

# MONOLOGUE, DIALOGUE, AND TRAN VIETNAM

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## Chapter One

### Introduction - By Way of Studying Tran History (1226-1400)

A number of years ago and after I became interested in Vietnamese history, I began to suppose that surviving Vietnamese poetry of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries might furnish historians with valuable information and should not be neglected.<sup>1</sup> As a neophyte, I asked myself what kind of information would become available. I had never been trained to read poetry in any language, let alone in the Chinese literary language which Vietnamese poets had appropriated for their own purposes many centuries earlier.

I soon had to disabuse myself of the fallacy that these poems would be packed with the factual information that always delights historians. And so I went back to school, as it were, and studied Sino-Vietnamese literature under the patient guidance of my late friend Harold Shadick, and, at the same time, I began to consider what was being written in the field of literary criticism. Predictably, I was introduced to the notion of a "text" and its meaning. My understanding of a "text" is simply that it can be expected, though not invariably, to embody, among other features, sets of recognizable literary conventions, to exhibit systematic linguistic usage, and to present itself in a coherently structured manner. These attributes could then endow it with readability and meaning. When I read a text, my first obligation would be to discover what it had to say about itself in the sense of how it "worked." This would involve studying its literary devices and the themes it voiced. And so I tried to train myself to develop an approach to texts which paid attention to such formal devices as signifying systems, structures, and figures of speech; these would be parts of a text by which its whole could be better understood.

Patterned literary features belong to a text's "textual" properties and invite recognition to enable it to be attributed with meaning over and above its apparent items of information.<sup>2</sup>

Vietnamese poetry, endlessly read and reread, now interested me and sometimes, I believed, told me things I would otherwise never have known. No instance of what could happen gave me more satisfaction than when Nguyen Trai's poems, written during the Ming occupation of Vietnam (1407-1427), disclosed that he associated those dismal years less with grief than with silence and the sensation of being nowhere. He was an unusually eloquent exile in his own country before he became a hero of the anti-Ming resistance and an honored figure in Vietnamese memory until today.<sup>3</sup>

This kind of enquiry excited me and promised a congenial mode of historical study. One had to bite the bullet and read and reread a poem until something unexpected might disclose itself. But I then went on to wonder about the possibility of bringing a textual approach to bear on other genres. I turned my attention to about sixty years (1293-1357) as they are recorded in the annals of the Tran dynasty (1226-1400), the name of the ruling family in Vietnam during most of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Here I seemed to stumble on an important development acknowledged by Phan Phu Tien, the dynasty's official annalist in the middle of the fifteenth century.<sup>4</sup> I read Tien's text as having been written to present the period as a time when good government was practiced, though he never says so explicitly. His judgment was recoverable after a systematic analysis of the structure of a number of passages that he contrived to insert in his text between bare entries of events derived from available records. By means of this narrational device, which I defined as "contrived narrative" in the form of pauses composed by Tien to express his opinions, he could draw his readers'

attention to significant episodes and behavior that illustrated what he considered should be the relationship between perspicacious rulers and talented subordinates.

Yet, attracted as I had become to textual study, I did not abandon a long-standing ambition to attempt a narrative account of the Tran period. A major virtue of narrative history, distinguishing it from topic-oriented history, is that the historian has continually to ask himself questions about how and why things could actually happen in a particular and perhaps changing cultural context. The choice of a specific topic for study may, on the other hand, tend to reflect no more than one historian's sense of what is significant and therefore worthy to be insinuated into the study of the past.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, a narrative historian can enjoy space to linger over problems arising from his study, and he is also challenged to experiment with effective narrational devices to do justice to his subject and, maybe, render it less familiar but more interesting.<sup>6</sup>

Yet I was bound, sooner or later, to wonder what would happen if I tried to combine a narrational approach with the requirements of textual criticism and had continually to slow down my narrational pace in order to put questions to my texts' formal features as well as their content. "The mind is refrigerated by interruption," remarks Dr. Johnson, and so, too, would be my narrative. I stated my problem in an essay I once wrote in honor of Professor John Legge.

Narrational flow could become more difficult to maintain when the historian, whose first obligation was with linguistic usage, was diverted by his obligation to describe and analyse a text's properties and halted to ask himself questions about its form as well as its content before being prepared to use it for the purpose of narrative history. His first and essential question would be 'how' was the text

written, in the sense of using various writing devices. Only then could he consider 'what' was being formulated and 'why'.<sup>7</sup>

And so my goal eventually became the crafting of a narrative history of the 174 years of the Tran dynasty (1226-1400) without neglecting my recently acquired enthusiasm for "texts." This volume reflects how I have attempted to resolve this problem. Two narrational possibilities occurred to me. I could narrate a "story" about Tran times that would be organized by means of a plot that would enable its parts and effects to cohere and that would endow it with meaning. Alternatively, the notion of plot should be abandoned as unrealistic even if much more data were available. Instead, I could choose to organize the narrative as a dialogue among prominent Vietnamese during the Tran period.<sup>8</sup>

I have chosen the second possibility as my narrational mode and believe that I can achieve what narrative historians always want to do, which is to demonstrate how and why things actually happened in the way they did.<sup>9</sup> I can do so because the improvisation of dialogue to provide rejoinders to or comments on what others had said requires me to exercise the imagination in reshuffling materials in the sources and in sensing associations among them and with happenings. The associations become extensions--syntagm-like (i.e. a particular sequence exemplifying a certain remembered meaning or retrospective intention)--of the original happening and throw additional light on how things could have happened, thereby amplifying or even clarifying accounts in the Tran Annals or in the poetry and prose (*phu*) of Tran times. They help to explain something as a "happening." The dialogic mode of narration also helps me to fulfil my intention to endow my narrative with a reasonable amount of textually-construed

materials, and this is accomplished by furnishing the dialogue with passages of textual exegesis.<sup>10</sup> Those who converse are educated Vietnamese and can be expected as a matter of upbringing to look for literary features in their texts that give force to language and facilitate meaning.

The contents of the conversations will draw heavily on the sources, but conversation calls for characters to do the talking. For this purpose I have created several sharply delineated characters. Though themselves inactive, they will from time to time discuss exciting events and will, I hope, move my narrative forward by means of their lively dialogue. Only a few of them will be sufficiently prominent to reflect what literary critics refer to as “limited points of view,” personal perceptions through which the narrative is filtered.<sup>11</sup> The voice of an omniscient author, myself, will be excluded, and what will be paraphrased in the third person will be words taken from the characters' mouths. My own influence cannot, of course, be entirely suppressed, for I shall be responsible for selecting those characters whom I wish to speak most, and I shall use my authorial judgment in apportioning space so that they can “sound”.<sup>12</sup> I shall also manipulate the conversation to ensure that what I believe to have been prevailing themes in Tran discourse are suitably ventilated. To use an expression favored by Bakhtin, I shall “orchestrate” the conversation and, to use David Lodge's expression, I shall “circulate” among the participants in the dialogue.<sup>13</sup> But I shall shrug off the problems that the dialogue is bound to raise. In spite of the title of the final chapter, I am not interested in contributing to “the last word” on any questions that come to the surface.<sup>14</sup> The chapter divisions are artificial, and the conversations could carry on endlessly.

Several narrational devices will be employed. I have mentioned that I shall

attribute to my characters exegetical passages in order to bring the textual aspects of the narrative into play. I shall permit myself generous digressions in the third person in order to flesh out the background. Digressions are where exciting events can happen. Why not mine the Tran Annals to tell an adventure story by recuperating the affect and meaning of the Annals' "stories" with the device of "conversation"? I shall introduce sub-themes in the dialogue to extend the range of experience available to the characters. I shall assign one character with the function of murmuring casual comments on matters likely to be taken for granted at the time but matters which I, a historian, have reasons for wanting to be mentioned. This is the character with whom I identify myself most closely but not to the extent of making him my mouthpiece.

The tone of the conversation will be animated and sometimes aggressive, as it often is in conversations recorded in the Tran Annals. I have been informed that Vietnamese conversation can be cantankerous and often impolite and tends to undermine personal character in order to undermine a point of view. Yet conversation is valued because it permits argument. When a character quotes a significant text or statement by someone else, he would tend to declaim or intone self-importantly and perhaps rather pompously. Educated men would savor "literary" passages employed to adorn their speech.

The conversation will usually focus on what happened within living memory or in records likely to be available to the characters. Dialogue can be expected to stimulate memory. Some conversationalists will have held office for years and can be assumed to be well-informed about what took place in Court circles either because of their duties and access to the ruling family or by hearsay. Peer judgments on official behavior and even

gossip would come to their ears and be included in their remarks, often with relish. What is certain is that those taking part in the conversation would wish to demonstrate that they had been or still were close to the center of affairs or at least close to those who were. What they said would be marked by one-upmanship. And they would often fancy themselves as poets or connoisseurs of poetry. The ability to write poems was regarded as a sign of a promising career in public service.

Allow me to sum up my intentions in experimenting with a dialogic approach to Tran history. I hope that the challenge of improvising a dialogue will require me to bring materials into new relationships with each other and may have the effect of modifying usually-accepted versions of Tran history. My purpose is to write a narrative history that makes allowances for the demands of textual criticism. I want "literature" and annalistic information to sustain a single narrative in which textual meanings help to create narrational effects. And, by examining patterns of linguistic usage in the sources, I hope to recover echoes of prevailing themes in Tran discourse, the kind of things people would often discuss and the idiom that came naturally to them.

Dialogue requires me to invent groups of characters. The first group lived in the early fourteenth century and the second group lived in the second half of that century. I shall introduce some members of the first group at the end of the next chapter, which comprises three monologues.

In the next chapter we shall listen to Chen Fu, a junior envoy sent to Vietnam by Kubilai Khan in 1293,<sup>15</sup> and to an anonymous Chinese encyclopaedist who sought to justify the Ming occupation of Vietnam in the early fifteenth century.<sup>16</sup> We shall also listen to Ly Te Xuyen, the compiler of a corpus of Vietnamese tales who in 1329

celebrated Vietnam's tutelary spirits and their timeless achievements.<sup>17</sup> These are three very different characters and they cannot be expected to speak with one voice. Yet in some respects they sufficiently share a sense of the Vietnamese geopolitical environment and its influence on its inhabitants to provide a setting for my story. I mentioned above that one of the characters in chapter three has the function of making casual comments on matters that would have been obvious to his companions. The reason for this device is to arrange for traces of the geopolitical setting sketched in the three monologues in chapter two to be heard in chapter three's conversation.

The characters appearing in chapter four will be introduced at the end of chapter three. Chapter five will resume a monologic mode of narrative with a study of Nguyen Trai's poems of renewal in the fifteenth century. During the course of the fifteenth century there appeared two voices with the last word on Tran history. The first voice is that of Phan Phu Tien, the mid-fifteenth century compiler of the Tran Annals and the official historian during the early Le dynasty. The scope of his story and his preoccupations, suggested by his many "pauses" that interrupt the sequence of entries, reveal a concern with problems of good government; his narrational "pauses" are intended to encourage his readers to pay attention to what he regarded as significant episodes or behavior in Tran times. By this means he could fulfil his didactic mission. He wants to teach the lessons of Tran history.<sup>18</sup>

Ngo Si Lien, who edited the Tran Annals later in the fifteenth century, was also an official historian, and his perspective is identified in his numerous and usually tendentious comments on Phan Phu Tien's annalistic entries.<sup>19</sup> Tien and Lien speak with voices of authority based on values concerning what constituted good government in the

fifteenth century. They were official historians who believed that Tran experience taught grave lessons and provided warnings to be heeded in their own day and to be borne in mind by future generations of rulers. The question will arise as to the extent to which Tien and Lien, conventionally regarded as responsible for the "master text" for Tran history, should be allowed to influence the story which emerges from the Tran period sources and which inspires the conversations in the earlier chapters. What happens to a rendering of Tran history when Tien's and Lien's alternative narratives, written by those expected to teach lessons of history, are dislodged from the center of the stage? Is Tran history more open-ended when these two giants are no longer permitted to have the last word? The conversations in chapter six respond to these questions.

## Chapter Two

### Prologue: Northern and Southern Accounts of Vietnam (1293-1418)

#### A far-off corner beyond the horizon

Chen Fu arrived at the Vietnamese capital of Thang-long, modern Hanoi, in March 1293. A strange experience at the border had already prejudiced him against what awaited him at his destination, and his discomfort was increased by the humiliation his mission had to endure when it was denied access to the main gate into the capital. He wrote three letters of protest before Nhan-ton, the emperor, relented.<sup>20</sup>

Chen Fu's ill temper is reflected in the aggrieved mood of what he has to say about Vietnam. He tells us that, as soon as he arrived in the Vietnamese capital, he had no time to write poems. Instead, he takes more than thirty headings to describe what he observes.<sup>21</sup> His peevishness is disclosed in how he chooses to introduce some of his topics by using the device of headings in the form of curt jottings of two or more parallel lines of five characters each, though not in verse form. These headings, also found in Chinese novels,<sup>22</sup> have a ditty-like effect and are a catchy way of highlighting curious or distasteful details. For example, he introduces the Tran Court thus: "Inferior customs, very depraved. No Chinese rites and music. The surname [of the former Ly dynasty] tabooed and changed to Nguyen. Pretending that the government is in the hands of an orphan." He then goes on to record the tabooing of the previous dynasty's surname "Ly," the "imitation" of the Chinese script, and Nhan-ton's excuse for not proceeding to China to be invested as a vassal because he was still mourning his father Thanh-ton, who died in 1290. According to Chen Fu, Nhan-ton's impertinence is aggravated when he

communicates with the Chinese Court in a style of address appropriate only when used between equals.

He finds frequent occasions for displeasure. By the absence of "Chinese rites and music," he means that he could see no evidence that Vietnamese social behavior had been regulated by the rules of decorum.<sup>23</sup> The vassal's appropriation of Chinese taboo rules were a further instance of impertinence. He again alludes to the Tran family's improper marriage relations and family behavior. "Ancestral sacrifices are never offered. The families of brides and grooms are impurely related." He goes on to explain that, although ancestral temples have inner chambers, seasonal sacrifices are not performed. Only the Buddha is devoutly worshipped. Men and women of the ruling family intermarry.

Predictably, the envoy writes ungraciously about the behavior of the population in general. Everything is defined in negative terms. "There are no" is a favorite expression for indicating conspicuous differences between Vietnamese and Chinese. "There are no Chinese rites and music." "There are no seasonal sacrifices [to the ancestors]." "There are no city walls." "They do not use bows." "There are no granaries." "There are no walls [in the houses]." Sometimes he emphasizes his unfavorable impressions by comparing Vietnamese habits with those of animals as an extreme device for distinguishing Vietnamese from Chinese. The sounds of the Vietnamese language are "like" those of birds. The earthen windows in the houses are "like" entrances to dog kennels. When the people climb, they move "like" deer, and their rapid swimming reminds him of wild ducks. One heading reads: "They drink through their noses as though through long-necked jars. Their heads fly like pulleys." He goes on to liken their drinking habits with those of oxen; perhaps they seemed to gulp or were

noisy. Those whose heads fly at night are "tribesmen"; "their heads fly into the sea to catch fish." "They crouch before their superiors like foxes." Abusive words such as "vile," "mean," "ugly," or "stupid" describe Vietnamese customs, dancers, and the names of temples. Details are given to show Vietnamese outside Court circles in a silly light. They have thick skin on the soles of their feet to avoid being cut by sharp grass when they are climbing mountains as though they were flying. Men and women of every age bathe together in all seasons, behavior he would certainly regard as immoral. They can swim long distances under water. His description of the ordinary people's houses tells us that they are no better than hovels. They are low and smoke-filled. There are no couches but only mats.

Chen Fu records more than culturally prejudiced observations. We are reminded that Vietnam differs from China in an obvious but crucial respect. Though he does not state specifically that it is smaller than either Guangdong or Guangxi, the two adjacent Chinese provinces, he leaves his reader in no doubt that the geographical setting for his account of the mission is a very small country. He gives an impression of the country's size by estimating the distance from the capital of Thang-long, on the site of Hanoi, to the southernmost province as approximately two hundred *li*, or, say, one hundred and fifty miles, a rather short distance in the context of the northern empire.<sup>24</sup>

A particular feature of this small territory is that it is abundantly endowed with riverine communications, and from time to time Chen Fu reiterates this point.<sup>25</sup> He maps the mountainous area north of the capital in terms of short distances between several rivers with sources in Yunnan. He emphasizes the key role of rivers in facilitating domestic trade: "This country has no stores. The people depend only on boats for trading

in rice. They have four rice harvests a year." One topic deals with Vietnamese boats: "They are light and long. The planks are very fragile. The prow resembles the wings of a female duck. Each side is tall. Thirty oars are pulled. Many boats have up to a hundred persons on board. They travel as though they are flying." Nam-sach River, east of the capital, is crossed by ferries. There are bound to be bridges in a riverine country. He mentions one bridge about sixty miles from the capital on the way to Thanh-hoa. Gao Pian, a famous ninth-century Chinese governor, had established a market by a bridge over the Phu-luong River flowing from the northern hills.<sup>26</sup>

The western flank of this small riverine country is "entirely mountainous," and Vietnam is separated from China by "lofty mountains." On his journey from the border to the capital, Chen Fu would have noticed the terrain, and this is probably why he records the names of several landmarks in the area. What he saw excited his poetic imagination. His text overflows with the language of mountains, peaks, towering cliffs, mountain ranges, rocks, and precipices. The area is densely shaded by trees, often very old and tall, and packed with green climbing vegetation. He would have spotted the thick clumps of bamboo and twisting mountain streams to which he refers. In some parts of this area one has to slash one's way through bamboo thickets. Parrots, peacocks, and innumerable monkeys scream at each other. He notes that tracks are cut into the hills and records several short distances to indicate routes along the rivers in the foothills to the north and northwest of the capital.

Chen Fu is on a mission to a disobedient vassal who had earned Kubilai Khan's wrath, and he is well aware of Vietnam's stubborn resistance to the Mongol armies and of Nhan-ton's off-hand reception of his mission. He is bound to ask himself how could such

a state hold its own. What kind of government, he would wonder, was responsible for such contumacious conduct? His answer is simple: the affairs of this remote, small, and riverine country were in the hands of the powerful and ruthless Tran family. In Chen Fu's eyes, Vietnam is seen as a combination of capable human performance and favorable geographical circumstances.

He writes harshly about Vietnamese rulers and begins with a brief historical introduction in which he tells of initiatives by those he chooses to call "bullies," local strongmen, who were able to control the territory after the fall of the Tang dynasty in the early tenth century. Throughout the tenth century one family after another "seized," "usurped," or "stole" power. Then the Ly family "usurped" and ruled for eight generations until the Tran family "stole" the country for sixty-nine years before Chen Fu arrived. Cutting them down to size, he insists that the rulers are no more than "chiefs, even though they falsely style themselves kings and emperors." He denounces the practice of elevating members of their family to the status of "princes." The Chinese doctrine of "the Mandate of Heaven" is never mentioned to explain how ruling families succeeded each other. Instead, the reader is left with the impression that the Vietnamese were unable to develop stable political institutions. Everything depended on individual achievement.

How, then, did the Tran family actually govern? The envoy immediately realizes that the country is in the hands of a tightly-knit family, whose immoral practice of marrying relatives of the same surname disgusts him. He notes, for example, that the ruler whom he met, Nhan-ton, married the daughter of his uncle, Tran Quoc Tuan, the Hung-dao Prince, who had commanded the army during the Mongol wars. The chief

posts at Court are occupied by princes, though two commoners, mentioned by name and whom the envoys also met, were admitted to the inner circle of government.<sup>27</sup> The chief minister is Tran Quang Khai, the ruler's uncle who was born in 1241 and died soon after the mission's departure. Duc Viep, the ruler's brother, born in 1265, is the other senior minister. Chen Fu does not doubt the powerful influence of these two princes: "all matters of state, great or small, are their responsibility." Whenever they are carried to the palace gate in their sedan chairs, mirror-shaped wooden placards, decorated with symbols to represent the firmament, are borne in front of them. Naturally, the ruling family is highly-privileged and endowed with territorial fiefs. He writes of the "chief's" great uncle, Tran Nhat Duat, the Chieu-van Prince, that "his family temple and great riches" are really "a large trading center" near the only seaport that Chen Fu mentions. He takes note of the Hung-dao Prince's fief at Van-kiep, strategically located to guard the land route from China.

The envoy is evidently impressed by signs of an excessive social hierarchy. Privileges extend downwards through an elaborately-graded official class. Officials as well as the monarch possess "dependants," whose foreheads are branded to identify to whom they belong. Those who are branded as "dependants of the one who sits on the throne" are the monarch's attendants and commoners.<sup>28</sup> Several passages mention official privileges such as the colors of umbrellas and ornaments, silver betel platters, and access to precious metals. An umbrella's color is one way of recognizing a person's rank. Only members of the ruling family use red for this purpose. "Others do not dare to do so." Officials wear green cloth over their shaven heads. The personal relationship binding the ruler and his officials is demonstrated by two annual feasts given by the ruler

for his officials. The first is on the fourth day of the first month of the year, when an ox is slaughtered; the second is on the sixteenth day of the seventh month. On the fifteenth day of the seventh month the senior officials pay their respects to the ruler and, "to a man, present gifts"; on the following day the ruler repays the compliment with a feast. From his experience of banqueting in the Hall of Scholars at the capital, Chen Fu would have been familiar with the lavish scale of entertainment on ceremonial occasions. Evidently, ceremonial occasions would be required when personal relationships compensated for the absence of elaborate institutions.

