter, which analyzes Tay Son supporters who came from the margins of Dai Viet society—a common feature of peasant rebellions often neglected by scholars.

The book's only weakness is the long introductory chapter and recap of Vietnamese history, which make for a very long and tedious eighteenth century for those readers who already possess background knowledge. But overall, this book will be useful for undergraduate and graduate students, as well as for scholars who focus on peasant life in East and Southeast Asia and the long history of uprisings in the area.

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