Chen Fu's account of the administration shows that, at least when he was in Vietnam, it was energetic and severe even if it was not complex. There are officials in the capital, in the provinces, and in the districts. In each province are those who "patrol the borders" and lead the local soldiers. Able-bodied persons bring spears, their only weapons. Two other classes of official are also found in the provinces; they are "peacekeepers" and judges. Officials in the districts illicitly "rake in outrageous taxes" on fish, shrimps, vegetables, and fruit. The legal system "is very cruel." Thieves, vagabonds, and other bad people have their toes and fingers cut off. Those who commit acts of vengeance may be handed over to elephants and trampled to death. When in need of legal redress one can ring a bell in the capital. Several taxes are levied. The tax on betel, which is produced in quantity, is under the supervision of special officials and is very heavy. Benzoin also brings in rich revenue but is not of such high quality as the resin from the western regions of Asia. The use of gold is controlled and cannot be sold. Only small silver coins are used for paying taxes. Precious metals are subject to sumptuary laws. Ordinary people who wear gold and silver on their clothing are

punished by death.

Chen Fu says something about the countryside, though there is no evidence that he knew much beyond what he saw or heard when he was travelling to the capital. He comments that "there are no town fortifications; there are only earthen parapets and that is all." In the west there are "moats with bridges." The following observation suggests a dense population, at least near the capital: "The villages have markets. Every other day all kinds of goods are collected together. At intervals of five *li* (over a mile) three houses are built. On each side of them benches are set up for occasions when the tax collectors arrive." But a notable omission are the village registers, mentioned in Vietnamese sources. Chen Fu describes mulberry orchards and various kinds of fruit and fish. He is interested in the often extraordinary size of serpents and marine life as though he feels obliged to enliven his account of this distant place. He mentions a huge fish that can swallow boats: "This is not false."

Chen Fu's information is never favorable. We have seen that he criticizes the ruling family for failing to honor its ancestors with annual sacrifices, though the Buddha is honored with great respect. His farewell poem when leaving Vietnam refers twice to *dhyana* Buddhism on the Vietnamese side of the border. A small shrine close to the envoys' residence bears the "crude" name of "Heaven Opens a Thousand Years." An inscription in front of it, dated 1232, is in honor of the eighth Ly ruler's daughter, an "empress dowager." The same passage also mentions Van-kiep, the Hung-dao Prince's estate. This area venerates the Buddha and hence the name "Van-kiep," which means "ten thousand *kalpas*" and is "stupid."

Chen Fu would certainly be familiar with the neighborhood of the envoys'

residence near the little shrine and inscription. He mentions the literati's office, the Tap hien vien, where noisy feasts are given to the envoys. Another section, also mentioning the Tap hien vien, incorporates first-hand knowledge of the administrative pavilions and the gates to the Court area, which had been the scene of the envoys' humiliation when they first arrived. Each gate has a placard with its name written in gold. The two gates to which they were first led are "small." Only the central gate, the Duong-minh ("sun and imperial token") Gate, led to "the chief's place." Nhan-ton did not hesitate to treat the mission with contempt.

Chen Fu mentions respect paid to spirits. There are always "little shrines at the doorways to the houses." Emblems of demons (Sanskrit *raksasas*) are painted on the soldiers' colored banners. There are people in the mountains who practice magical arts with chanting and ascetic practices. They can change themselves into tigers and attack roebuck and deer and eat them alive.<sup>29</sup> "But this is rare."

Chen Fu relieves his unedifying description of this vassal country by often alluding to better times when Chinese heroes were on the scene. Perhaps he wants to avoid giving the impression that Vietnam had always been a strong country. "Ma Yuan halted his soldiers" in an area known by "the Tang" as Lang-chau on the northern border. He was on his way to crush a widespread rising of the two famous sisters in the first century C.E. and to restore the southernmost Han jurisdiction.<sup>30</sup> The envoy manages to mention this congenial fact immediately after referring to Van-kiep, the fief of the Hung-dao Prince, who was the hero of the Mongol wars. He is even able elsewhere to devote a section to Ma Yuan's attack on the two sisters. He reports that the general's four sunken "ironclads" can still be seen in the sea when the water is clear. Here, and probably

elsewhere in his account, he, a well-read man, chooses to quote earlier sources when writing about places at a distance from the Vietnamese capital with which he is not personally familiar. An early Chinese source had already stated that Ma Yuan ordered one bronze vessel to be sunk: "When the sky is bright and the water is clear, you may at times see a double-decked ship there, far off." The Vietnamese had destroyed Ma Yuan's bronze pillars, but the present ruler has raised an earthen heap as a shrine to Ma Yuan, the "conqueror of the waves."<sup>31</sup> The heroic Zhu-ge Liang of the third century C.E. is said to have crossed the lower reaches of the Lo River. Gao Pian, the ninth-century Tang governor, erected a solitary stone pagoda near a market at a bridge over the Phu-Luong River after he had "pacified" the country. "Its vestiges have survived." The same section mentions the third-century C.E. governor, Si Nhiep (Shi Xie), whom the local population worshipped fervently.<sup>32</sup>

The envoy knows that he is visiting a sturdy as well as a disobedient vassal who controls a manageably small country and is not restrained by Chinese-style "rites and music" or, apparently, by any form of ideological conviction. But we should bear in mind that he arrived when the Tran family was on the crest of a wave of military successes against Kubilai Khan. Its personal prestige would have been enormous, and everything could readily depend on successful manpower management rather than on complex institutions. Chen Fu would not dare to acknowledge the Tran Court's military strength, though he mentions the Hung-dao Prince three times, but he can at least show that the Court's influence enabled it to support itself lavishly and to enjoy and share privileges with its officials. The family's influence is ubiquitous. He does not mention the names of towns but only of a princely fief, Van-kiep, though rivers and geographical

landmarks such as mountains are named. Unlike in other parts of Southeast Asia, rival urban centers with wealth and prestige did not exist to compete in wealth and prestige with the ruler's capital. The only threat to the ruler's authority might be that ambitious princes could exploit their fiefs to accumulate private resources. In this situation, great importance would be attached to the extent of the princes' loyalty to the head of their family.

Chen Fu is bound to be disgusted by the Tran family's indifference to what educated Chinese would consider to be a government's major concern: the encouragement of learning to promote moral behavior, disciplined family life, and a seemingly observance of age and sex distinctions. He sees no sign of the influence of Vietnamese scholars educated in the Confucian classics and histories, although he knows very well that Court officials such as Dinh Cung Vien, who presented him with a farewell poem written in Chinese, understood the Chinese written language and that the Tran "emperors" were familiar with, and actually emulated, the outward appearance of the Chinese Court.

Chen Fu realizes that the Tran family has turned geopolitical circumstances to its advantage in order to go its own impudent way. The family has benefited from its location on the fringe of China, its small and manageable size, and its easy riverine communications. Unlike the compiler of the next Chinese text, the An-nan zhi-yuan, he actually visited the country when Kubilai Khan's defeats were still ringing in his ears. The compiler, as we shall see, could take a detached view from the perspective of what would seem to him to be the establishment of stable Ming rule in Vietnam.

The An-nan zhi-yuan presents itself as being no less authoritative than a

"monograph"; it belongs to the distinguished genre of Chinese writing initiated by the monographs in the Chinese Dynastic Histories.<sup>33</sup> Readers would expect to be furnished with complete and useful information for the guidance of officials. The compiler of the An-nan zhi-yuan, as we shall see, consults old books or contemporary documents. Accordingly, he provides a considerable range of information on geographical and institutional matters, customs, census tables, notable features of the landscape, a Chinese version of the history of Vietnam, spirits and Buddhism, tribal populations, literature, and a selection of Ming proclamations. The compilation's likely date is 1418, during the Ming occupation of Vietnam between 1407 and 1427.

This text is more dignified than Chen Fu's querulous account. The compiler does not feel required to use abusive language or to show a special animus against the Tran family. In fact, he is not particularly interested in Tran Vietnam. Instead, he stands back from the vantage point of the Ming occupation in the early fifteenth century in order to survey his subject in a relaxed, comprehensive, and even encyclopaedic way. His intention is to overwhelm his reader with convincing information on every aspect of Vietnam and always to present the country's "appearance" as distant and culturally impoverished.

The compiler, faithful to his encyclopaedic pretensions, is at pains to record measurements of distances. The country extends approximately the equivalence of 300 miles from east to west and about 800 miles from south to north. The latter estimate is less accurate than Chen Fu's. Two additional details demonstrate more convincingly how the Chinese perceived Vietnam's size. The country is described as "a small and [internally] accessible" country. When the Chinese governed Vietnam, "there were

certainly post stations [where couriers bearing official dispatches changed horses], but in [Ly and Tran times] only runners were necessary to travel by foot from the capital to Lang-son on the northern border or to Thanh-hoa on the coast." The Chinese seem to have associated the Vietnamese with swift movement. Chen Fu knew that they could swim rapidly over long distances, that they "flew" when they climbed, and that they possessed large boats which also "flew." Another detail, showing us how the Chinese perceived Vietnam, is even more convincing. Although there were thirteen "provinces," the compiler advises the reader that a Vietnamese province was only the size of a Chinese "district."

The An-nan zhi-yuan is similarly precise about Vietnam's riverine terrain. Under the heading of "Mountains and Rivers," a profuse vocabulary is used to signify riverine features: the sources of rivers, tributaries, river bends, depths, hazards, banks, fords, bridges, and access to the sea. The term "communication" is frequently used when rivers are mentioned and especially in connection with the Red River. The text records the Red River's confluences with the great rivers in the northwest in the neighborhood of Bach-hac, with the Dai-hoang River in the southeastern part of the plains, and with rivers emerging from the foothills on either side of the plains. The capital is described as being a great expanse of water extending into the distance. Under the heading of "Dykes and embankments," we are told that "in this ocean land the ground is soggy. Dykes are few but there are some embankments." Or again, "The territory of Jiao-zhi [an early Chinese name for Vietnam] contains a great amount of water. There are bridges everywhere. The best of these are used by unmarried boys and girls for purposes of merriment. They are also used for "exchanging wares."

Vietnam is seen not merely as being small. Only a small part of it is heavily populated and cultivated. This is the Red River basin, surrounded by mountains and through which the major rivers flow. Here are the rich agricultural plains. Detailed statistics, probably compiled during the Ming occupation, reveal that nearly twice as many settlements are here than elsewhere in the country. The Red River basin is also attributed with much more taxable land than anywhere else. Perhaps about a quarter of a million people lived in the plains in Ming times, or more than half the population recorded in 1418.

The An-nan zhi-yuan contains a number of statistical tables listed under headings such as population and produce. The data would have been based on Ming government records. The information need not always be taken at face value, but it provides a useful gauge for assessing the relative importance of different parts of the country.

But the compiler is an encyclopaedist with a special goal. He presents no less than a detailed account of Vietnam through the centuries, and the effect of his geographical and historical perspective would be that a reader would hardly fail to agree that the Ming government's policies towards Vietnam were in the country's best interests. The people needed special assistance and especially in cultural matters. The reader would respond to his defense of the Ming regime by realizing that Vietnam was the victim of its geography and not its beneficiary, as Chen Fu had supposed.

He achieves his purpose by means of his literary devices. The first of these is his conspicuously frequent recourse to citations from other texts and even from Vietnamese poems of the fourteenth century. His is a multi-vocal text. The cited texts are usually Chinese and no later than of Tang times. He also includes many unacknowledged

quotations from Chinese dynastic histories and especially their biographical monographs. Because few Chinese texts were likely to discuss the Vietnamese people sympathetically, the reader is exposed to a prejudiced point of view.

The citations are an effective means of achieving the compiler's intention to justify the Ming occupation. By citing ancient texts he can appeal to the venerable authority of Chinese antiquity to support an adverse judgment on Vietnamese society. Emile Gaspardone was surely mistaken in his reading of the An-nan zhi-yuan when he supposed that the citations had no more subtle purpose than to provide "ornamental references."<sup>34</sup> Citing texts written when the Chinese ruled Vietnam also enables the compiler to present Vietnam as a country which, though only a remote extension of China, had once benefited from Chinese government and cultural tutelage. The same device could also suggest that Vietnam was not significantly different before and after the period when it was not under Chinese tutelage. In this way the impression is created that Vietnamese historical experience becomes immobile when the Vietnamese are left to themselves. Vietnam, because it is situated on the fringe of the Chinese cultural world, would always be more or less culturally deprived. Chinese writers of earlier times had done the compiler's work for him. For example, "customs" are a key aspect of his subject, yet he does not regard it as anachronistic to quote from texts written many centuries before to criticize Vietnamese customs. His is a more subtle method of denigrating Vietnam than Chen Fu's abusive language.

Another effect of the compiler's dependence on Chinese citations is to give the impression that a major hiatus in public and cultural life occurred between the end of the Tang period in the tenth century and the years when the Ming ruled in Vietnam, even

though the explanation could be that, during those centuries, very little Chinese material was available to the compiler. The reader would conclude that not much of importance happened in the Ly and Tran centuries. Those centuries would resemble an interregnum when rightful [Chinese] sovereignty was in abeyance. According to this point of view, the Ming restored the standards of Tang rule rather than interrupted the Ly-Tran way of life. The hiatus is invariably signified by the expression "Ly and Tran times" wedged between accounts of what happened up to and including Tang times and accounts of the measures taken by "the [Ming] dynasty."

One effect of this text on Chinese readers would be that they were continuously reminded of the major geographical feature that accounted for everything: Vietnam was a small and, above all, an isolated riverine country. Isolation was the determining factor in what happened, particularly after the country ceased in the tenth century to be governed by the Chinese. Thus, the narrative from time to time uses such words as "therefore" and "only" in passages which situate Vietnam on the fringe of the Chinese world and then goes on to describe the consequences of its unfortunate location.

The emphasis on geographical location prepares the ground for what matters to the compiler, who is anxious to justify the Ming occupation. Vietnam, because it lay on "the southern borderlands," needed standards of government which only the Chinese could provide. This point of view is expressed in the opening passage under the heading "Men of Mark," which is a lengthy Chinese version of Vietnamese history that includes not a few who held posts under the Chinese dynasties. During the period from "the Han to before the Yuan [the Mongol dynasty] there were quite a number of men of mark. Alas! This place is isolated and distant. It was largely unable to glimpse civilized rule,

and [men of mark] had no means of avoiding anarchy and remained unknown."

Exceptional men in such a deprived country were unable to contribute anything and were lost to history.

Because China's benign influence in Vietnam had been the only significant happening in Vietnamese history, the compiler has little to say about pre-Han or post-Tang times. Nevertheless, scattered details of a non-Chinese past appear and are likely to be attributable to Vietnamese sources. The section described as "A Miscellaneous Monograph" associates the Hung Kings of pre-Chinese times with the legend about Tan-vien Mountain. In the section on "Palaces," a reference is made to the Kingdom of Van-lang, also associated with pre-Chinese times. Van-lang's "customs were pure," a statement contradicting the compiler's intention to discredit Vietnamese society from earliest times. In the historical introduction we are informed that "although [from the tenth century] the rulers were regarded [in China] as feudatories on the frontier, yet they ruled as emperors as did [Zhao Tuo] of old." Zhao Tuo [Vietnamese Trieu Da], who died in 137 B.C.E., was remembered in a thirteenth-century Vietnamese history as the founder of the Vietnamese "empire."<sup>35</sup> Ma Yuan's victory over the two sisters, recalled by Chen Fu, is mentioned in the section on ancient cities. The compiler clearly had access to Vietnamese information. Indeed, he refers to "local district records" and "oral tradition" in the context of geography, miracles, a man of prowess, and a grotto. Here, we are hearing more than the compiler's voice.

The paucity of materials concerning the Ly and Tran centuries has the effect of creating a major hiatus in Vietnamese history between the fall of the Tang and the Ming period, and the Ming government can be shown to fill a vacuum in Vietnamese public

life. Short passages on governmental institutions during Ly and Tran times, squeezed in between summarized accounts of what happened during the millennium of Chinese rule and Ming administrative innovations, constitute a lean record. Not surprisingly, in a passage under the heading of "Traces of Officials," who turn out to be former Chinese governors, we learn that the official posts established by the Ming dynasty were intended "to make Jiao-zhi a newly created land."

An indifference to Ly-Tran government is illustrated under the heading of "Post Stages," to which I referred above. If something was urgent, a person would be ordered to go by the shortest possible route. Otherwise "runners" went by foot. This suggests that the scale of government was modest and that there was no excessive pressure on it. But, according to the compiler, the Han and Tang governments "certainly" had [horse-borne] couriers for transmitting official documents "to expedite the affairs of government, but today this matter cannot be studied." China and Vietnam are explicitly compared and China is given the benefit of the doubt even though evidence of Chinese postal arrangements in "Annam" was lacking. The compiler's account of the bridges is another example of the virtual invisibility of Ly and Tran government. A quotation from Mencius introduces the account: "Bridges should be built in the eleventh and twelfth months so that the people would not have to wade." This, according to Mencius, was an example of the practice of "good government." The compiler goes on to state that Vietnam had many rivers and so there were bridges, which were also used for entertainment and commercial purposes. As a result, everyone cooperated in maintaining them. But there is no hint that the government took the initiative in building bridges. Evidently the unfortunate Vietnamese did not benefit from Mencius's influence.

Village registers, ignored by Chen Fu, are again ignored, even though the text's ample demographic information, available in Ming times, makes it certain that the Ming had inherited the earlier census system. The single and somewhat grudgingly acknowledged instance of governmental initiative in the Ly-Tran period comes towards the end of a long passage on "Dykes and Embankments," where another glimpse of this riverine land is vouchsafed.

. . . . Dykes are few but there are some embankments. The people are densely crowded and there is not enough land for cultivation. People in former times constructed tall embankments alongside the rivers to prevent the water from overflowing. The land is salt-laden and water encroaches on it. Powerful families, wanting to convert saline land to their private use, independently built embankments to keep out the salt water. They scattered grain, and then settled people to live there. This [practice] increased the land's value.

The text goes on to mention embankments of considerable height and length. Yet, nothing in the passage up to this point suggests that the government was responsible for hydraulic works. The text then notes that officials, strictly controlled, were appointed to supervise the repair of embankments along the rivers. At the beginning of every year, all, irrespective of class or age, had to work; this detail conveys urgency in a land where rivers could cause dangerous floods. Officials also inspected the works in the seventh month when the water rose. This measure benefited the people, and the Ming administration continued the same policy. The text's impression of government's negligible influence under the Ly and Tran is only slightly modified by this observation.

Chen Fu had recognized effective, if harsh, rule. Why should the compiler's

judgment be different? The explanation is likely to be connected with what the compiler regarded as the crucial instance of ineffective government. The Ly and Tran rulers failed to perform what Chinese such as Chen Fu, for example, believed was government's most positive and important function: to reform the people's customs by means of education. This was the main justification for Ming rule. The Ming mission was a civilizing one and one which required social discipline. The Vietnamese, left to themselves, would never have reformed their customs and would never have developed strong institutions for doing so.

By means of eloquent citations from miscellaneous Chinese texts, we learn under the heading of "Customs" that Vietnamese customs, when "unreformed," were deplorable. Ma Duan-lin's fourteenth century encyclopaedia, with its wealth of citations from earlier texts, is mobilized to assert that

the people did not know rites and duties. They had an unstable and cruel disposition. Using wealth to exert power, local strongmen seized and aggrandized. They made dependants of the poor and weak. . . . There was always suffering. Therefore, from the first Chinese dynasties up to and including the Tang, virtuous and strict officials were appointed many times to pacify the land.

The Nan Yue wai-zhi is quoted in support of this judgment:

They were frequently and vindictively fighting among themselves. The relationship between fathers and sons was not observed [i.e. there was no sense of filial piety]. Therefore, without strict officials and good generals, it was impossible to calm them.

In the section on "Traces of officials," the compiler quotes Zhou Cheng's memorial to the

Eastern Han Court in the second half of the second century C.E.:

Chiao-chou is a distant land. Greed and corruption are customary practices; there are evil gangs of powerful bullies. Local officials are reckless and oppressive.

The people are plundered and exploited.

The compiler's device of attributing disparaging information on "customs" to earlier texts spares him the need to say more on the subject. The implication is that he has nothing more to add to the sorry tale.

The An-nan zhi-yuan uses strong language. One is led to believe that the character of this border people was inherently flawed, and the inference is important: the Vietnamese would never have been well-governed during the centuries when they were left to themselves.

Nowhere in the text is the connection between good behavior and good government more clearly defined than under the heading of "Schools." Here we are monotonously reminded that Vietnam in early times "was a distant place and was not nourished by kingly influence and therefore lacked proper social relationships and civic virtues." On these matters they were "utterly ignorant." Shi Guang, a governor early in the first century C.E., was the first to introduce schools "in order to govern this people," and the situation had gradually improved by Tang times, when several Vietnamese even had official careers in China. Furthermore, the compiler unexpectedly concedes that "under the Ly and Tran, praised as a particularly flourishing time, there were scholars and men of talent whose ability combined elegance and solidity in equal proportions." Are we again hearing Vietnamese speak and in this instance to claim an achievement they knew would be acceptable to Chinese ears and, if so, why was the compiler willing to

admit it to his text? Perhaps he wanted to make the point that this happy state of affairs was not the result of good Vietnamese schools. "The schools were hardly worth the name. Those who sought an education were taught in their homes privately." And nothing is disclosed of the influence of "the scholars and men of talent." The reader could be left to assume that their vocation was simply to write poetry about the landscape, specimens of which are provided by the text, to participate in poetry-reading sessions at the rulers' banquets, or to honor departing Chinese envoys. Whatever else they did, they had no success in reforming Vietnamese customs and may never have tried. Thus, it would be left to the Ming government to assume the responsibility of promoting literacy in order to change customs as "an urgent matter." Here is a devastating Chinese-style judgment on the culturally impoverished hiatus between the tenth and early fifteenth centuries and in spite of the admission that the Ly and Tran period was known as a "particularly flourishing time."

What does the compiler have in mind when he refers to "bad customs"? Because he seeks to justify the Ming occupation, he appropriately includes, at the end of his text, Ming proclamations intended to reform the local customs. But the proclamations do not add much to our understanding of what Chinese regarded as cultural weaknesses. Their interest lies in the fact that, if we take the proclamations' contents at their face value, we have to conclude that the Vietnamese people with whom the Ming officials had to deal do not seem to have changed very much since the time long ago when Han officials first met "these people." This, no doubt, is precisely what the Ming Chinese wanted to suppose.

Sympathy for the weakest elements in society is often praised as the chief justification for Ming rule, and we are continually told that "local bullies" and local

officials would seize power and oppress "the little people." Chen Fu had already referred to the seizure of territory by "bullies" in the centuries after the fall of the Tang. "Local bullies" would accumulate weapons, ships, and followers and fight each other to the death. Vagabondage, exacerbated by warfare, was another aspect of this distressing situation. People would abandon their families, neglect their fields, and behave lawlessly. Sometimes they went into the jungle "to harm the people and obstruct civilization." Chen Fu had noted that vagabonds were severely punished.

"For a long time," the Ming proclamations tell us, "the people were infected by the vile customs of a distant place, but, even though Vietnam was far off, the people's nature was good." China's example must now be followed. The proper family relations of father and son, husband and wife, elder and younger brother, respect for the old, pity for the poor, and so forth were to be cultivated. Clothing as well as rites must be Chinese. Customs would then be "pure."

Reform on this scale obviously required schooling and the product of education in the form of "wise and talented men." "No generation is without them." And so Vietnamese were to be sent to Peking to be tested and selected for posts and then returned "to succor the people." Schools were to be established and *nho* [Chinese *ru*; literati] chosen to teach in them. *Nho*, the Vietnamese literati, could at last find a useful role in society as teachers and exemplars of good behavior. This admirable state of affairs was possible everywhere; "how much more so here because Vietnamese are said to be a cultivated people, happy to read books." If, as is plausible, Vietnamese *nho* had spoken about themselves to Chinese officials in this way, we have a further example of how local self images occasionally subverted the An-nan zhi-yuan.

Neither Chinese source discussed in this chapter holds the Tran polity in high esteem. Instead, they agree that it is bereft of moral values. Chen Fu stigmatizes the Tran practice of marrying within the family, and the compiler adduces authoritative Chinese texts to demonstrate that Vietnamese society had been ill-disciplined ever since records became available. So far, the only difference between the two sources is that Chen Fu is impressed by the Tran dynasty's administrative strength while the compiler strenuously denies the possibility that Vietnam, left to its own resources, has any chance of holding its own by Chinese standards and therefore by the only standards worth considering.

According to Chen Fu, distance from China was to the advantage of the Tran ruler, who felt sufficiently confident to humiliate Kubilai Khan's envoys. According to the compiler, on the other hand, distance was a handicap because it was responsible for cultural isolation and backwardness. Neither source, however, can avoid acknowledging that Vietnam had acquired some "sinic" aspects. Chen Fu visited a capital city where the city gates had Chinese names and whose ruler was styled "emperor," while the compiler admits that some Vietnamese were well-educated by Chinese standards, though not as the result of state-organized schooling.

Both sources despise their subject, but is something more at stake? Chen Fu's vivid description of the rugged terrain immediately south of the Chinese border, his references to the Hung-dao Prince even though the wars had ended five years earlier, and his discomfort in the Vietnamese capital may reflect an awareness that Vietnam is hardly a harmless neighbor. The compiler's description of Vietnam's "geographical configuration" is also vivid: "To the southeast the great ocean is a moat. Mountain

ranges block off the northwest. It is a land of four barriers." Geographical features would seem to hinder Chinese intervention in the vassal's affairs. Moreover, the Ming proclamations are intended to tame as well as to educate this unruly people and thereby to solve the problem of disturbed Sino-Vietnamese relations once and for all. Perhaps the Chinese were aware that Vietnam had acquired some "sinic" features and were apprehensive because they believed that China's strength and greatness were derived from its unique culture and that a transfer of Chinese cultural features beyond the borders without China's control would be to China's disadvantage. Nervousness could explain why the Chinese judged Vietnam by much harsher standards than they found necessary in respect of other Southeast Asian countries, where signs of Chinese influence could not be detected.

The two sources differ, however, in a notable way. Chen Fu paints a wild landscape with geographical hazards, wild animals, and strange people in the highlands. But the reader of the An-nan zhi-yuan would learn of an exciting geographical feature, something in addition to Vietnam's isolation. According to this text, Vietnam, in spite of its backward social condition, was blessed with magnificent scenery. The opening passage under the heading of "The View" leaves one in no doubt about this. "The land of Jiao-zhi is hidden in a remote place, but its mountains are famous and the scenery outstanding. One can see far off, climb to gaze around one, relax, and enlarge one's understanding." Or again, under the heading of "A Miscellaneous Monograph," we are told that "the scenery is wondrous and strange and there are many kinds of people and different customs . . . ." The combination of remoteness and marvelous scenery recurs under a number of headings, and the reader could suppose that the Vietnamese were

creatures of their environment. The headings are illuminating: "scenery," "mountains and rivers," "old vestiges," "grottoes in the hills," "gardens and ponds." The compiler frequently uses such expressions as "truly a site of beautiful scenery," "exceptionally fine," "scenery outside this world," and "wandering in fine scenery." The reader is not surprised to learn that a Ly ruler "traveled to enjoy" the beautiful Chuong-son area near the coast and built five temples there.

Why would the compiler wish to exalt the Vietnamese landscape in extravagant terms? One reason is that he, an encyclopaedist, is once again incorporating Vietnamese sources, written and oral, made available to the Chinese during the Ming occupation. It is difficult to imagine that Chinese should be so moved by the local scenery. The theme of fine scenery is sufficiently repetitive that it suggests that the compiler often tapped Vietnamese materials and that we are discovering something of how the Vietnamese themselves perceived the meaning of fine scenery. Perhaps, too, as Columbus did in respect of the Caribs, in this way he could contrive to dehumanize the Vietnamese to supply even more force to the impression he was anxious to develop. He would be making known their preference for being passively absorbed in the natural scene rather than having to exert themselves in performing their social obligations. This would explain why, in this text, the Vietnamese literati, poets and monks, are chiefly visible in the setting of the natural scene. Even Buddhism in the mountains, as we shall see, is downgraded to become a means of magical practices.

Living in a small country, Vietnamese would never be far from nature at its loveliest, and this is reflected in the text's practice of recording different associations of the landscape. In the section on the "Mountains and rivers," we learn that Phat-tich Hill,

not far west of the capital, is "truly a site of beautiful scenery." Vu-ninh Hill in Bac-giang, not far north of the capital, is beautiful. Traces of foundations of ancient times are sometimes found in beautiful scenery. Deep mountain caves are often surrounded by handsome peaks and ranges of marvelous hills. There are several references to the Tran rulers' affection for the landscape. In the section on "Persons," Tran Nhan-ton, the ruler whom Chen Fu met, is said to have established the Truc-lam sect of *dhyana* Buddhism on Yen-tu mountain in the northeast. A Tran ruler built a retreat in a mountainous area. Another Tran ruler built "the Lanka school" in the hills and appointed the famous *nho* Tran Ton to be in charge of its library and its chief teacher. The same passage continues by stating that Tran rulers would wander here from time to time to enjoy the scenery. They gave feasts in honor of the Buddha's Paradise. On the eighth day of the fourth month the inhabitants and scholars would gather by Thien-tu River, not far from the capital, to sing, dance, and recite. Every year in the third month important people would "wander" in the Phat-tich area to gaze at the scenery and perform rites. Their chariots would be herded together. Men of letters and famous scholars would often chant impromptu. Sino-Vietnamese poems of the fourteenth century are quoted; they extol the scenery. There need no longer be any doubt that the An-nan zhi-yuan is a multi-vocal text.

Many famous hills and temples were in the Bac-giang area, north of the capital. Here the scenery was "extraordinarily lovely." "Travelling officials seeking office and famous people would often leave behind verses there." In the late fourteenth century a junior member of the ruling family, Tran Nguyen Dan, a descendant of Tran Quang Khai, a chief minister known to Chen Fu, withdrew from public life to live amid the "lovely

scenery" of Con-son. Villagers, too, enjoyed these sites. Grottos seem to have been favorite places for excursions. One grotto is mentioned as the scene of villagers' annual sightseeing excursions. Visitors would bring lamps with them to inspect caves, where they might find Buddhist images. One grotto was so large that it could contain more than a thousand robbers.

Preserved in the hills were memories of Vietnam in ancient times. Old people sometimes transmitted them. Fine scenery and famous people seem inseparable. In the section on "Mountains and Streams," mention is made of the sixth-century hero Li Bi. "He came from stock that had assisted heroes." He rebelled against the Chinese, and "the heroes of several provinces rose to support him." Those more frequently remembered were known as "Masters of the *Dhyana*," the meditative school of Mahayana Buddhism. The compiler notes that temples were still standing to mark places where the Masters lived. The opening passage in the section on "Spirits and the Buddha" states that in Ly and Tran times there were many famous monks whose marvels were manifested and known. The rulers paid homage and inquired about mysterious matters, and the result was that they, the rulers, abandoned their bodies and left the world. Officials and soldiers were often influenced.

There were also a few spirit cults and Taoists, though "only one or two examples are provided [in the sources at the compiler's disposal]." The ancient practice of Jiao-zhi was to venerate spirits. "There were many depraved shrines. When one ran into disaster, one hurried to witches and wizards. . . . In the lands of frontier tribes these customs prevailed and need cause no wonder." The compiler would hardly be expected to have to distinguish sharply between practices of ancient times and those on the eve of the Ming

occupation. The record was always deplorable.

More often than not, monks were remembered as miracle workers, able to produce rain or change their bodies. A Ly-dynasty Master, Khong Lo, living near a famous mountain, could assume supernatural forms. He would fly into space and walk on water. Wild animals would submit to him. He was a miracle worker par excellence, and "no one could fathom him." Under the heading of "A Miscellaneous Monograph," we are told that, in Ly times, the Master Vien Chieu saw the Manjusri bodhisattva in a dream. The bodhisattva was grasping a knife, rending his bowels, and washing his brain. "Tradition has it that his intention was to supply medicine." The episode concludes, perhaps cynically, with the statement that "the *dhyana* school therefore flourished." The Master Gioi Chau's prayers for rain were instantly answered. A Tran ruler set up an earthen jar in a hall. When the Master came, rain was plentiful. There was not the slightest spot of water outside the jar. The ruler congratulated and honored him.

The landscape with its Masters had other associations too. The Master Tri Nhan, an ascetic living in the Dong-trieu area, could tame tigers, and he once ordered a gang of robbers to "reform." Many did so. There were also magicians. The passage on "Temples and Shrines" contradicts the passage noted above about "Spirits and the Buddha" and claims that there were many magicians. These discrepancies suggest a variety of sources and careless editing. The passage begins with an account of the influence of spirit worship, and the reason is a familiar one: "The country is a frontier land of tribal peoples. Their customs are not surprising." Only later in the same passage is a concession made: "There are also temples and Taoist shrines." Finally, strange peoples are mentioned. In Quy-hoa, Chia-hung, and Ngoc-ma there were those who

drank through their noses. Chen Fu had been told of this freakish habit. Liao, wearing red clothes, lived in the famous mountains of Thuan-quang, Chia-hung, Quang-hoa, and Ngoc-ma. Other instances of strange groups of Liao occur in Ai-chau and elsewhere.

Having read the An-nan zhi-yuan, a Chinese reader in early Ming times could then make a general statement about Vietnam. The country was small, had many rivers, and was culturally deprived. Its fine scenery evoked memories of famous persons in the past who were usually Masters of the *dhyana* but lived on the fringe of society. The reader would gather that rulers and ruled alike honored famous monks, perhaps the only positive thing said of the rulers. But the short passages on governmental institutions during Ly and Tran times, wedged between accounts of what happened in the millennium of Chinese rule and Ming administrative innovations, would prevent the reader from seeing much more of the Vietnamese than their geographical environment. The conclusion would be that the compiler knew little of importance about local government, his chief concern.

The compiler has chosen to convey Vietnamese awareness that they dwelt amid beautiful scenery, but his disclosure adds only a picturesque aspect to his otherwise dreary subject. He never indicates that supernatural influences of grave significance were involved. The tales of Vietnamese tutelary spirits, contained in a Vietnamese compilation, the Viet dien u linh tap of 1329, reveal that memories of ancient Vietnam were for the Vietnamese, indeed, embedded in the landscape and that rulers did, indeed, "wander in fine scenery." But the geographical setting, in spite of Chinese asseverations to the contrary, now becomes the scene of wise leadership, amazing achievements, and timeless success. There are no "local bullies," few monks, but many heroes.

We shall begin to hear Vietnamese points of view about how things actually happened in their country and on what experience had to offer by way of guidance. Disparity between the neighbors in terms of territory and cultural values disappear when Chinese meet their equals on the battlefield.

#### Among the mountains and rivers

Our source is now Vietnamese in the form of a group of short tales about exceptionally famous territorial spirits, the rulers they served, and the glorious achievements of spirits and rulers alike when, among "the mountains and rivers," they toiled side by side on behalf of the country. The text, compiled by Ly Te Xuyen in 1329, is known as the Viet dien u linh tap, or "Compilation of the Departed Spirits in the Realm of Viet." I have used what I believe is the text's earliest version available to me and known as A.47, the number assigned to it in the Ecole Francaise d'Extreme-Orient's collection of Vietnamese manuscripts. This version is likely to be closer to Ly Te Xuyen's original compilation than other lengthier versions. A later and enlarged version, A.751, has been attributed to Nguyen Van Chat in the fifteenth century.<sup>36</sup>

The compiler of these tales knew that his subject was an august one and deserved to be introduced appropriately. Chinese visitors to Vietnam such as Chen Fu knew that the Vietnamese, despite their lack of moral qualities, were familiar with the Chinese written language, but they would not realize that educated Vietnamese, no less than educated Chinese, had used that language in order to equip themselves with a device for communicating and strengthening the authority of their own statements. They did so by quoting from or simply by alluding to what they considered to be an ancient and

prestigious Chinese text and thereby appropriating the authority of its language for their own purposes. The Chinese text could be endowed with authority not because it came from China but rather because it had been written long ago, had survived in written form, and could therefore be regarded as reflecting ancient and well-trying experience. But, and the qualification is crucial to understanding the Vietnamese attitude towards Chinese texts, the wisdom and power associated with ancient Chinese texts would be tapped and incorporated in Vietnamese statements only after the Vietnamese themselves had chosen to do so for their own purposes. The quotations or allusions were not valued because they could contribute towards a blueprint for organizing government and society in conformity with a Chinese style of "Confucian" moral order. The Chinese texts were, if not simply to adorn Vietnamese writing, to serve Vietnamese rhetorical purposes that varied endlessly from occasion to occasion and period to period.

With these considerations in mind, we can see why the compiler of A.47, though dealing with a topic as serious as the spirits' contribution to the country's welfare, chooses to begin his Preface with an unacknowledged quotation from the Zuo-zhuan, an ancient text with the highest prestige in China and belonging to the "Six Disciplines," the basis of Confucian learning and a text assuredly known to educated Vietnamese. The quotation is as follows: "The sages of old said: 'To be intelligent and upright is what is required to be hailed as a spirit.'" But the Zuo-zhuan precedes this observation with a solemn passage: "I have heard that, when a state is about to rise, he [the forthcoming ruler] receives his lessons from the people and, when it is about to fall, he receives his lessons from the spirits." In the Chinese text the spirits are harbingers of disaster, but the compiler of the tales has no truck with this dogma. The Vietnamese spirits are invariably associated with

success. By truncating the Chinese text, he has isolated what he needs from the Zuo-zhuan and assumes that educated Vietnamese would recognize the cadence of an ancient text on the subject of a good spirit's credentials and the need to distinguish good from bad spirits.

He can now proceed to what concerns him: "In our imperial Viet land there have been many spirits from ancient times," and he insists that they are of unequal merit. Some of them are the spiritual essences of the mountains and rivers and others are the heroic spirits of humans. The compiler then reveals his purpose. If their merits are not recorded, it will be difficult to distinguish the good from the bad.

Thus, a tailored but sonorous quotation from the Zuo-zhuan authenticates the high status the compiler wants to attribute to the Vietnamese spirits' achievements. Yet this device by itself would not be sufficient to confer credibility on his work. As the compiler of the An-nan zhi-yuan would do, he feels obliged to cite his sources whenever possible. Only one of them, the Chinese San guo zhi, is extant. In three tales, "tradition" is cited. Four tales have no source references. He cites two books written by Chinese governors. Two sources were written by Vietnamese in the eleventh and twelfth centuries: Do Thien's Su-ky is cited for ten tales and a Buddhist text, the Bao cuc truyen, for four tales. The actual naming of as many specific sources as possible is a necessary narrational convention to safeguard the compilation's claim to be believed.

There is a very important reason why the compiler wants to be taken seriously and which surely explains why he undertook his work. In respect of every spirit mentioned in the Viet dien u linh tap, we are told that in 1285, 1288, and 1313 the Tran rulers promoted them to reward them for their assistance during military emergencies and

especially during the Mongol invasions of 1284 and 1287. The titles conferred on the spirits reflect qualities the grateful rulers valued: courage, loyalty, and uprightness. The significance of the rewards is the belief that the spirits, some of whom had first manifested themselves in early times, continued to be available and valuable even in the compiler's own day. Their spiritual efficacy was timeless.

The text's other narrational conventions are plain enough. Whether the tales are about spirits or about humans who eventually become spirits, their structure, as we shall see, is uniform; the same kind of things happen in each tale even if their sequence may vary slightly. There is also a great deal of recurrent language. We frequently read of "fear," "amazement," and "comprehension" when spirits miraculously manifest themselves. All elements of the population, villagers and monks as well as rulers and their followers, are capable of acknowledging the spirits' power. Rulers and ruled are equally threatened by those who disturb the peace. Alarming emergencies regularly occur in the rulers' and country's fortunes. Heroism is invariably displayed in the wars against Chinese and Chams.

Two additional narrational features would attract the reader's attention. The first is the device of direct discourse between spirits and rulers; this is the spirits' opportunity to relate their distinguished role in Vietnamese history. The second feature is the frequent use of the expression "indeed," or "so it was," when a spirit or spirit-to-be accomplishes what it has promised. This expression makes the tales even more credible.

These narrational features reinforce the text's intention, which is to demonstrate how those who rule should do so and that nothing is more important than a ruler's capacity to apprehend supernatural or human signs of assistance in a country rich in

supernatural power and not wanting in men of exceptional prowess. To be able to recognize these signs and to select suitable assistants are crucial attributes of leadership in Vietnamese society and justify the right to rule. The Viet dien u linh tap is about leadership or, more precisely, about the canons of behavior required of those who lead. Here, then, is the promise of a Vietnamese statement on government, a matter of concern to Chen Fu and to the compiler of the An-nan zhi-yuan, both of whom were familiar with the canons of behavior relating to good government inculcated in Confucianist literature, and a subject on which, according to the Chinese, the Vietnamese themselves had nothing to say.

The first seven tales are about "Sovereigns," most of whom are heroes and heroines during the Chinese occupation. They include the two sisters who fought Ma Yuan in the first century C.E., the episode familiar to Chen Fu and the compiler of the An-nan zhi-yuan. The next eleven tales are about "Ministers" who, either during their lifetime or subsequently as spirits or as both, served rulers. Two served the famous Chinese governor Gao Pian. Seven served the Ly rulers and were therefore prominent not long before the Tran family came to power. Three also served the Tran in 1252 and in 1257. Finally, there are ten nature spirits, designated as "Supernatural Powers." Four served the Ly rulers. All spirits included in these three groups were collectively honored by the Tran in 1285, 1288, and 1313.

The tales' narrational structure usually contains the following three episodes, though a particular tale may omit an episode and the sequence of episodes need not be exactly the same. The episodes deal with various examples of selecting assistants (spirits or humans), services performed, and rewards. In the context of selection, we usually

expect to read of the spirits' origins whether in their lifetime or as local territorial spirits; their encounters with rulers, be they Chinese governors or Vietnamese emperors, in the form of apparitions or dreams or both; the testing of the spirits' claims to supernatural power; and proof that the claims are genuine. We would then read of the spirits' remarkable achievements in the rulers' service and rewards in the form of the establishment of cults after their death for those who had served rulers heroically or of the rulers' honors conferred on those who were already spirits, the villagers' "unceasing" worship of the spirits and the spirits' "invariable" response to the villagers' supplications, and, finally, even more illustrious titles conferred on the spirits by the Tran rulers in 1285 and 1288 after the second and third Mongol invasions and in 1313 after a victory over the Chams.

The most distinguished mode of selection is when Heaven appoints a dead hero, an achiever in his lifetime, to be the tutelary spirit of a particular area, maybe a tract of "mountains and streams," a stretch of a river, or an estuary. Rivers, means of communication, are bound to figure prominently in any description of the Vietnamese landscape. Heaven honored seven of the eleven "Ministers," five of whom had served the Ly family. They were rewarded by Heaven because in their lifetimes they had served rulers with distinction either by protecting the country from invasion or by preserving peace within the country.

The tales assume that the selection of those who will bear heavy responsibilities on behalf of the country must not be a casual matter, and not least when Heaven is involved. When Cao Lo, An-duong's general in the third century B.C.E., was unjustly killed, "Heaven took pity on his loyalty and appointed him to control (this tract) of land."

Ly Phuc Man, who had served Ly Nam De as a general against the Chinese in the sixth century, was rewarded for his loyalty with two tracts of land. When he died, "Heaven congratulated him on his loyalty, and he retained his former post [of protector of the lands in question]." Nature spirits, too, are entrusted by Heaven with the protection of tracts of land. These, the "supernatural powers," had existed from time immemorial, and, when a dead hero becomes a tutelary spirit, he is accorded the same status as the nature spirits and thereby enlarges Vietnam's resources of supernatural power. Vietnamese heroes and their deeds therefore become part of a timeless heritage. According to the tales' perspective, Vietnam, rather than being perceived as a kingdom, is a congeries of specific tracts of land, all of which have been entrusted to supernatural protection.

Here, then, is one example, involving Heaven itself, of the process of verifying a person's credentials before they are accepted. But the spirits themselves may also examine the credentials of rulers to whom they are prepared to manifest themselves, almost always in dreams, before offering their services. "Ministers" and nature spirits alike are discriminating when they appear before rulers who are energetic soldiers on campaigns, or in danger from shipwreck and deserving to be preserved for success in warfare, or threatened by invaders, rebels, or court conspirators. One spirit addresses the first Ly ruler's son: "You, sir, are attacking the south. I am the spirit of Dong-co Mountain [the prince has reached this mountain on his journey south]. I request that I may follow your army." The assumption is that those who receive spiritual assistance have already shown signs of being able to protect their country. The spirits reinforce success rather than launch a ruler's successful career. Rulers' needs vary: founding a new capital city, seeking a guardian spirit to enforce the laws, assistance during an

invasion by Sung China in 1075, assisting Gao Pian against Yunnanese invaders in the ninth century. Assistance can be in the form of mobilizing armies of "demons," controlling dangerous natural elements, proffering advice for coping with particular contingencies, or occasionally advising Chinese governors how their administration should be conducted. Advice to governors is in the form of platitudes from the Confucian canon as if Chinese are expected to be self-consciously bookish on matters of government.

A significant feature of the relationship between spirits and rulers is that spirits use the correct language regulating relations between superiors and inferiors when they appear in a ruler's presence. They may also knock their heads on the ground. A spirit's choice of a worthy ruler is not the only aspect of the relationship between rulers and the spirits. The ruler, be he Chinese or Vietnamese, must be willing to respond to a spirit's presence. Sometimes a beautiful location is sufficient to convince him that it is likely to be inhabited by a spirit. A ruler may encounter "land worthy of beholding." He offers libations and soon afterwards he dreams of a strange apparition. The accuracy of his perception of the terrain is thereby confirmed. A spirit's presence can also be sensed in the visible properties of "the land," and the text uses a term signifying "bounded territory."

An exalted sense of the landscape's magical properties was probably an ancient Vietnamese characteristic. We observed above the powerful impression the beauty of the Vietnamese landscape left on the An-nan zhi-yuan's compiler, and I suggested that he had been influenced by Vietnamese sources. In view of the contents of the tales, the surmise is reasonable. Vietnamese rather than Chinese would proclaim the association of fine

scenery with famous people. In 1175, fifty years before the accession of the Tran, the dying ruler Ly Anh-ton, entrusting the country to his heir, spoke thus:

The country's mountains are marvelous, its streams are beautiful,

The men are heroic, the land has spiritual power.

Precious and lovely, valuable,

What is there that does not grow?

Other countries cannot be compared.

You must take care to preserve it.<sup>37</sup>

In the Viet dien u linh tap, the first Ly ruler uses similar language. He had been "travelling to enjoy fine scenery " and "his heart was stirred." He declares, "I behold this land of marvelous mountains and beautiful streams, an extraordinary place." He offers libations and prays: "If a heroic spirit is here, respond." Ly Phuc Man appears and recounts his record of exploits that included repelling two Chinese invasions in the tenth century. He was to serve the Tran when the Mongols attacked in 1257.

But rulers do not always sense a spirit's presence in so spontaneous and relaxed a fashion. Sometimes they are cautious and want to test and verify a spirit's claims to supernatural power. The rulers are behaving as one would expect of those accustomed to command. We now hear voices of authority and deference. For example, a prince of the ephemeral Le ruling family of the late tenth century travels by boat and sails into a violent storm. He spots a shrine on the bank, and villagers inform him that it is the ancient shrine of the local spirit of Dang-chau, associated with a victory in the sixth century. The prince orders libations and challenges the spirit: "If you have spiritual power and can drive away the wind and rain, order the rain to fall on this side of the river

and stop the rain on the other side. I shall then consider that your powers have been verified." The spirit succeeds in this challenging test. Direct discourse makes passages such as these dramatic. The reader realizes the urgency of the situation and, in this tale, has been given a sweep of Vietnamese history from the sixth to the tenth century in the form of the spirit's exploits.

A Chinese governor of the seventh century provides another example of a test. He had built a shrine at the strategic site of Bach-hac in the northwest at the confluence of three great rivers flowing from Yunnan. He then issues a challenge: "If this spirit is very powerful, I command it to appear in the form of the image [in its shrine]." That night two men appear in a dream, both in the form of the image. The governor wants to test them. They compete in jumping across the Red River; one of them is the winner and is allowed to inhabit the shrine as the local spirit.

Sometimes rulers consult members of their entourage before recognizing a spirit's claims. Their assistants may explain the history of a particular spirit, urge the ruler to build a shrine for a spirit, explain the significance of a spirit's appearance, or, as a monk did, advise a ruler how to test a spirit's claims. The tests to which spirits have to submit strengthen the reader's confidence in the spirits' power.

No matter whether a ruler is initially cautious in accepting a spirit's credentials, the tales make much of the spirits' eagerness to vaunt their earlier exploits as soon as they have manifested themselves. They are anxious to flourish their credentials. They are unmistakably achievement-oriented and would be admired for that reason. These conversations between spirits and rulers would have a powerful effect on readers. Glorious moments in the Vietnamese past become episodes in an unending story of the

benign spiritual influence of dead heroes, now elevated to the status of spirits, or of animist spirits. Past and present would merge to create the effect of the timeless heritage of spiritual benefits unleashed for the sake of the land. The Tran rulers were aware of this when they promoted the spirits for their wartime services.

Repetitive language abounds when rulers encounter spirits, and no terms appear more frequently than *khi* and *linh*, the fluid pervading the body and spiritual power respectively. *Khi* is a sign of *linh* in the form of clouds and vapor. A spirit's appearance is heralded by *khi*, and then its "awesome *linh*" manifests itself. A five-colored *khi* may emerge from the ground. The sun is suddenly dimmed by a cloud of *khi*. The first Ly ruler detects the countryside's beautiful *khi* when he is travelling. The Dong-co spirit requests that its *linh* may be allowed to follow the future second Ly ruler's army. The Le prince inquires whether the Dang-chau spirit has *linh*. After the Cao Lo spirit has made itself known, one of Gao Pian's followers exclaims:

The mountains and rivers of the Southern Kingdom are matchless.

The dragon's spirit ( i.e. the ruler's prowess) stirs the place's *linh*.

Chiao-chou's difficulties will cease.

We shall always see soaring peace.<sup>38</sup>

Here is a singular tribute to Vietnam's spiritual presence. Even the Chinese can detect it.

I noted above the recurrent use of "indeed" or "so it was." The function of this expression is to signify the successful testing of a spirit's credentials by demonstrating that it has achieved what it claimed to be able to do. For example, the Dang-chau spirit "indeed" controlled rainfall. During the first Mongol invasion of 1257, a spirit of unknown origin, Ly Do Uy, appeared to the king in a dream: "Your Majesty need not

remove your Court to a distant place." Libations were then offered to ensure that the invaders would withdraw. "Afterwards it was, indeed, as the spirit had said."

Heaven identifies dead heroes who are worthy of being appointed as spiritual guardians of the land, spirits identify rulers who deserve to be assisted, and rulers identify "land" likely to be inhabited by spirits. But the process of identification does not end here. Villagers, too, have no difficulty in associating the land with spirits. They respond as soon as supernatural signs come to their notice because they have been reared to believe that they live in a world inhabited by spirits and are thankful to increase the number of auspicious spirits when opportunities occur. "The people mourned" the deaths of the two sisters in the first century C.E. and built a shrine for them. Villagers can introduce rulers to spirits. Villagers "mourned" the death of a Cham king's widow. "The sound of moaning is heard on the river," the villagers explained to a Ly ruler. Ly Do Uy, drowned in a storm, had told the local villagers that "Heaven appointed me to be the river's spirit." The villagers immediately built a shrine. Villagers explained to the Le prince how a river spirit's *linh* responded to their worship.

One more and critically important instance of identification and selection remains to be discussed. We have seen that rulers would choose territorial spirits to assist them. We now need to consider the living whom they chose to assist them and why, and we must remember that those who achieved notably in the rulers' service could, when they died, be rewarded by Heaven by being appointed territorial spirits. Here is an opportunity for considering the status and style of public life, held in such high esteem as eventually to lead to supernatural status. Unusual status after death would have to be preceded by unusual performance on earth.

The rulers' subordinates, their "servants" or "assistants," are recruited from three categories. The first comprises those who, in their lifetime, would have lived in court circles. The second category comprises those described in the tales as "generals" during rebellions against Chinese governors; their activities suggest that they came from a rural background. One way of describing them would be that they belonged to a "military camp culture," focused on a resistance leader active in the countryside rather than in the environment of the Chinese provincial capital. Such a leader would attract enterprising local people. The third category emerged from the villages.

Ly Hoang, a son of the second Ly ruler in the first half of the eleventh century, is the highest-born member of the court-oriented group. He exemplified administrative "talent" of the highest order when he was the governor of the southern province of Nghe-an. His father had spotted his "talent" and retained his services for a number of years. His achievements were straightforward. He protected the province. He assisted his father during a campaign against the Chams. He held a census and demarcated tribal borders. The people "feared" him. He had *virtus* (*duc*; Chinese *te*), which Arthur Waley translates as the "latent power" inherent in everything. *Virtus* is a spiritual substance which attracts people to its possessor; all have it but in uneven amounts. When the provincial population heard of Ly Hoang's death in the capital [whither he had been recalled when his elder brother gained the throne], they erected a shrine and honored him as an "auspicious spirit" even though they had "feared" him in his lifetime. The spirit frequently exhibited its efficacy and assisted Tran Thai-ton during a voyage in 1252 against the Chams. The ship traveled "as though it flew." "Indeed" he was victorious, and Thai-ton promoted the spirit. Tran rulers subsequently promoted this spirit three

more times.

Pham Cu Luong was a provincial magistrate's grandson and a senior official's son. He had "assisted" a series of tenth-century rulers and rose to the status of *thai-uy*, a post held in Tran times by the ruler's senior relative. During the reign of the second Ly ruler there were numerous difficult and unresolved law cases. Prayers were offered to Heaven, and a spirit appeared to the king in a dream and announced that Heaven had appointed Luong to be in charge of law cases in the capital. The ruler's entourage identified him as a historical figure, and he was appointed to be the spirit that superintended the law. The Tran rulers promoted this spirit three times.

Ly Thuong Kiet, a famous general when the Song invaded Vietnam in 1075-1076 during the fourth Ly reign, was a general's son. He was so resourceful that he was known as having a general's "talent," and this brought him to the fore. His achievements were continuous. He was always being promoted and eventually became *thai-uy*, the highest post at court held by princes or commoners in Ly and Tran times. When he died, he was recognized as an "auspicious spirit," presumably by the grateful ruler. The Tran rulers promoted this spirit three times for its services in wartime.

There are four instances of spirits in my second category, those who were "generals" during their lifetimes in what I call a military camp culture. They lived long before. The first is Ly Ong Trong, a village giant of exceptional power and ability in managing affairs. In his youth he had been a local official but was insulted by the governor. He resigned, studied, and taught the Chinese classics. He entered the service of the First Emperor of China (Chin Shi Huang Ti) and became a general. His "reputation shook" the people of Central Asia, and the emperor judged him to be

"extraordinary." In old age he retired to his village in Vietnam and the emperor cast his image and placed it in front of the Hsien-yang Palace (in China) to intimidate the northern barbarians. Long afterwards, in the Tang period, Ly Ong Trong appeared in a dream to a Chinese governor in Vietnam and expounded the Zuo-zhuan and the Classics. The governor ordered a shrine to be built at Trong's home. Later, Gao Pian, the Tang general, dreamed that this spirit assisted him against Nan Zhao, the shrine was enlarged, and the image was hailed as that of an "auspicious spirit." The Tran promoted this spirit three times.

Cao Lo was An-duong's "general" in the third century B.C.E. not long before the beginning of the Chinese occupation. In the ninth century he appeared in a dream to Gao Pian, recounted his military achievements under An-duong, whom he had "assisted," and stated that he had been murdered but that Heaven pitied him and entrusted this "land" to him. As a spirit he "managed" all military and agricultural affairs. Gao Pian wished to know more and was given an account of feuds in An-duong's time. Henceforth, merchants who prayed at the spirit's shrine escaped shipwreck. The Tran promoted this spirit three times.

Truong Hong and Truong Hat were "famous generals" under Trieu Quang Phuc in the sixth century. When their leader was slain, they fled and were subsequently poisoned. In the tenth century they appeared in dreams and assisted rulers in their wars in riverine areas. Shrines were erected for the brothers and worship was "unceasing." They helped the fourth Ly ruler and Ly Thuong Kiet win victories over the Song in the eleventh century. The Tran thrice promoted the brothers' spirits.

Phung Hung, a tribal chief in the eighth century, is the last member in this group.

He was a local "bully" and possessed a great amount of courage and strength. He could seize a tiger. His younger brother was capable of similar feats. "The Liao all feared their reputation." During a rebellion in the Tang period, Hung brought neighboring villages under his control, regarded them as his own "land," and called himself a ruler. His awesome reputation caused "trembling" throughout the province. The Chinese governor, who could not subdue him, fell ill and died. Hung then took over the provincial government for seven years and is therefore classified in the tales as a "Sovereign." Succession disputes broke out when he died. His *linh* shone so brightly that a shrine was built for him to the west of the capital. When those who were robbers or were involved in disputed legal cases took oaths in front of the shrine, the consequences would be immediate. The shrine became popular. In the tenth century the spirit appeared to a ruler in a dream and offered him help during a Chinese invasion. Victory "indeed" followed. Special rites of worship were established and maintained thereafter. The Tran promoted this spirit three times.

The third category of spirits had been villagers. The first of these is To Lich. His family had lived for generations in a village in the neighborhood of the future capital. Three generations lived under one roof, a detail suggesting a Chinese-style family. The family was evidently an important one in the area. In the Jin period (265-419), To Lich became a "second degree" graduate [in China] and the magistrate of Long-do, the future site of Hanoi. He had the "reputation" of being loyal and filial. In the Tang period a governor dreamed that this spirit told him that "for a long time" it had "managed the land" where the governor intended to build a capital. "If the governor teaches my people their duty, I shall long reside here." When Gao Pian built a city on the same site, he

heard what had happened earlier and made the spirit the city's protector. When the founder of the Ly dynasty moved his capital there and renamed it Thang-long, the spirit paid him homage in a dream and was given an illustrious title. The Tran rulers promoted the spirit three times.

In the sixth century, Ly Phuc Man was Ly Bi's loyal general. Ly Bi, had led a rising against the Chinese, and Ly Phuc Man protected two areas. "The tribesmen did not dare rebel and the local people lived in peace." When he died, a shrine was built, presumably by the villagers. Centuries later, the founder of the Ly dynasty, while patrolling this part of the country, sensed a supernatural presence and summoned the spirit to appear. "An extraordinary person" did so, paid homage, and explained that Heaven had rewarded his loyalty by conferring this tract of land on him. The spirit recounted its exploits against robbers and pirates in Tang times. It had assisted Gao Pian against Nan Zhao and the tenth-century Vietnamese rulers against the Song. It was now offering its services to the Ly ruler. During the Mongol invasion in 1257, the villagers drove the enemy from their area; a title was conferred on the spirit, and the villagers were excused from military conscription. The Mongols were defeated in the same area when they again invaded in the 1280s. Titles were conferred on the spirit on two more occasions.

Le Phung Hieu is another villager. He would forcibly intervene when there were land disputes. "People did not dare to get close to him." The founder of the Ly dynasty recruited him into a special unit in the army. "He was the peer of famous warriors." In 1028, when the founder died, he took the lead in protecting the heir against his brothers' conspiracy to overthrow him. The grateful heir compared him with heroes in

Tang History. Phung Hieu continued his military career and was appointed an auspicious spirit when he died. The villagers erected a shrine for him; their requests were always met. The Tran promoted the spirit three times.

Muc Than was a fisherman who saved the fourth Ly ruler's life from the chief minister's malevolent magical arts. The tale is an interesting example of someone of lowly origin who seized an opportunity to bring himself to the ruler's notice and instantly become famous. The ruler congratulated him on "his courage and resourcefulness." He was given a post and subsequently became a senior general. When he died, he was appointed *thai-uy* and orders were given that his statue should be made for worship. He was appointed an "auspicious spirit." The Tran promoted the spirit twice.

Sometimes the "ministers" are attributed with physical prowess. Phung Hung could seize a tiger. They were brave. Military ability was greatly esteemed in the world of the tales. Le Phung Hieu, who served the early Ly rulers, was "the peer of famous warriors." Ly Thuong Kiet's ability was on the battlefield. The resourceful Muc Than became a senior general. Cao Lo, the Truong brothers, Ly Phuc Man, and Phung Hung were also "generals." They lived during the Chinese occupation when one most readily distinguished oneself from others by being capable of leading armed resistance. Ly Ong Trong, also a "general," is an ambiguous figure; he served the First Emperor of China in Central Asia, where his reputation "shook" the people there.

But the "ministers" had a more significant attribute in their lifetime and even later when they had become spirits because they "assisted" rulers in a particular way. They were administrators who loyally "managed affairs" on behalf of those they served. Perhaps the clearest example of an administrator is Ly Hoang, specifically shown to have

had the "ability" to administer the province of Nghe-an in a variety of ways. Pham Cu Luong, who had served several rulers in the tenth century, is another example of an administrator. He was promoted to the post of *thai-uy* before he died and was posthumously entrusted by Heaven with legal responsibilities. Evidently he had acquired a great deal of experience in public affairs. Even the strongman, Phung Hung, exercised legal responsibilities after his death. Lawbreakers took oaths in front of his shrine.

The ability to manage affairs is recorded in other ways. Ly Ong Trong could "manage affairs" when he was a local official. When he became a spirit, Cao Lo "managed" the military and agricultural affairs of the tract of land entrusted to him by Heaven. Though scholarly concerns are usually beyond the scope of the tales, they are mentioned when spirits have to handle Chinese governors. Was it assumed that Chinese officials would be familiar with the Confucian classics? Ly Ong Trong, when a spirit, expounded the Zuo-zhuan and the "classics" to a Chinese governor in order, no doubt, to improve the standards of his administration. To Lich, whose family lived close to the center of Chinese provincial rule and seems to have resembled a Chinese-style extended family living under one roof, had been a Chinese graduate and able to give bookish advice to a governor; he told the governor to teach the people their "duty," a key Confucian virtue.

The attributes of the rulers' assistants tell us something about how government is perceived in the world of the tales. Good government is understood to mean strong government, and strong government was exercised among the Vietnamese people as well as against invading outsiders. The people of Nghe-an "feared" Ly Hoang, though this did not mean that they disliked him. On the contrary, they honored him as an auspicious

spirit when they heard that he had died. Tribesmen "did not dare to rebel" when Ly Phuc Man was protecting two areas under Ly Bi. Le Phung Hieu, when still a villager, would settle land disputes, and people "did not dare to get close to him." "The Liao all feared the reputation" of Phung Hung and his brother, while Phung Hung's "awesome reputation" caused people to "tremble." The association of spirits with the enforcement of the laws suggests that maintaining social discipline was a priority of government. Hung helped to protect the laws when he became a spirit. As the result of Heaven's intervention, Pham Cu Luong became the protector of the laws when he was a spirit.

Two further comments can be made about those who "assisted" rulers before they became spirits. Their careers are depicted as long, successful, and accompanied by promotions. They never cease to earn "merit." They never fall foul of their masters. Even Cao Lo, who incurred the envy of others and was murdered, "had many military achievements under An-duong." These long and successful careers prove that the rulers had selected their assistants wisely. Indeed, the tales teach that prudent selection is an indispensable source of stability. Heaven selects suitable spirits to protect tracts of land, spirits have their eye on worthy rulers, and rulers test and select suitable spirits to assist them. Recording long and successful careers performs the same function in the tales as the expression "indeed" to record what happens when a prudent ruler selects a suitable spirit to serve him. In either case success is implied.

The other comment about the rulers' "assistants" is the significance of what happens when those who achieve so abundantly eventually die and become spirits. Sometimes villagers instinctively believe that a dead person deserves a shrine and sacrifices, and, sooner or later, their judgment will be justified when the spirit answers

their requests. Usually, however, supernatural status is a reward from Heaven or a ruler, and what is now especially noteworthy is the significance of this scale of reward, which is that the prestige of public life is signalized in no uncertain terms. In seventh-century Cambodia and thereafter, the death wish of those who had earned merit on behalf of their ruler was that they would be united with Siva. To this end they would list their achievements in their death with inscriptions as though they were hoping to convince Siva. The Vietnamese tales, when they list a dead assistant's achievements and record his supernatural status, seem to share the Khmers' cultural values. But there is a difference. Supernatural status in Vietnam meant that spirits could continue to assist worthy rulers. This does not seem to have been the case in Cambodia.

I shall now propose a syntagmatically ordered group of four axioms that represent the tales' teachings. It reflects Vietnamese historical experience and not Chinese classical learning. The Vietnamese reader of these tales would, I believe, be sufficiently familiar with the axioms that he would take them for granted and feel it unnecessary to enunciate them as I shall do. Each axiom is inseparable from the others. No matter in what sequence the axioms appear in the tales, they represent four interrelated aspects of exemplary behavior required of rulers. If one of them is missing in a particular tale, its presence can be assumed because the remaining axioms would not make sense without it.

The first axiom stresses the need to be aware of signs of supernatural power residing in tracts of land and also of signs of a human's extraordinary prowess.

The second axiom may represent a major Vietnamese cultural feature. It is not always sufficient to take note of these signs. Investigation and testing are often and perhaps usually necessary before trusting the signs. Villagers continuously verify their

local spirit's power by the regularity with which it responds to their appeals for help. Dead heroes are rewarded by Heaven only after Heaven has evaluated their conduct on earth. Spirits have invisibly tested rulers' performance before they offer assistance. Rulers painstakingly verify spirits' claims; two tales explicitly acknowledge that some spirits may be impure. Village heroes pass their fellow villagers' test of their prowess. Before they make appointments, well-informed rulers are familiar with the qualifications of officials and villagers alike. In other words, to be perceived as an achiever implies that one's capacity for achieving has been proved. The Chinese practice of testing by means of literary examinations is notably absent in the tales as a Vietnamese practice.

Thus, in the achievement-oriented world of the tales, achievement has always to be evaluated and measured. Hierarchical status corresponds with unusual personal qualities, no matter whether one is a ruler, a ruler's "servant," or a villager. A capacity to perform on an extraordinary scale is what is respected in society, and the uneven distribution of the capacity explains why one person can attract the loyalty of others. The ruler with his unequalled prowess (*virtus*) is acknowledged as the chief achiever. Even spirits pay him homage. Rulers can confer and elevate the spirits' status. The rulers' servants are passive. Only rebels challenge a ruler's authority and they cannot be expected to succeed..

The third axiom teaches what is bound to happen after rulers recognize the credentials of a spirit or human. When a spirit or human is appointed to "assist" a ruler, exemplary service begins and continues indefinitely.

The fourth and final axiom is that exemplary service must be appropriately rewarded. Heaven bestows tracts of land on spirits. Shrines are built and libations

offered when spirits have aided rulers or villagers. Promotions and titles are conferred by rulers on humans and spirits alike.

Vietnam is evidently a country where supernatural power is available and can be tapped when emergencies arise. When the proper relationship between rulers, spirits, and "assistants" prevails, the country is secure. The compiler's sources, accounting for a millennium and a half, always subscribe to these axioms and teach nothing else, and we can suppose that the Viet dien u linh tap reflects a deeply-entrenched Vietnamese understanding of how human affairs must be managed.

No matter if there are long intervals of time when nothing is recorded about a spirit, it will eventually reappear, especially during the thirteenth century when the country needed its services. The Truong brothers lived in the sixth century, but their spirits do not appear before the tenth. Ly Phuc Man also lived in the sixth century, but he appears as a spirit as late as the first Ly reign in the early eleventh century. Ly Hoang lived in the eleventh century but appears as a spirit to help the Tran ruler as late as the thirteenth century. But their delayed appearances do not mean that the exercise of their powers was only spasmodic. Two of the tales' key expressions are in the context of the villagers' "unceasing worship" and that "the spirit never failed to respond to [the villagers'] requests." These terms account for the long intervals between the inception of a cult and the spirit's intervention on behalf of a ruler. Villagers had kept a cult alive in the meantime. Sometimes, as we have seen, villagers are able to call a ruler's attention to their local cult. Vietnamese spiritual power is never in abeyance.

A feature of the long intervals between the beginning of a cult and its spirit's first appearance is that the intervals almost invariably coincide with the twelfth century, when

the Ly rulers were becoming feebler and the end of their rule was in sight. One would expect these all-powerful spirits to make a special effort to compensate for the rulers' weakness. The contrary happens, and the inference seems to be that spirits were believed to manifest themselves only when rulers of prowess/*virtus* deserved to be helped. The function of supernatural power is to reinforce human strength. In the world of the tales, energetic assistants such as Le Phung Hieu and Ly Thuong Kiet serve effective rulers, under whom they earn their qualifications for eventual spiritual status. They need to be in the presence of extraordinary persons in order to flex their muscles. This situation is well illustrated by the case of To Hien Thanh, known from the Ly Annals to have served Ly Anh-ton (1138 -1175) in suppressing internal unrest. He also became *thai-uy* and "protected" Anh-ton's youthful successor for a few years. Yet the tales ignore this honorable man, and the reason must be the assumption that only outstanding men of the caliber of the first four Ly rulers would recognize, attract, and employ assistants of a caliber that justified their eventually becoming spirits.

The interest of the long spans of time represented in the tales is enhanced when one reads that Chinese governors and Vietnamese rulers alike would revive official sacrifices at the shrines. The shrines were never abandoned. The readiness of Chinese governors to honor the local spirits is a striking tribute to the prestige of the Vietnamese spirits. But no narrational device does more to create the impression of long periods of time than the passages of direct discourse, when spirits, challenged by rulers to justify their claims to supernatural power, appear in dreams and boast of their exploits over the centuries either as human beings or as spirits or during both phases of their careers. Glorious episodes in the past become opportunities for reminding readers of the unending

presence of the supernatural power that had stood the country in good stead for many centuries and compensated for its size in comparison with that of China.

The tales' perspective is a timeless one. Later experiences are a renewal of earlier ones. Past and present are conflated because Vietnam is a land with an unending and flawless record of spiritual dispensations. Not only are emergencies predictably surmounted; the emergencies themselves are predictable. These are threats to the borders or to the throne. No emergency requires that society be reformed. Comparisons do not have to be made between past and present. There is no awareness of a venerable Vietnamese antiquity; the two tales about the Hung kings (the Tan-vien tale and that about the Trung sisters) and about the An-duong period are not presented as exemplifying special heroic qualities.

A final comment about the tales' presentation of the past is that nothing suggests familiarity with the concept of the rise and fall of states. Si-ma Guang, whose Zi-zhi tong-jian was to become the model for Vietnamese official histories, states that he was influenced by the Zuo-zhuan when he wanted to write a history which contained "all a prince ought to know, everything pertaining to the rise and fall of dynasties . . . ."

Though the preface to the tales begins with an unacknowledged passage from the Zuo-zhuan, those who read the tales, princes or others, were taught a Vietnamese version of useful knowledge in the form of the axioms to which I have drawn attention.

In this chapter I have tried to allow the voices to speak for themselves, each by way of a monologue. Chen Fu comes through as self-opinionated and irritated by the impertinent self-assumption by the Tran Court of features of the Chinese imperial style but also an absence of signs of social discipline and moral customs reinforced by

"Chinese rites and music." The country depends for its survival on its location behind the mountains of China's southern border, on its manageable size and easy riverine communications, and on harsh and expensive government by "the bullies" who are its "chiefs." The compiler of the An-nan zhi-yuan read what Chinese saw and recorded centuries before and also read what Ming officials and their Vietnamese informants reported, and on this basis he is able to justify the Ming occupation of a country too far from China to be able otherwise to overcome its cultural backwardness. Some of its inhabitants are familiar with Chinese literature, but there had been no educational system to guarantee that the country would be well-governed when left to its own resources.

The focus and mood of the compiler of the Viet dien u linh tap are, however, very different. He is less interested in what can be described than in how things had happened with such predictably successful consequences. The tales he reproduces record that rulers and villagers alike are able to sense the supernatural ambience of the landscape, though we have to turn to the An-nan zhi-yuan for an ampler vision of what Vietnamese could associate with "beautiful scenery."

The voices heard in this chapter are clear enough, but their points of view are so far apart that it is difficult to imagine orderly and interesting dialogue. Therefore, we are left with monologues. Yet all the voices have been concerned with a particular country's geopolitical setting. I believe that Vietnamese would agree with the Chinese that Vietnam was a very small country when compared with China, and the Chinese would concede that its remoteness and mountainous borders gave it strategic advantages and that its riverine terrain lent itself to easy control by its chiefs. On the other hand, if a conversation were actually under way, the Chinese would not conceal their contempt for

the Vietnamese style of government. "Rites and ceremonies" were lacking, and there was an indifference to "moral" behavior and education.

The Vietnamese would no doubt retort that, in several important respects, their performance could be compared with that of the Chinese themselves. To make their point they could flaunt their ability to write poetry in the Chinese script and their familiarity with Chinese literature. According to one of the tales in the Viet dien u linh tap, a Ly ruler did not hesitate to liken Le Phung Hieu with famous heroes in Chinese dynastic histories. Or again, so self-confident were educated Vietnamese in their command of Chinese culture that the compiler of Viet dien u linh tap felt free to parade his own version of the Zuo-zhuan without pausing to acknowledge his debt to that text. The Vietnamese might even have dared to remind the Chinese that they had repelled Chinese armies. The Chinese would not wish to pursue a line of conversation that could fuel the same fear of Vietnamese possession of Chinese skills that worried Chen Fu.

Sooner or later, the Chinese would deride the immobility of Vietnamese historical experience. There was no antiquity to be venerated. The cultural situation before the Chinese arrived was no different from what it was after they withdrew in the tenth century, and the Ming were faced with the same social problems that had been faced by the Han governors. The Vietnamese, for their part, would readily agree that there was an important but very different element of sameness in their historical experience. The past, far from being a record of unrelieved backwardness that the Chinese liked to stress, was a time of continuous success in face of grave danger.

No doubt, conversation would especially become difficult to sustain if the Vietnamese chose to insist that their successes came from rulers endowed with the same

quality that the Chinese habitually attributed to their own rulers, namely *virtus (duc/te)* or prowess, a supernatural quality that attracted others to their side and that guaranteed their victories. The Vietnamese would again be claiming comparability with the Chinese. Now could be their chance to explain why their rulers' subordinates were either themselves men of outstanding prowess or passive followers. The Vietnamese political arena, rather than being where the influence of educated men could make itself felt, resembled a hierarchy of prowess.

Perhaps the Vietnamese would hesitate to reveal a further and crucial source of strength, otherwise inaccessible to the Chinese, which was that their country comprised a group of definable tracts of land, each of which was protected by a territorial spirit who paid homage to the ruler. These tracts, with their own historical and magical associations, contributed to a common and glorious experience of territorial invincibility and fostered a sense of unity in spite of the absence of a complex bureaucracy. Furthermore, the spirits were part of a network of tested relationships that were centered on the rulers and included subordinates at court, chosen for their loyalty and bravery rather than their literary qualifications. The relationships were taught in the Viet dien u linh tap in the form of the axioms that we have noted, and they represented the Vietnamese alternative to the Confucian teachings echoed by Chen Fu and the compiler of the An-nan zhi-yuan; these teachings were recommended in the tales of the Viet dien u linh tap only for the benefit of Chinese governors. The network of relationships, rather than ample riverine communications, made Vietnam a manageable country. Good officials would be able to manage affairs not by reforming customs but because they had earned an awesome reputation and were feared.

Perhaps the disclosure of such information would strengthen the Chinese view that the Vietnamese were a superstitious people. This kind of exchange, and indeed anything else in an attempt, on the basis of the texts described in this chapter, to create a dialogue among representatives of two points of view, would probably result in talk at cross purposes. Educated Vietnamese would be able to understand the Chinese frame of reference when rites and ceremonies were mentioned, but their own reliance on the territorial spirits would be incomprehensible to the Chinese. The outcome would be acrimonious. Such a dialogue would leave no more than the impression of a small country that managed to survive in the thirteenth century in spite of its giant neighbor. One expression more than any other reflects the Vietnamese mood: "so it was." When in 1257 the Mongols invaded, a spirit assured the Tran ruler: "You need not move your Court to a distant place." The tale goes on to relate: "Afterwards, so it was as the spirit had said."

Obviously these texts do not lend themselves to being reconstructed in the form of a dialogue. There are other texts available, however, that lend themselves more readily to be adapted to resemble an actual conversation. In 1294, the envoy Chen Fu and Dinh Cung Vien, a senior official in the Tran Court, bid farewell, and a convention of Chinese protocol on such occasions was that farewell poems were exchanged when envoys were about to depart. The Vietnamese had adopted the practice. Dinh Cung Vien's poem is as follows.

The envoy's emblem flies beneath auspicious mist.

He will not shirk rough thoroughfares, nine thousand miles of land.

His sleeves will sweep aside the miasma of the Southern Ocean.

Suddenly, a sound breaks into the *dhyana* (meditation) of humankind.

Still young in office, you are already ahead of Zhong Zhun (113 B.C.E.);

Your noble discourse in high places exceeds Lu Jia's (198 B.C.E.).

When you return to Court, you will surely be noted.

This distant vassal will always wish you peace and prosperity.<sup>39</sup>

Vien had chosen an appropriate poetic mode (*ho*) for the occasion, and he described the Vietnamese part of the journey in the conventional language of Chinese writers. The references to the Han envoys Zhong Zhun and Lu Jia are ostensibly intended to flatter, as is the reflection in the final couplet. Lu Jia served twice as Han envoy to the Chinese warlord in Canton, Zhao Tuo, or Trieu Da in Vietnamese. Zhong Zhun was sent to try to lure Zhao Tuo's descendants to obedience in 113 B.C.E. When Lu Jia returned from his first visit to Zhao Tuo, in 196 B.C.E., Emperor Gao-zu conferred a lofty title on him. During his second visit, in 179 B.C.E., Lu Jia persuaded Zhao Tuo to formally abandon his claim to imperial status. Incidentally, Vien's poem echoes another Vietnamese voice, that of Le Van HUU, the thirteenth-century editor of the Vietnamese Annals, who commented upon Vietnam's relations with the Han empire and praised Zhao Tuo as the "first emperor in the south." When Dinh Cung Vien mentions Lu Jia in his poem to Chen Fu, he may be behaving as insolently as he had in 1291 when he publicly rebuked the Chinese envoy Zhang La-dao and as insolently as the emperor Nhan-ton had been a few weeks earlier when he wanted Chen Fu's mission to enter the Vietnamese capital by a subordinate gate.

Chen Fu's reply keeps close to the structure of Vien's poem:

Incessant rain will accompany my carriage and wash away the pestilential

vapors.

Why should the giant bird halt after three thousand miles of water?

Before the journey in the South is over, I shall hear talk of Vimalakirti's illness.

Mindless, I shall cross into the North with Bodhidharma's *dhyana* in my ears.

The envoys' insignia will then be homeward bound. The bronze pillars will be  
behind them.

The emperor's presence will be close. The imperial veranda will lie ahead.

Approaching the mountain path, I grasp your hand with no other wish

Than that loyalty and rectitude will brighten the evening of your life.<sup>40</sup>

In his first two couplets Chen Fu matches Vien's corresponding ones with mention of climate, distance and the *dhyana*. The flight of the giant bird is a cliched reference to vast distances from an ancient text. He similarly matches Vien in the final two couplets with reference to imperial service and personal farewells. Chen Fu's final line is apt because we know that Dinh Cung Vien died in that same year. Both poems visualize Vietnam as a remote part of the world, separated from China by unhealthy terrain. Such was the point of view of the two Chinese texts studied above.

So far the exchange has been formal and unexceptional. But, after he had returned to China, Chen Fu wrote another poem and packed it with erudite literary language to express what he really felt about his experience in Vietnam. One can imagine that, if a conversation between those who held the points of view represented by the three texts rendered earlier in this chapter actually happened, there would have been plenty of times when either the Chinese or the Vietnamese would have made known their true feelings privately.

Chen Fu's other poem is an angry one. It begins with a rueful reference to his reckless ambition that was responsible for his going on a mission into the distant South. The scene is ominous. What happens in the South ages him. Recollecting the episode disturbs him.

Thus it was that in my youth I sought the long tassel.

I, a light-weight for so heavy a task, was ordered down to the Southern region.

After ten thousand miles to Shang-lin, I had not reached the hills.

But then at night in the Han Valley a cock crowed.

My honest heart shook in the shadow of bronze spears.

Amid the noise of bronze drums, my hair began to whiten.

Fortunately I have returned with body intact.

But, when I return there in my dreams, my fevered soul is frightened.

The poet has spared no pains to emphasize the horror of the experience. The "long tassel" is his metaphor for foolhardy ambition, and the crowing cock at night is a figure of speech for the danger awaiting him at the Vietnamese border. The spears and drums conjure up the spectacle of a foreign court that could stand on its dignity even in the presence of the imperial envoys. The last couplet is a frank admission of fear.

Chen Fu's two poems, read alongside each other, evoke a vivid contrast between the secure North and the dangerous South. Both poems are about the journey to and from Vietnam, and their crucial feature is the border between North and South. At the border, the cock crows in the night and foretells danger. When he writes his poem for Vien, he refers to the pestilential vapors on the border, as Vien also does, which was an almost obligatory literary flourish on such an occasion. When he writes to himself, however, his

soul is feverish even after he has returned. What happens on either side of the border is also significant. The threatening language of "spears" and "drums" in the third couplet of the private poem speaks of deep anxiety, whereas, in the farewell poem, "the bronze pillars behind" and "the jade veranda ahead" signify that the envoy is back on home ground and suggests relief at having left what he and his fellow-countrymen were wont to describe as "a far-off corner over the horizon."

Dinh Cung Vien's and Chen Fu's exchange of poems, the civility of which was guaranteed by Chinese protocol, is no more lively than a formal conversation between two persons whose intentions are to demonstrate their literary competence. The poems hardly break free from the monologist pattern elsewhere in this chapter.

So much for glimpses of the setting provided by Chinese and Vietnamese monologues. The narrative will now assume the form of a dialogue on lines described in the first chapter. Conversation will depend on the "limited point of view" of characters whom I have created but whose speech, whether direct or indirect, is influenced by what is recorded in the Tran Annals or in poems and prose written in Tran times. The narrative in the next chapter will comprise two episodes. The first involves characters living in the early fourteenth century.

## Chapter Three

### Conversations in the early fourteenth century

#### On the shore of West Lake (1314)

In 1314, Emperor Tran Anh-ton went through the formality of abdicating in favor of his son, Minh-ton, and envoys from the Mongol ruler in the Northern empire visited the capital city of Thanh-long. Their credentials were inspected, a banquet was held in their honor and they were noisily feasted. The new emperor, still only fourteen years old, was clad in golden silk robes and wore the imperial cap, and his appearance impressed the envoys so much that they exclaimed that he was "as ethereal as an immortal." They even talked about his appearance when they returned home and discussed it with Tran envoys sent to the Mongol Court. The Tran envoys were delighted, of course, and assured the Northerners that the Southerners were all "ethereal." Minh-ton's remarkable effect on the Northerners was observed by all who attended the banquet. It was the new emperor's first and highly successful appearance before representatives of the Mongol Court.

One afternoon shortly afterwards, several strollers happened to meet on the shores of West Lake in the neighborhood of Thanh-long. They had noticed a fisherman haul a large fish from the lake, and they wanted to inspect it. The older members of the group knew each other. Long was an elderly soldier of senior rank, long since retired from active duty. During the two Mongol invasions in the 1280s he was close to the Hung-dao Prince, a near relative of the ruler and the commander-in-chief. Long had commanded a unit in the imperial bodyguard during the wars. Those were exciting and unforgettable

years, and Long was never happier than when he had the chance of reliving them. He admired the prince enormously and had little respect for those who owed their position in the rulers' service to scholarly skills and no more. Now in his late fifties, he had the reputation of being brave but opinionated. Standing deferentially by his side were Thanh and Lam, also veterans of the Mongol wars and proud to be close to Long but with little to say.

Another elder character was Chu, a literatus who had worked in the Han Lam Academy and, latterly, in the History Office. Vietnamese envoys to the North were among his acquaintances. He had never fought in the wars and had not been appointed to the coveted post of *hanh-khien*, or liaison officer between the Court and local administration. On the other hand, he was at home among the archives and had worked with those who drafted edicts for local consumption or memorials for the Northern Court. Perhaps because his career had not been a notable one, he had an excessive opinion of the importance of literati in government service. When aroused, he would talk at length.

Tich, also elderly, was regarded as being respectful and upright. He worked for many years in the Han Lam Academy, was once attached to the household of Emperor Thanh-ton (1258-1290) and circulated easily among the personal entourages of the emperors and princes. He was a scholar, a poet, and a connoisseur of poetry with a reputation for being a pedant.

Dinh, somewhat older than Chu and Tich, was neither boastful nor quarrelsome. He was the quietest person in the group. He had taught in the State College (*Quoc tu giam*), became interested in meditational Buddhism, the Buddhism of the *dhyana*, and was favorably noticed by Tran Tung, elder brother of the Hung-dao Prince who

commanded the armies during the Mongol invasions. Tran Tung was famous not only for his services in the wars but also as an accomplished practitioner of the *dhyana* and as a religious influence on Thanh-ton. Dinh eventually belonged to the fringe of the monkish circle close to the Court.

Khung, younger than those so far mentioned, was well-educated like Chu and Tich, but he also held responsible posts. He was too young to have fought in the Mongol wars but already had considerable administrative experience and was working his way upwards. He had served in the Censorate, had accompanied the mission to the North in 1312, and had recently been appointed a *hanh-khien*, being the only one in the group with this prestigious status. His peers know him as smart and somewhat abrasive; he would make scathing comments about the behavior and performance of some of his colleagues in public life. He was recognized as a scholar, had succeeded in every stage of his career so far, was apparently ambitious but also prudent. He would not choose to dominate a conversation. He had a somewhat cynical frame of mind and was wont to call attention to what others took for granted. He could not claim to have played any active part in the heroic events of the 1280s, but he was a shrewd observer of his own time. He was expected to rise high in the ruler's favor and had already attracted to his side junior officials, two of whom, Hap and Ang, both law officers, happened to be with him. They were in their early thirties and had passed the government examination of 1304. They kept their opinions to themselves.

The perspective developed in the previous chapter is that Vietnam was a small but manageable country. Energetic rulers would make their influence felt. Similarly, because the scale of public life was small and there were only a few senior posts, officials

would be likely to know each other if only to keep up-to-date with what was happening. Thus, these men were acquainted with each other and ready to chat. Long, Chu, Tich, and Dinh had worked at court for many years, and Khung had recently become well known. Each of them was able to pass on gossip and might also have recent information about what was happening on the borders and especially on the northern border.

Relations with the Mongols continued to be of concern. And so it was not surprising that the recent diplomatic event in the capital was still fresh in the minds of these men when they happened to meet in a pavilion on the shores of West Lake one afternoon towards the end of 1314.

News about the unusual scene at the banquet had reached the strollers' ears. Not surprisingly, they began to chat about it. The senior ones compared the recent Mongol mission with the tense missions of the late thirteenth century, when Kubilai Khan sent envoys to rebuke our emperors for daring to resist his armies and for refusing to bring tribute in person. Evidently, the South-North relationship had now improved. The country was able to deal with the Mongol Court on more relaxed terms. Yet this would never have happened if the country had not been strong enough to survive no less than three invasions from the North, and they began to ask themselves why things had turned out so fortunately. The elder members of the group tapped their memories and were eager to demonstrate how close they had been to the center of affairs at critical moments or, at least, close to those who were. They had obviously lived through a dangerous age, and Long, who served in the entourage of the Hung-dao Prince, recalled what the prince had said on the eve of the second Mongol invasion: "You and I have been born into a disturbed age and have grown up in difficult times."

Tich, who had served the emperor Tran Thanh-ton (1258-1290), mentioned a poem Thanh-ton wrote in 1289, just after the wars had ended.<sup>41</sup> He reminded them that it was common knowledge that Thanh-ton assiduously practiced the techniques of the Buddhist school of meditation, as others in his family did, but the wars made it impossible for him to return to his ancestral home at Thien-trung downriver and to spend his remaining years in religious retreat. The Tran emperors' custom after delegating the responsibilities of government to their sons when the latter became adults, as Thanh-ton did in 1278, was to retire to Thien-truong, but the Mongol invasions in the 1280s meant that he had to stay behind to support his son, Nhan-ton (1279-1293). Tich recalled this background to the emperor's poem written in 1289, a year after the wars ended, and went on to describe the situation the emperor found when he eventually returned to Thien-truong, this "awesome landscape, the most sacred part of the country." Here was the scene that awaited him:

Instead of music and singing, there are blackbirds.

Instead of a thousand rows of servants, there are a thousand oranges.

"This couplet," Tich explained, "means that the emperor had to be content with a simple scene because the palaces had been destroyed by the invaders. The allusion in the second line would be to Ly Hanh, a Northerner, who was in such straightened circumstances that he could leave his heirs no more than an orchard of oranges. Thanh-ton was surveying a devastated scene in Thien-truong as elsewhere in the country. In the previous year he had been obliged to grant tax relief. Nevertheless, he was 'carefree' and could end his poem cheerfully:

The world has been cleansed, the dirt removed.

Enjoying oneself in the countryside this year is better by far than in previous years.

No wonder that he was exultant. The Mongol armies had been finally expelled.”

Thanh-ton died a year later, but the peace had held until now. Indeed, the envoys who recently visited Thanh-ton's grandson, Minh-ton, were very friendly. And so the group again wondered how the country managed to survive. Tich proposed that his friend, Nguyen Suong, neatly answered the question when he wrote in a poem that "one day people might not know, as we do, that the final victory at Bach-dang River [in 1288] was the result partly of terrain and partly of human achievement.”

Dinh, attracted to the teachings of the *dhyana*, preferred to give weight to geographical considerations, and he invoked the judgment of an authority no less renowned than the *dhyana* patriarch Huyen Quang (1254-1334), later honored by Minh-ton as "the great teacher of Con-son, who bestowed on me the field of blessing." Huyen Quang, according to Dinh, wrote a poem when he passed through Van-kiep in the northern province of Lang-chau. Here the Hung-dao Prince, the victorious general in the wars, had his country estate. The location and warlike associations of Lang-chau were bound to remind Huyen Quang of the Mongol invasions, and yet he wrote in his poem that "a hundred years are only a moment in time. When we look behind us, the ancient mountains face us." Dinh concluded: "Surely the poet knew that, in the final reckoning, the country was protected by a natural barrier. The mountains had always existed."

The mention of Van-kiep, the scene of invasion and victory alike, provoked the old soldier Long to break into what he considered to be an unsatisfactory turn in the conversation. Naturally, the monk saw everything from a timeless perspective, but no

realistic discussion of the victory could any longer ignore the Hung-dao Prince. Who was better qualified to praise him than another general, Pham Ngu Lao, still alive today?

The group listened with attention. Pham Ngu Lao was admired as a brave general as well as the Hung-dao Prince's disciple and a member of his household. He had a fine reputation. He was always victorious in battle, and he treated his soldiers as his children. He was well-read and fond of poetry. He was also a man of principle. A few years ago he dared to complain about the emperor Anh-ton's (1293-1320) harsh treatment of his elderly relative, the Minh-hien Prince, during a recent campaign against the Chams. This prince was Lao's close friend. They even ate meals together at the same table in defiance of imperial protocol to Anh-ton's disgust. Anh-ton had expelled the Minh-hien Prince from the camp because he disturbed the soldiers with his remarks, and the prince withdrew into the forest with several dozen household followers.

To many, Lao was best known for a poem he wrote to shock young men who had not yet earned merit in public life. Tich intoned the famous line: "They should blush to hear men speak of [Zhu-ge Liang]." Few heroes were more popular among educated men than this hero of the Record of the Three Kingdoms. Tich added that Pham Ngu Lao, in an earlier line of the same poem--"The ardor of the heroes in our armies can swallow an ox"--astutely alluded to a passage written by the famous Northern poet, Du Fu.

"In this age, merit-earning is certainly a powerful impulse," commented Thanh, himself a soldier. "During the Cham campaign to which Tich has just referred, the emperor's emissary, Doan Nhu Hai, who successfully summoned the Cham ruler to surrender, accused a prince of wanting to steal his merit. Anh-ton supported Hai's claim."

"He could hardly have done otherwise," muttered the hitherto silent Khung. "In

1299 Hai had composed the prince's groveling letter of apology to his father, Nhan-ton (1278-1308), for his drunken behavior when his father was in Thien-truong."

Long was anxious to bring the discussion back to the topic of the illustrious Hung-dao Prince and he called attention to Pham Ngu Lao's memorial poem in the prince's honor. Here, he suggested, was something that evoked the dead hero's greatness and also reflected the poet's relationship with his former general and his profound sense of loss. How skillfully he chose words to commemorate the prince's qualities! How aptly in the first couplet did he convey the sorrowful mood of autumn and "the sad sound of the wind." The prince was "far-sighted" and "entirely trustworthy," and in this way he dominates the scene in the second couplet. But what happened in the third couplet was that the prince had died, and so the poet signified the sensation of the prince's disappearance by the "darkening of the river by the rain" and "clouds that blocked out what could be seen."

Tich, who knew the poem, agreed that the poetic language reflected an acceptable standard of poetic usage. The expression "ten thousand miles of the Great Wall" was certainly a suitable metaphor for "trustworthiness," and the poet's terms for "far sightedness" and "the close relationship of leader and follower" in his last line had been authorized long ago by the well-known *San kuo chih* (History of the Three Kingdoms). Moreover, Pham Ngu Lao may have cleverly appropriated a term for "sorrowful" used by the illustrious Song loyalist, Lu Yu (1125-1214), and in the third couplet he may even have likened the prince with Han Tin, the famous hero who had helped the first Han emperor, Cao-to [Gao-zu], establish his dynasty.

Chu, a historian, wondered why the poet chose to refer in his first line to the

"Truong Lac" palace, an ancient palace in the far North which Han Cao-to had restored. He also noted, rather tartly, that the emperor Anh-ton, now in retirement, wrote a poem about Han Cao-to that did not conceal the fact that Cao-to later murdered Han Tin. Why should Lao have likened the prince with someone who came to a sorry end?

Tich impatiently retorted that every educated person knew that Han Tin was one of three heroes associated with the rise of the Han dynasty and that was why Lao alluded to him and that Lao's reference to the Han palace was only to endow his poem with an authentic imperial atmosphere as a metaphorical device to honor the land the prince had served. "All of us who write are familiar with the poetic convention of using metaphors and allusions to emphasize our meaning, and so did Pham Ngu Lao when he used Northern expressions for referring to the Northern empire which Han Tin served. After all, the two empires are of comparable status, and there is nothing improper in appropriating Northern 'imperial' vocabulary for his purpose."

The erudite turn to the conversation, predictable among literati, irritated Long, and he again brought the prince into the picture by declaring that the prince's military strategy was unquestionably responsible for the victory, and he added that this aspect of their discussion was still urgent. Very recently disputes had broken out on the northern border and one could never be certain that there would not be another invasion. After all, the traitor prince Tran Ich Tac lived in the North and could at any time be foisted on the country as the Mongols' puppet ruler. The days when Southern ships can sail across the Northern border and terrify the local population were long past. "We must therefore remember what the Hung-dao Prince on his deathbed told Emperor Anh-ton. His advice was simple and sensible because it was based on the country's genuine strength and was

supported by ancient and always successful experience in warfare with the North."

Long had often heard the prince's officers repeat this advice. He knew it by heart. "When the Han army attacked our first emperor, Trieu Da, with superior numbers, the people used scorched earth tactics and ambushed the enemy from the rear with their small arms. When the enemy advanced swiftly and in force, they could quickly be brought under control, and, if they moved patiently and without harming the people, it was up to our excellent generals to seize opportunities that arose as one would do when playing chess. The prince always insisted that what was essential was that attention should be given to fostering unity in our armies and treating the people's property with respect. This was the right strategy for protecting our country." Long concluded with emotion that all who had been close to the prince were influenced by his self-confidence. The prince knew after his success in the first invasion of the 1280s that the land would be cleansed of the enemy's dirt, as Thanh-ton gratefully acknowledged in his poem. "The prince's reference to our skilful generals was another sign of his supreme confidence in our country's resources, though it might also mean that the prince was certain that the Mongol generals would never be so astute, or even that he was taking the opportunity of teaching us how we should behave towards our people."

The older ones in the group listened to Long with great respect. They had lived through those dangerous times and understood the wisdom of the prince's words. Lam, an old soldier, remembered the importance the prince attached to unity within his own family. When the second invasion was about to begin, he drew his sword when his son, the Hung-nhuong Prince, treacherously hinted that the time was now ripe for avenging his grandfather Lieu's disgrace by seizing the throne. They all knew that the "disgrace" in

question was the emperor Thai-ton's (1237-1277) marriage to Lieu's wife in order to safeguard the imperial succession. Thai-ton's first wife was childless.

Hap and Ang, young *nho*, were children in the 1280s and the prince had died fourteen years ago. Therefore, it did not come naturally for them to think so highly of the peasants as the prince did. They were making their way upwards in official service and were cultivating the affectations and prejudices of those who preferred to associate themselves with an imperial court culture. Their contact with peasants was very different from the wartime generation. They were accustomed to administer severe punishments and levy heavy taxes, and on their tours of duty they saw evidence of Buddhist and other superstitious practices. They also knew that princes themselves, in spite of the Hung-dao Prince's lofty sentiments, did not always treat peasants with respect. No one had forgotten Prince Tran Khanh Du's notorious defense when accused in 1296 of bad conduct in the countryside: "generals are falcons and people are ducks."

The elderly ones, and especially Long, Thanh, and Lam, were happy to relive their dangerous but exciting past. They chatted away, and the others were reluctant to interrupt them. What stood out vividly in the veterans' minds was the swift passage of events. The campaign of 1285 was over in five months, and that of 1288 lasted no more than three. In these short periods of time there was continuous movement on land and sea and never far from the rivers where the decisive battles took place and especially at Ham-tu and Bach-dang. The size of the Mongol armies was unbelievable. They swarmed across the border in hundreds of thousands. Thanh described how in 1285 they were caught between those who came from the north and those from the south through Champa, and in 1288 we had to face them from the north by land and also from the sea.

The first two months in 1285 were especially anxious. Some of our people on the northern border surrendered. The Hung-dao Prince escaped by boat just in time. He was accompanied by two faithful dependants. The rest of his personal followers had fled. Thanh-ton's brother, Ich Tac, shamefully gave himself up to the Mongols and allowed himself to be nominated puppet ruler of our country. In 1292 our envoys to the North met and snubbed him. In 1285 Thanh-ton's daughter was sent to a place of safety, and he and his heir fled from the capital city to Thanh-hoa in an ordinary boat. They used their official vessel as a decoy. "Everything now depended on the talent of the Hung-dao Prince, and many suspected his loyalty as a result of the indignity his father had suffered. But he never wavered, and he threatened to strike with his sharp-pointed staff anyone who looked askance at him."

Lam took up the story. "The third month of 1285 was a critical time. Mongol armies from the north and from the south aimed to join forces at Tay-ket, downriver from the capital, but in the fourth and fifth months the brilliant tactics of the Tran princes, with their provincial levies, turned the tide. Everything now played into our hands. In the fourth month, Emperor Nhan-ton ordered the princes to send their 'light troops' to attack the Mongol army at Tay-ket, and the battle took place at Ham-tu. Luck was on our side. The enemy spotted Song soldiers among the Chieu-van Prince's army, took fright, and fled. How fortunate that this eccentric prince had cultivated the company of Song fugitives from the Mongol-controlled North. The prince made an important contribution to the defeat of the enemy."

Tich interrupted Lam to add a further detail on behalf of the Chieu-van Prince, Nhan Duat. He was no ordinary prince. His services to the country included bringing up

and educating the infant Minh-ton from the time of his birth in 1300 to just before his father decided a few months ago to appoint him heir. Tich went on to recall Nhat Duat's interest in the barbarians of Da-giang, whose languages and customs he knew sufficiently well that he gained their confidence and submission after they had rebelled in 1280. He had the courage to enter the rebel stockade with only a few boys, sit down with their leader, and eat their food with his hands. Khung added that Nhat Duat's services on that occasion were particularly valuable, because Da-giang was no great distance from the capital, and an attack could have caused considerable damage.

Long and the other veterans were now in their element. They could not forget that cunning had also contributed to victory, and Long related his favorite anecdote about Ha Dac, the son of the district chief of Phu-ninh, whose ruse in the fifth month of 1285 broke the Mongol advance from the coast that was trying to join the enemy armies in the capital area. Under cover of night, Dac fashioned giant-like dummy men from bamboo and clad them. He also stuck a large arrow through a great tree. When light came, the enemy saw all this and was terrified and did not dare to engage Dac's men in battle. Thereupon our soldiers attacked vigorously and destroyed the enemy. Dac followed up his success, built a pontoon across a river, and intercepted and massacred the survivors. His younger brother was also cunning. After he was captured, he stole an enemy flag and clothes and escaped. He clung to the flag in order to pretend to be an enemy, and this enabled him to spy on them. The result was that the enemy suffered another heavy defeat. Long went on to declare that, although Prince Hung-dao's ruse in 1288 at Bach-dang River of placing stakes in the riverbed to impale the fleeing Mongol fleet as the tide went out was a much more spectacular ruse, Ha Dac and his brother deserved to be

remembered for their achievements. He noted in passing that the Mongols were consistently unfortunate on the sea. In 1288, Prince Khanh Du surprised the Mongol fleet, destroyed it, and seized the enemy's supplies.

The story of Ha Dac and his brother illustrated a further and obvious factor responsible for victory, personal bravery on the battlefield. The veterans again agreed and recalled Do Khac Chung's daring visit to the Mongol camp to gather information under cover of bringing a conciliatory letter. He offered to go even though he was tattooed with the slogan "Kill the Tartars." The Mongol general rebuked our ruler for lack of propriety and mocked Chung: "You are angry but puny. What will the future hold for your country?" Not intimidated, Khac Chung quoted Han Tin's strategy when attacking the State of Yen on behalf of Han Cao-to. "He stationed his army at the border but first sent a letter. If Yen did not choose peace, this was Yen's error." Khac Chung was surely taunting the Mongols. Tran Binh Trong was another hero. Captured by the Mongols and asked if he would like to become a Northern prince, he replied contemptuously that he "preferred to be a Southern Ghost." He was immediately put to death.

"Why," asked Ang, the young *nho*, "should he have been offered princely rank in the North?"

"Perhaps," suggested Chu, "because the Mongols discovered that he had married Thai-ton's daughter and was himself descended from an ancient ruling family."

Lam suggested that a heroine of those times should also be applauded. She was Tran Phuong Duong, the wife of the Chief Minister, Tran Quang Khai (1241-1294), Thanh-ton's younger brother, the victor at Ham-tu and the liberator of the capital in 1285.

In 1284 the Mongols had occupied the capital and compelled the Tran Court to escape downstream by boat. The prince's vessel, with the sleeping Quang Khai on board, caught fire at midnight, and the princess led him to a small boat and protected him by covering his body with hers. Dinh Cung Vien's inscription in her honor praised her behavior and likened it to that of Feng Fu.

Chu, the historian, explained that, although according to the famous Northern political philosopher, Mencius, Feng Fu, a man, had been a tiger-tamer who improperly showed off this skill after he had become a scholar, the princess's courage on this occasion justified her being compared with that of a lion-tamer.

By now it was clear to the veterans that there were several reasons for their country's survival. Geography, brilliant leadership, cunning, and good luck had all contributed to the outcome, though Long refused to give up his conviction that the Hungdao Prince was the architect of victory. But they had to agree that human courage was indispensable. The long list of merit earners, compiled when peace returned, was an impressive acknowledgement of those who had distinguished themselves, not to mention the many humble persons such as Ha Dac and his brother without whose services the war would have lasted longer. Do Khac Cung was promoted to the rank of senior *hanh khien* and granted the surname of "Tran."

Hap, one of the young *nho*, had a question. He had been told that Do Hanh, who had captured the Mongol general Omar after the Bach-dang River victory, was not given a high rank, and the reason was that he had handed his captives to Thanh-ton and not to Nhan-ton, his son. Why should this have been so?

Chu supplied the answer: The Tran family practice was that the heir was styled

"emperor" and occupied the throne even though his father, now known as the "senior emperor," was still hale and hearty. The reason for this arrangement was to guarantee that no one would challenge the father's choice of his successor. To do so would be treason against an "emperor." And so in 1268 it was Thanh-ton, the "emperor," who addressed the Tran family and appealed for unity. This happened even though his father, Thai-ton, was alive. In fact, Thai-ton later that year watched Thanh-ton play-acting with his elder brother and congratulated the latter for not wanting to compete with "an emperor." Chu followed up his explanation by reminding the young *nho* that during the wars some suspected the Hung-dao Prince's loyalty to the emperor.

Tich summed up the discussion by concluding that it would seem that they were bound to succeed if everything was taken into account. "The Hung-dao prince was right to assume that we would always have skilful generals able to cope with the enemy's better tactics. He had every reason to assure Nhan-ton in 1286 that he would certainly destroy the enemy when he saw him returning. In his short poem in honor of the Ham-tu victor, Quang Khai gave the essential lesson to be learnt from the war:

If for the sake of peace we exert ourselves to the limit;

This country will last forever.<sup>42</sup>

Such was his confidence." Tich continued: "The Hung-dao Prince's message was the same. Follow the tactics he taught and we are bound to succeed. Everything depends on our own efforts. Nguyen Suong is wrong to state that the victory was only partly our achievement and that the terrain also played its part. As for what Huyen Quang meant, one could argue for ever."

So far those who led the conversation assumed that the country's strength should

be measured in military terms. But there was one in the group, Chu, who had served years in the History Office. He spoke hardly at all but felt that the subject had by no means been exhausted. As he listened to the conversation, he thought of tales of the territorial spirits. In these tales, whenever there were crises, including invasions from the North, spirits would suddenly appear, often in dreams, and give advice, and there would always be rulers or their subordinates who would know what should be done next. Everything would then invariably turn out as the spirits confidently predicted. But should human affairs be understood to depend simply on miracles? Surely, thought Chu, allowance must also be made for something else besides miracles and valor in warfare? Was there no room for other kinds of effort?

Chu decided to break into the conversation in order to throw further light on where lay the country's strength and its ability to survive great dangers. The country's scholars as well as its generals had their role as protectors. He did not hesitate to admit that the Hung-dao Prince and Pham Ngu Lao were educated, but for them, Chu suggested, literary competence was for the sake of embellishing prose and poetry or even speech by "alluding" to famous phrases or even words found in the works of literary giants. "Certainly," he acknowledged, "one could earn a reputation by writing good poetry, especially when one was dead. We all know Tran Quoc Toai's (1254-1277) poem:

From ancient times what does not become dust?

After one dies only one's poems are more valuable than gold.<sup>43</sup>

These days our younger colleagues in the imperial service are in the habit of circulating their poems in order to catch their peers' eyes and to demonstrate how well-read they are.

Even Do Khac Chung, rewarded with the surname of Tran for his wartime exploits, tried his hand at writing poetry on the well-known theme of the chrysanthemum but could not manage to work in the expression 'spring grass.'" Some shuddered when Khac Chung's name was mentioned. Sent to rescue a Vietnamese princess about to perish on her Cham royal husband's funeral pyre, he raped her on the way home.

Chu continued by reminding them that literati now had a promising future in public service. After the war the need to repair damage done to the dykes and to restore authority among a population that had been scattered during the campaigns and often reluctant to peacefully settle down again in their villages required additional travelling officials and especially those who could keep records. But there were not enough members of the ruling family to do this kind of work, and so in 1304 forty-four candidates were passed in the official examinations amid acclaim. Another examination took place later that year and, indeed, there was another this very year. And had not the emperor Nhan-ton, immediately after the final invasion, insisted that those who were *hanh-khien* and eunuchs and those who were scholars in the Han Lam Academy should be on good terms with each other? He had done so to honor Dinh Cung Vien. After all, as the emperor pointed out, the former handled imperial documents that the latter had drafted, a detail that caused Khung to whisper to Hat and Ang that their country was fortunate that it was not so large that its rulers could not manage affairs personally without always having to send messages through various levels of officialdom. Chu, increasingly anxious to make the point that the *nho*'s time had come, also recalled that Doan Nhu Hai was continuously promoted after he had successfully drafted Anh-ton's apology to his father. It was only a few years later that Anh-ton promoted him to the War

Council in preference to a favorite prince. The reason was that Hai was "a scholar and had talent."

But some of Chu's listeners wanted him to explain what he meant when he said a few moments before that scholars had opportunities of protecting the country. This was a strange claim, they thought. "Here is an example," he replied. "A few months ago Anh-ton appointed Minh-ton as his heir even though his son was only fourteen years old and his mother did not belong to the senior line of the Tran family as Anh-ton's mother and his predecessors' had. Anh-ton's decision shows the crucial importance he attached to securing the family succession. His ancestors had the same concern. But the previous ruling family, the Ly, never provided for so orderly a succession. Each Ly ruler postponed announcing his heir until he was on his deathbed. The purpose of this procedure was to avoid family quarrels when the rulers were still alive. Our emperors, on the other hand, make the announcement when their eldest sons are still young and they themselves are still able to supervise the conduct of government. In this way there is no danger that the succession will be disputed. During the Mongol invasions, father and son stood side by side. We can take the succession procedure for granted. But is there any guarantee that the procedure, with the stability it provides, will be followed in the future? This is where scholars can protect the state. The accomplished historian, Le Van HUU, carefully compiled the Annals of the Ly dynasty to teach valuable lessons from the past, and, among other lessons, he illustrated the danger that could arise from the Ly practice of postponing the announcement of the heir to the end of a reign. Our own experience shows how wise was Le Van HUU's advice. Confucius paid heed to the disasters of the past. Scholars are the teachers who warn us of what can happen when we neglect the

lessons of the past. Believe me, these lessons are as valuable as the military lessons the Hung-dao Prince taught."

Some of Chu's listeners thought that he was making much ado out of nothing. They believed that our emperors' motive was obvious and was not based on Chu's bookish considerations. The emperors wanted to assuage the anger of Prince Lieu's family. Had not some feared that the Hung-dao Prince would be unable to suppress this anger when the Mongols were on our doorstep? Thai-ton devised a prudent expedient when he married his heir, Thanh-ton, to the Hung-dao Prince's daughter. Thanh-ton and Nhan-ton followed his example by marrying their heirs into the same family. Minh-ton's mother, the daughter of Tran Binh Chong, the heroic commoner who had died in the war, had Tran blood in her veins from her mother, but she was not descended from Prince Lieu. Anh-ton 's first wife had not given birth to a son, and he had probably given up hope and was anxious to retire to Thien-truong and practice meditation. He had recently chastised the Chams and was confident that the country was secure. He apparently had decided that any heir was better than no heir, and he chose Minh-ton. After all, the young prince has been well brought up by Nhat Duat.

Chu rejected this explanation, but he now knew that he needed to defend more powerfully his assertion that scholars were able to defend the country as effectively as generals. He decided to begin by recalling that Long had quoted the Hung-dao Prince as invoking the military tactics adopted against the North long ago by Trieu Da. "We should not forget," he declared, "something more about Trieu Da and something that the historian Le Van Huu had recorded in order to teach a lesson of history every bit as valuable as the prince's military lessons. Trieu Da was not only a skilful general. Le Van

Huu showed that he was also a skilful diplomat. Today we should all thank Trieu Da that we inhabit an empire, and we should thank Le Van Huu for explaining how Trieu Da set an example in preserving our imperial status."

Chu now held the attention of all, especially of the younger ones for whom what happened thirty or more years ago was not particularly interesting. They were involved in what was happening today and probably wondering whether Minh-ton's recent accession would make a difference to their careers. They gathered from what had so far been said that somehow their country would survive foreign crisis, and they had heard that the Mongol government in the North had lost its fire. Still, scholars in public life were a topic bound to interest them because they, too, were scholars in public life and also ambitious. And so they encouraged Chu to say more.

Chu was glad to do so and began by telling them that Le Van Huu presented his history to Thanh-ton in 1272. This was an anxious time when Kubilai Khan was making impossible demands on our rulers, such as demanding to see our official documents and requiring us to disarm our borders. Thanh-ton and his father felt that this version of vassal status, so unlike what the Song had required was intolerable and decided to repudiate it in the only safe way available, which was in writing to be read within their court as a kind of declaration of independence. This meant that the country needed a "history" in the same way that the Northerners had one and to be written in a Northern fashion and as a history of an independent country. Le Van Huu of Thanh-hoa, attached to the staff of the chief minister, Tran Quang Khai, was appointed to the task, and he decided to model his "history" on Si-ma Guang's Record.

"Surely," insisted Chu, "we have here extraordinary proof that a scholar can take

on urgent public responsibilities, and how resourceful he showed himself to be when he chose his basis for the case that our country was certainly independent and no less so than the North. Because he was a scholar, he knew how to discover everything known in the Northern books about Trieu Da, the southern warlord at the end of the Chin dynasty and the beginning of the Han. Trieu Da is important to us because long ago he established our imperial sovereignty and maintained it in bold defiance of the North. He had presided over his own imperial Court in the South, with all the trappings found in the Northern Court. He was undoubtedly the first emperor to rule in the South. The North knew this and hated him for it. And how was he able to succeed? He was born with a divine energy, something we call *duc*, and in such quantity that he was superior to other men in his generation.”

Khung was listening carefully. This was a story which could not be retold too often, and he expressed his delight that the focus of the discussion had at last come to rest on the ruler as the cornerstone of the country's security. Chu continued by stressing what the historian had found admirable in Trieu Da's example. His advice should be taken at least as seriously as the Hung-dao Prince's advice. First, the ruler should seal off the borders, and this is exactly what our rulers wished to do when Kubilai Khan wanted to send his soldiers through our country against the Chams. Second, the ruler should conduct his foreign relations according to correct principles, which was what Trieu Da did when he succeeded in retaining his imperial status; he styled himself "emperor" even though he deceived the Han envoy by declaring himself to be a Han vassal. “Vassalage” was a screen.

Tich, another attentive listener, hastened to note that Le Van Huu had

demonstrated an additional source of strength. He, a Southern scholar, had been able to manipulate Northern texts to the advantage of the South. According to Le Van Huu, Chinese sources themselves, even Mencius, were available to show that no particular part of the world had the monopoly of those endowed with divine energy. "In this way he could neatly demolish the basis of the Northern emperors' claim to universal sovereignty and authenticate our independence by means of Northern texts."

This statement led Khung to remark that he often suspected that Northerners feared us because of our mastery of their knowledge. "Do their envoys not see their script written everywhere in our capital?"

The old soldier Long relished Tich's point that Southerners could use Northern knowledge against the North, and Tich felt it necessary to explain that learned poets frequently improved the effect of their work by means of apposite allusions to the work of literary giants. Long brushed him aside and asked Chu to continue. Chu did so by quoting Le Van Huu's final words in his comment on Trieu Da. If the later rulers of Trieu Da's family had followed his example, "they would have retained the country for a long time, and the Northerners would not again have been able to gaze on us with covetous eyes."

"What actually happened?" asked the now excited Long.

Chu replied, "We remained a subject land for a thousand years until Heaven willed it that Dinh Bo Linh in early Song times would assume the imperial title. We have always remembered him as our First Emperor but only because in those days we knew little about Trieu Da and nothing about the significance of his career. We owe it to the historian Le Van Huu that we are better informed about our glorious past. And we must

also realize why he wrote as he did. He was not a bookworm. Early in Thanh-ton's reign, the country was in great danger, and he was ordered to refute the Mongols' persistent claim to overlordship.<sup>44</sup> In this way, our Court would never doubt that Thanh-ton, no matter what ruses he adopted to keep the enemy at bay, never regarded himself as a vassal, and there was no more cunning and effective ruse our emperors could employ than presenting Northern envoys with disarming poems. Believe me that scholars, and our emperors are always scholars, are able to employ ruses just as effectively as those which generals employ on the battlefield."

Tich, familiar with the poetry of those times, was eager to mention a poem written by Nhan-ton to welcome the Mongol envoys of 1289. These envoys arrived very soon after the war's victorious end. It was an exceedingly anxious time, for the Northern emperor was bound to be furious, and Nhan-ton needed to mobilize all his poetic expertise to simulate a mood of humble submission. His poem did so.<sup>45</sup> He began with the hope that imperial compassion would be pervasive everywhere and would revive life even at the extremities of the world. The stain of warfare would then be washed away. An accomplished scholar, he went on to liken the healing effect of the envoys' mission to the pacifying influence of the sage emperor Shun's lute when it played "the Southern Wind." The song would bring all resentment to an end. And so he could conclude his poem on a confident note. "When there is mutual affection everywhere, there will no longer be a South and North, no matter what calamity befalls us." So amicable was the occasion that, when Nhan-ton referred to the Han envoy Luc Gia [Lu Jia] and offered a gift to the chief Mongol envoy as Trieu-Da had done to Luc Gia, the envoy brushed the offer aside and included a line in his farewell poem: "Why was Luc Gia greedy for

wealth?"

Tich continued by saying that Nhan-ton could rise to any diplomatic occasion. In 1301, when envoys came on a routine mission to order us to resume sending tribute once every three years, Nhan-ton chose to render the relationship between our two countries in terms of maximum courtesy. He referred to the North as "the Upper State," following the terminology used by barbarians in ancient times, and to the South as "the Little Territory," another archaic term:

In the Upper State there is a deep compassion that stirs our feelings.

In our Little Territory the customs are mean and the ceremonies are a matter for shame.<sup>46</sup>

Here would be a polite contrast between the civilized notions of the North and our standards.

Nhan-ton understood very well how arrogantly the Northerners regarded our way of life, and he artfully played up to this prejudice in order to keep them at bay. His intention was to disarm them, and he succeeded. Similarly, our present ruler, Anh-ton, responding in 1308 to the news that a new Mongol emperor had come to the throne, did not hesitate to end his poem thus:

The state of peace depends on your word.

Feelings of happiness suffuse my countenance.<sup>47</sup>

Chu suggested rather tauntingly that more than enough had now been said to make it evident to all that the Southern Court had successfully absorbed Le Van HUU's advice about the need to regulate our relations with the North as admirably as Trieu Da had done. Scholarship as well as weapons protected our country.

The *nho* in the group were visibly pleased by what Chu and Tich had said, but Long and the other veterans were becoming restive. No doubt the poems' tone was suitable for formal occasions such as the arrival or departure of the envoys, but whoever took them seriously? Protocol required this kind of literary courtesy. But what happened between the arrival and departure of the envoys? Surely, we were shamefully humiliated by their presence, and no one thought so more than the Hung-dao Prince. When, on the eve of the second Northern invasion he rallied his followers and challenged us to resist the enemy, he made a point of describing how the envoys would strut up and down our city's roads, chattering like voracious owls. They insulted our court. Dogs and sheep, men without any substance, they treated our senior officials with haughtiness. "I grieve," the prince had exclaimed, "that I have not yet eaten their flesh, peeled off their skin, swallowed their livers, and drunk their blood."

Someone added that in 1281 the prince had first-hand evidence of how rudely these envoys could behave. That year an envoy drove his horse straight to the Duong-minh gate that leads to the ruler's palace and wounded the sentry's head with his whip. The same envoy ignored Tran Quang Khai, who was sent to welcome him, and preferred to relax on his own in his official quarters. The Hung-dao Prince heard of this and visited the envoy in clothing resembling that of a Northern monk. The envoy was deceived and welcomed him respectfully, but a member of the envoy's entourage, knowing the ruse and wanting to show anger toward the Tran family, stabbed at the prince from behind. The prince was unmoved, and the envoy then escorted him to the door with respect. The envoy had been made to look foolish.

Long gave an example of how intensely the prince hated the Mongols. He even

arranged that the ship in 1289 carrying the Mongol general and other prisoners back to the North should be pierced with holes so that it sank with all on board. Others also hated the Mongol envoys. Dinh Cung Vien, who wrote the inscription in honor of Quang Khai's wife and bade farewell to Kubilai Khan's last envoy Chen Fu in 1293, actually lost his temper in front of a Mongol envoy in 1292. The envoy, Zhang Li-dao, had already incensed us by informing us that the chief ministers in the Mongol Court were of the same rank as the Vietnamese ruler! He was also tactless enough to defend Kubilai's invasion of Burma on the grounds that the Burman ruler fled and therefore no harm was done to temples and property. Vien could not contain himself and blurted out: "If such was the Son of Heaven's divine intent, would it not have been better for him not to have taken up arms in the first place?" The envoy shouted back: "Surely the misfortunes befalling Annam are because men such as you are unable to understand the imperial Way!" He shook his sleeves in displeasure and stalked out. Vien had to apologize.<sup>48</sup>

Long felt that more should be said about the affront we endured on account of these vexatious missions. He understood that our rulers adopted a grovelling tone when they wrote memorials for the foreign envoys. However, the memorials, unlike the poems, dealt with real business, and their effect, far from making us seem strong, would expose us as spineless and give the impression that we knew that we were always in the wrong as far as the North was concerned.

The historian Chu objected. In his youth he had been close to Dinh Cung Vien in the Han Lam Academy, and he knew something of the care that went into composing memorials to the Northern Court. Memorials were usually presented on urgent occasions, and they sought to strike a delicate balance between the humble language

obligatory on such occasions and matters of principle on which our Court could not and would not budge. No diplomatic occasion was more urgent than the arrival of Northern envoys early in 1293, when Kubilai Khan was still smarting from defeat and was believed to be preparing yet another invasion force. The inquisitive and peppery Chen Fu came to our country with this mission. The archives have a copy of what Nhan-ton and his *nho* advisers wrote, and it has been remembered as an example of how best to cope with a situation of such gravity.

The younger *nho* asked Chu to give them some details about this famous memorial. He began by describing the elaborate welcome accorded the envoys. The court hurried to greet them and incense was burnt in the streets. When they reached the palace, everyone kowtowed three times. The Northern edict was shown and Nhan-ton knelt before it. It began: "If you will confess your faults, I shall not punish you further." "How magnanimous is the sage-like Son of Heaven," exclaimed our emperor. "Our joy is boundless."

The mission turned out to be a troubled one and began inauspiciously when the protesting envoys were first directed towards the secondary gates to the city. Nhan-ton never, of course, went to the Northern Court as the Mongols insisted. Instead he sent his own envoy, who was imprisoned by the Mongols. What is important, however, is the tone of Nhan-ton's memorial.

Nhan-ton did not trouble to deny that he and his father, Thanh-ton, had "transgressed." It would have been futile to have done otherwise. But all that was now over. The memorial artfully made much of Kubilai Khan's magnanimity. It was as though the parent of us all, Kubilai himself, had made it possible for our world to be born

anew. "The compassionate Son of Heaven had spared our lives." The Mongol edict had sternly referred to our insincere submission, and Nhan-ton was surprised by this. Be this as it may, "I intend to serve Your Majesty with utter obedience." The memorial was packed with expressions of humility. The Mongol emperor was attributed with every possible quality. He was the source of abundance throughout the whole world. "Even if I had a thousand lives and ten thousand deaths, this would be insufficient to repay you for your favor to me." The memorial ended with conventional obeisances, and Nhan-ton now multiplied his compliments. "Your intelligence is renewed every day. Your wisdom and courage have been conferred by Heaven. You rid the world of the merest grudge . . . . You do not neglect this little country. You demonstrate the heart of the great sages of old."

Long grunted loudly, and Chu had to assure him that this kind of language was no more significant than the florid language used in the poems. Nhan-ton could not have written otherwise. What was important was that he made no concessions and wrote only what Kubilai would expect to read. The best evidence that this was not a humiliating memorial is that the Mongol emperor in fact rejected it and began to plan a fourth invasion. Fortunately for us, he died soon afterwards and his successor called off the plans and issued a pardon.

There was considerable argument concerning the extent to which Chu had made the case on behalf of a scholarly contribution to the country's security. After all, the memorial was rejected, and only Kubilai's death saved the situation. But Ang, one of the younger *nho*, had the last word: "In the short run, this prudent and exquisitely written memorial had no effect, but in the long run it did because it was the latest example of the

live-and-let-live diplomacy practiced by our wise rulers in the tradition set by Trieu Da long ago. The tradition was even an advantage to the Northerners themselves who did not wish to get bogged down in continuous warfare with us. And so Kubilai's successor immediately resumed the tradition and 'pardoned' us as well! Our emperors have assiduously established a peaceful system for managing our relations with the North. The 'Tartar' Kubilai was an exception. Northern rulers do not usually want to invade Champa by marching through our land."

The civilians in the group approved of this intervention by their junior colleague, and Ang was encouraged to speak further: "This form of diplomacy can even enable us to score extraordinary victories over the Northerners." Long and his friends found this claim improbable.

Khung, a former envoy, continued Ang's thought: "Consider Mac Dinh Chi's achievement in Peking itself." Khung summarized what happened in 1308. "Mac Dinh Chi was a rather short man, and the over-sized Mongols mocked him when he arrived as an envoy to Peking in 1308. But he could turn the tables on them in front of their emperor. He perceived a screen in the Court chamber, pretended that he saw a live oriole perched on a sprig of bamboo, and tried to seize it. The Mongols hooted with laughter. He then tore the screen apart. The Mongols were now astonished. Chi explained that he had never heard of a bird perched on bamboo. After all, bamboo represented the superior man and the bird the inferior man. It was quite improper that this screen should be seen in the Court chamber, and he therefore destroyed it for the sake of the Mongol emperor. His gesture surely confounded the Mongol officials present on that occasion.

"His gesture, however, made a great impression on the Mongol emperor, and the

impression was increased when the emperor ordered Chi and the Korean envoy to compete in drafting an inscription. Chi won handsomely by immediately writing down lines that extolled the example of four honorable officials in ancient times and by artfully incorporating passages from the Book of Songs and the Analects, two texts respected equally in the South and the North. Chi's intention was to remind the Northern courtiers of the highest acceptable standards for official behavior. When in office, they should act. When removed from office, they should starve in retreat. Thus, he insinuated that we in the South were entirely familiar with the standards of official conduct sanctified by the ancient classics. He used his knowledge as effectively as Le Van HUU had done when he justified Trieu Da's imperial status by means of Northern texts. At the same time he was able to snub the Mongol courtiers and also to earn their emperor's praise. This was no mean feat. When we consider it together with the recent compliment the Mongol envoys paid our young emperor when they compared him to an immortal being, we can rightly say that victories can be won on the diplomatic front as well as on the battlefield."

Long could not help conceding that Mac Dinh Chi had put his scholarly talent to good use. He also acknowledged that serving on missions to the North could be a dangerous undertaking. Courage was needed when presenting our defiant memorials. An envoy could even be imprisoned. Chu was delighted that Long had at last admitted that the memorials should not be dismissed as merely grovelling acts of submission. The mood of the group now seemed sufficiently relaxed that Khung was persuaded it was time to bring the afternoon's conversation to an end. He was an efficient official and wanted to sum up the ground they had covered in their search for various reasons to explain the country's survival during the recent dangers.

"We were certainly brave in battle, though we also enjoyed a fair share of good luck," and he bowed in the direction of Long. "Our formal relations with the North were regulated to the best of our ability. We never had to abandon our imperial status, the symbol of our independence. But, over and above these advantages, and something we have not mentioned, a magical presence in our soil surely helped us in moments of great crisis. At least our leaders at that time believed so. Did not Tran Quang Khai, Thanh-ton's brother and his chief minister during the wars, compose a poem to salute our capital guardian spirit, the spirit we call Long-do? To this spirit he ascribed the power to summon three thousand spirits of the water to put to flight a million malignant spirits. And how did he end his poem?

I implore the spirit to use its abundantly awesome power to expel our Northern  
foe

And immediately make the world peaceful and pure.<sup>49</sup>

Numbers may have been against us, but we possessed resources to correct the imbalance."

Long then recalled that the Hung-dao Prince had rallied his followers by telling them how a Song general had defended a small city against a 'million' Mongol soldiers but thought it unnecessary to mention this piece of hyperbolic rhetoric when our own feats were being remembered. Instead, Long observed that the Long-do spirit was not unique. The spirit of a Ly prince had helped Tran Thai-ton on a campaign against the Chams, and in the invasion of 1285 Ly Phuc Man's spirit had told Nhan-ton that he did not need to withdraw from the Thien-mac river mouth. This was the turning point in the second invasion, when we began to turn the tide.

"But the afternoon is coming to an end," concluded Long, "and we have become excited remembering what we endured in times of danger and how we faced many challenges. I, for one, have much upon which I wish to reflect."

The group dispersed.

Outside the Office of the Keeper of the Imperial Chariots near the Gate of Everlasting Glory (1317)

One morning in the third month of 1317, some who had chatted three years before on the shores of West Lake happened to meet again outside the Office of the Keeper of the Imperial Chariots. They were sitting in a small pavilion close to the Gate of Everlasting Glory leading into the Forbidden City. Here was an interesting place for idlers, because they could easily see visitors going in and coming out of the Court. The old soldier, Long, had recently died, and the famous general Pham Ngu Lao attended mourning rites in his honor, but Chu, the historian, and the ancient courtier Tich were still alive and met near the Gate. Ang, too, was there. He had recently been promoted to the post of *ty lang* in the *Trung thu sanh* and had just departed the Court. Tan, a middle-aged official in the Censorate with the reputation of being utterly loyal to the ruler, joined the group. Dinh, who practiced meditation, emerged from a nearby pagoda and spotted his friends Tich and Chu.

Not long afterwards, Khung, the well-known *hanh-khien* with the habit of calling attention to the obvious, emerged from the Court with tittle tattle that included the news that five Tran princesses had just completed their wedding ceremonies. One of them was the Huy-chan Princess, daughter of Anh-ton's palace concubine, and Khung informed his

companions that this princess was mean-minded and greedy and was known to seize land from ordinary people. A complaint had been brought against her, but the emperor Minh-ton refused to hand it over to a legal officer. Instead, he ordered the princess's husband to look into the matter. "I shall not entrust the charge to a legal officer and disgrace the former ruler's concubine. You must handle the case and see that the land is returned." The husband did so immediately. Khung added, perhaps sardonically, that Long, if he had been present, would have commented that the great Hung-dao Prince, always mindful of the services of "the little people," would have approved of Minh-ton's concern for justice.

Ang, a self-consciously correct member of the younger generation of officials, was always anxious to demonstrate his respect for the ruler. He observed that, though Minh-ton was not yet eighteen years old, the conventional age of those whom the rulers appointed as their heirs, he had already shown his fitness to rule even before showing good judgment when handling this case of the greedy princess. Two years earlier, when the river overflowed its banks, Minh-ton had personally supervised the repair of the dykes even though the Censor chose to remind him that his duty was to cultivate his inner quality (*virtus*) and not trouble himself with such trivial matters as supervising waterworks. Tran Khac Chung, the senior minister at Court, heard what the Censor said and retorted that the ruler was required to help the people whenever they were threatened by a natural disaster. No function of imperial government was more important. How could one say, as the Censor did, that "sitting quietly and staring into the distance" was cultivating one's inner quality?

Tich exclaimed that Minh-ton was his father's worthy heir. Did not Anh-ton in

1307 show similar initiative when the Dam-dam dyke broke? Bui Ton Hoang wrote a poem to celebrate Anh-ton's activities and compared his solicitude with that of Han Wuti in a similar crisis and his enlightened sense of responsibility with that of the sage ruler Yu, Tamer of the Floods. In 1307 precautions had not been taken against natural disasters,

But now our sage ruler, caring for the people,  
Spurs on his officials to supply famine relief.<sup>50</sup>

His son has shown a similar sense of duty.

Khung, observing that there had been plenty of floods and famines after the Mongol wars as a result of the damage done to the dykes, was, on account of his activities at Court, in frequent contact with Tran Khac Chung and was familiar with his outlook. Khung recalled that, during the famine of 1315, the Censor had blamed Chung, a senior court official, for not giving priority to regulating the elements and for not giving advice on matters pertaining to Heaven and Earth. The Censor had concluded with the words: "This is improper behavior." Chung was nettled. "I can only perform duties attached to my post," he had retorted. "As for the drought, you should address the Dragon King. Why should he pass the buck to me?" Khung added that Minh-ton had a great deal of time for Chung and conferred a higher title on him later that year.

Tan, of the Censorate, protested that the Censor in 1315 was being wrongfully depicted in a foolish light and that Khung was well aware that Chung was not an entirely satisfactory prince. Indeed, the Hung-dao Prince's son, the Hung-nhung Prince, had, a number of years ago after Chung had seduced the widowed princess he rescued from a funeral pyre in Champa, foretold that Chung would do much harm to the Tran family.

Perhaps Minh-ton's liking for him could be unwise, though the others doubted whether the young emperor would permit himself to be adversely influenced by anyone.

Anyhow, his father was still alive. And Dinh, who practiced meditation and was close to Anh-ton, reported that the senior emperor was sufficiently satisfied with his heir that he felt no compunction about preparing to go into permanent retreat.

The conduct of current Court business, as usual, aroused lively discussion, though the prestige of the ruling family meant that the officials' criticisms tended to be restrained. The rulers were given the benefit of the doubt when they made their appointments, and, after all, Tran Khac Chung was a war hero. And so the conversation moved naturally in the direction of what constituted good government or, rather, why the present government should be favorably judged. Was everything to be attributed to the ruler's *virtus*? Tich, with years of service in the imperial entourage and supported by Tan, agreed, but Chu, the historian, demurred and pointed out that a number of talented and educated men were now serving in the administration, men such as Tran Thi Kien, Bui Moc Dac, Doan Nhu Hai, and others.

Khung often became restive when conversation seemed to him to be drifting mindlessly. "Certainly," he remarked, "we have survived the Mongol invasions, though some of us here, including myself, know little about what really happened. Apparently, a number of circumstances were in our favor: good generalship, skilful diplomacy, courage, and sheer good luck. But have we the right to be confident that we shall always be so successful? Are we today being somewhat complacent in imagining that our situation is completely stable? No doubt our young ruler and his august father can be expected to manage new problems when they arise, but are we, active in public life,

doing him a service if we do not also inquire into whether everything is in good order? A variety of expedients, military and bookish, has brought us to this day, but should we suppose that our leaders will possess expedients for success on every occasion?"

This was the uncomfortable style of questioning that those who knew Khung well could expect from him. His questions were also those that most of them preferred to leave unanswered. Immediate issues and their own prospects were sufficient concerns for them. Khung disturbed Tan in particular. Tan was an experienced official and had a reputation for complete loyalty. Perhaps, thought Tan, a charge should be leveled against Khung? Ang, on the other hand, who belonged to the post-war generation, was curious to know how the conversation would now proceed. And even Dinh, always silent, began to show more interest than was his custom..

At this moment there was burst of shouting, and the Gate of Everlasting Glory was thrown open to admit Nhat Duat, the Chieu-minh Prince, his carriage, and his brightly clad entourage. Banners proclaimed the prince's illustrious title. The prince had come from his country seat near the coast to visit his former pupil, Minh-ton. When the commotion had died down, the conversation resumed, and Chu spoke first. As a result of his experience in the History Office, he could not help attaching great importance to the rulers' personal qualities, and to one quality in particular, which was their ability to manage their own family. If the ruler felt insecure, his government was bound to be insecure. As they all knew, the Tran rulers had been able to compose the dangerous family feud caused by Thai-ton's marriage in 1237 to his brother Lieu's wife by marrying their heirs to Lieu's female descendants. Therefore Lieu's blood on both their fathers' and mothers' sides has flowed in our emperors' veins. The single exception is Minh-ton

himself, whose mother does not belong to Lieu's family, but he is likely to marry his uncle Tran Quoc Chan's daughter. Anh-ton and Quoc Chan are brothers and on close terms. Our rulers have also managed to keep their senior relatives at their side in Court by appointing them to the highest posts. But these arrangements would not, of course, absolve them from making every effort to safeguard the loyalty of all their relatives.

Chu clinched his argument by quoting Thanh-ton's New Year's address to his family in 1268:

The Empire is our ancestors' and has been inherited, and it is right that we enjoy happiness and wealth with our relatives. If those not of our line are honored, they nevertheless suffer and benefit with their own kinsfolk. You must hand down these words to your descendants so that they will not be forgotten. The imperial family will then enjoy happiness forever.<sup>51</sup>

Thanh-ton was urging the princes to be on good terms with each other and to not be disrespectful or arrogant.

Nevertheless, several of Chu's listeners were led to suppose that Thanh-ton's words meant that the country depended on nothing more than the imperial family's self-interest. This would explain Minh-ton's wish to settle the greedy princess's theft of land out of court; he was more concerned to safeguard his family's reputation than protect the people's property. Selfish motives of imperial self-interest would account for other happenings in living memory. It was not surprising that in 1289 the emperor lavishly rewarded those who had distinguished themselves in the wars; as Nhan-ton explained, this would encourage support if the enemy again invaded. More interesting was Nhan-ton's habit of wandering through the city and hailing the princes' dependants when he met

them, and giving instructions that they should not be scolded. Tich recalled how Nhan-ton, returning to the palace, would explain that he could live in security when his entourage was well treated. "When the country has problems, all we have are these people." Minh-ton no doubt had similar considerations in mind last year when he ordered his chief minister, relatives, and officials to harvest state land. Or again, a special honorific title had been created to signify Quang Khai's status at Court. His services to the ruler in peace and war were indispensable. They were all familiar with the myriad titles enjoyed by the princes and their offspring. As Thanh-ton had admitted in 1268, the imperial family was privileged.

Tan interrupted the conversation to remind them that the princes had been in the forefront when we defended ourselves during the wars, and he also sententiously added that one should never try to distinguish between the interests of the ruler and of the country. They were identical, and the reason was simply that the ruler's spiritual prowess exceeded that of everyone else. The ruler knew what was best for all of us.

No one wished to be heard to disagree with this view. What was important, Ang suggested, was that our sage-like rulers, loyal to their family, did not include their relatives in the government if they were inadequately qualified to serve. Long ago, Quang Khai had been promoted over the head of a more senior prince. More recently, Anh-ton had promoted the *nho* Doan Nhu Hai instead of a prince whom he greatly loved.<sup>52</sup> In a sense, Minh-ton belonged to the same discriminating tradition as far as knowing his officials was concerned. Last year Nguyen Binh assisted Prince Khanh Du during a tour of duty in Dien-chau. The ruler ordered someone to receive the taxes Binh brought with him. A courtier thought that this was a strange procedure. Should not the

ruler himself have accepted the taxes? Ang was at Court on this occasion and heard Minh-ton reply: "Binh has done his task with honesty. If I had not received the taxes in the way I did, I would have implied that Binh had conducted himself dishonestly. I therefore called attention to his honesty." The ruler was sufficiently informed about his staff that he knew that Binh was not corrupt. Khung then muttered that the ruler's personal style of government was possible only because the South was not a large and unmanageable territory.

Tich, drawing on his experience in Thanh-ton's entourage, mentioned another important aspect of the ruler's role as a mediator among rival princes. Even Quang Khai and Quoc Tuan, the Hung-dao Prince, had not always been on good terms, and yet so much had depended on them. Quang Khai was the senior prince, but Quoc Tuan's father, Lieu, had been Thai-ton's elder brother. Their relationship was even closer, for, as a result of Thai-ton's marriage in 1237, they were half-brothers. Yet Quoc Tuan would mock Quang Khai for not washing, until one day the two of them became friends after Quoc Tuan washed Quang Khai's clothes and Quang Khai gracefully acknowledged that he had done so.

The official, Tan, always anxious to speak in support of the rulers, had to concede that Tran princes could sometimes be impulsive and capable of acting in a manner likely to cause friction among their relatives. But, insisted Tan, on such occasions the rulers and also their female relatives could be relied on to show good judgment. Princely escapades began early in the dynasty's history. Prince Lieu, whose hapless situation in 1237 could not be easily forgotten, had already forfeited his very high rank after he seduced a palace girl connected with the former Ly dynasty during the disastrous flood of

1236, which had given him unusually easy access by boat to the palaces in the capital. The great Quoc Tuan himself was capable of similar follies. In 1251 he even dared to seduce the newlywed wife of a Tran prince and was spared drastic punishment only after Thai-ton's elder sister implored the emperor to allow Quoc Tuan to keep the woman he had seduced and pay compensation to the injured family. "We should never," remarked Tan, "neglect to respect the role of the Tran females as mediating influences during family crises. The widow of the last Ly ruler and Tran Thu Do's wife helped to compose the quarrel when Thai-ton took Lieu's wife in 1237."

Chu agreed that the ruler and senior relatives played an important part preserving peace within their family. After all, it was in their own interest to do so. He added that the rulers could also be very strict when necessary. Lieu's entourage that rose up in arms in support of him in 1237 was mercilessly executed. In 1283 a Tran noble was fined and reduced to the rank of an army conscript and further humiliated for having written an anonymous libel against the ruler. Those who surrendered in the war of 1285 were punished, and in 1289 some who did so were executed. Only soldiers were spared, and they were ordered to carry wood and stones to repair damaged palaces, which no doubt included those at Thien-truong to which Thanh-ton alluded in his poem. Disloyal princes, including Tran Quoc Khanh's son, were deprived of their Tran surname. And officials certainly did not escape punishment. Those in occupied territory who had given supplies to the Mongols were demoted.

"Apparently a considerable number of people, including those of high rank, had surrendered in the wars," commented Khung to those who chose to listen. "Perhaps we were more fortunate in surviving than we realized when, a few years ago, we had the

veteran soldier Long still with us to explain why we were bound to win."

"Yes, alas!" continued Chu, "even educated men could not always be relied on. Dang Long was in Nhan-ton's entourage, and the emperor wanted to give him a post in the Han Lam Academy, but Thanh-ton forbade this. Dang Long nourished a grudge and even surrendered to the Mongols. Later he was captured and executed." The cynical Khung muttered that an official's quest for merit could lead to treason.

Chu preferred not to comment and reminded the others that the Tran rulers did not punish only in wartime. In 1309 many vagabonds had been executed or banished.

"Nevertheless, discontented princes were more dangerous than peasants because of their exceedingly important responsibilities at Court and also because they had entourages. It may have been touch and go whether Quoc Tuan would betray the ruler during the wars. His own son had urged him to avenge the harm done to Lieu. Arrogant and greedy princes were another threat and none more so than the Nhan-hue Prince, Tran Khanh Du, now aging. You will remember that last year our emperor, Minh-ton, took the precaution of attaching the honest Nguyen Binh to Khanh Du when he was sent to the south to collect taxes. Minh-ton would have known Khanh Du's infamous remark that generals feed on the people just as hawks feed on ducks. The scolding that this statement caused him in 1296 kept him from Court for some time, so much did he fear Anh-ton's displeasure. The fact that he had been a highly successful general in the Mongol wars did not deter a *hanh-khien* from accusing him of greed at the public expense."

Tich, who had been close to the emperors during the wars, was able to tell several stories about problems caused by Khanh Du in addition to his well-known greed for wealth. At an early age he had distinguished himself as a soldier and had been elevated

to the illustrious rank of "Adopted Son of the Son of Heaven." He was entrusted with the second highest command in the Mongol wars. But before then, however, he had abused his lofty status by seducing the Thien-thang Princess, an egregious crime because she was no less than the wife of Quoc Tuan's son, another hero in battle. Nhan-ton feared the consequences and wanted to kill Khanh Du painlessly. But the culprit fled to the country home of a general and disguised himself as a riverine charcoal seller. Nhan-ton by chance recognized him on his boat and pardoned him.

Tich concluded his tale by remarking that this was a further instance of the Tran rulers' good judgment. Personal feelings were never allowed to get in the way of the country's interests. "Tan was right to remind us that we should never try to distinguish between the ruler's and the country's interests."

Encouraged, Tan urged his companions to bear in mind that often, when the rulers took action against the advice of their officials, the latter would invariably come round, agree, and praise their sage-like wisdom.

Khung had little time for this kind of remark. He listened impatiently to what had been said about the emperors' motives. For his part, he had little difficulty in believing that they always acted according to what they considered to be in their best interests. His single reservation, which he did not think fit to utter, was that the wisest decisions were those to which officials of his own caliber had been privy. He did not express his thoughts about the way the conversation was going. Instead, he chose to turn attention away from the rulers and broaden the scope of the discussion by suggesting that self-interest was, in fact, a pervasive characteristic of their society. "Certainly most of those with whom I have official dealings are obsessed with earning merit in order to catch the

ruler's eye and be promoted. Such is the attracting power of the ruler's *virtus*. It cannot be otherwise." He again called attention to the obvious. Dinh nodded his head in agreement but remained silent.

Chu, the historian and the person in the group most familiar with the important documents of their times, was always reluctant to attribute unrealistically heroic qualities to military men, and with scarcely concealed delight, he invoked the Hung-dao Prince's appeal to his entourage, generals and humbler dependants, on the eve of the second Mongol invasion of 1285.<sup>53</sup> When Long was still alive, he would not want to quote from it, though this famous document had been copied many times and was no doubt familiar to his audience. The force of the appeal, addressed to those who owed to the prince their means of subsistence, their future prospects, their rewards, and even their happiness, was, according to Chu, unmistakably aimed at their self-interest, and the personal relationship between the prince and his dependants was why he did not hesitate to mock and even threaten them. Khung was right in saying that self-interest was a pervasive influence. Self-indulgence is one form of self-interest, and this is what the prince attributed to them. They spent their time cock fighting, gambling, looking after their property, enjoying their families, accumulating wealth, hunting, drinking, and listening to coarse music. This was a formidable list of personal distractions, which would not protect them when the enemy invaded and scattered their possessions.

Chu's friend Tich, always with an ear for rhetorical effects, praised the prince's powerful use of language when denouncing these instances of self-indulgence. He continually repeated the term "shame" and its equivalences in connection with their unwarrior-like behavior. He used the expression "insufficient" no less than eight times

when insisting that their wealth and other sources of pleasure would be insufficient to spare them suffering when the enemy came, and he underlined the solidarity among them all by repeating "not only" four times when making the point that "not only" he but all of them would suffer. The prince's appeal must have been frightening to hear, but it continued on another and consoling note, again one of self-interest. If they trained their soldiers and fought, "not only" he would earn undying fame as well as happiness but so would they. "Not only" was again repeated, five times in this context.

Chu resumed with a final comment on the taunting appeal. The climax was another invitation to self-interest. They could disgrace their ancestors or their ancestors' altars would benefit and they themselves would preserve their reputation. Nothing would be more important than their good name.

The members of the group felt uncomfortable with Chu's almost brutal understanding of the force of the prince's appeal. They were accustomed to admire those who fought in the Mongol wars and unwilling to believe that heroes had to be goaded into action. Khung came to their rescue by suggesting that there was nothing surprising in this attitude of mind. Why should these dependants be blamed for wanting to live in the present even if some may have feared that the Mongols were awaiting their opportunity on the other side of the border? After all, as the prince himself admitted, the country had been at peace for a long time and the people did not know how to be soldiers. "Indeed, has anything ever happened to us," Khung exclaimed, "to shake our confidence that things would always turn out well for us? Are not the tales about our territorial spirits supposed to teach us that we are always able to surmount dangers from outside, as we did during the three Mongol invasions?"

Ang listened attentively to his elders' comments on what motivated those who made major decisions on behalf of the Court and also on what motivated those who obeyed orders, and he believed that he could make a useful observation. Self-interest was certainly a powerful influence everywhere. "I often travel on duty in the countryside, meet those who work on the land, and have the chance to learn something about their outlook. Undoubtedly, almost all are only concerned with the affairs of the present and guided by what at the moment seems to serve them best. What happens now is what is important to them, and the reason for this state of mind is not hard to find. These people believe that they can enlist the help of the Buddha by making gifts to monks and temples in order to guarantee happiness in the next life. Even though they are uneducated, they can understand the doctrine of *karma*. Every act produces another. They are earning merit in the same way that we officials try to do in the imperial service for the sake of success in our present lives. All of us live in the present because we wish to improve our immediate prospects. This is a matter of common sense, and we should not be blamed for being selfish."

Khung praised young Ang for making a helpful remark. Dinh, the *dhyana* practitioner, now wanted to speak, but Chu interrupted him. "How fortunate we are," he exclaimed, "that our rulers today do not recklessly support superstitious Buddhism as the early Ly rulers did. Le Van Huu hurled several charges against the monks that would be unthinkable today. They wasted the country's manpower by encouraging men to enter the monkhood and squandered the country's wealth in building innumerable temples. They were also irresponsibly merciful towards their enemies. As the great historian put it, 'they would pander to the minor benevolence of Buddhism at the expense of their

major duty to the State.' Today these problems do not arise."

"Le Van Huu should have criticized them," retorted Dinh impatiently, because he knew something of the debt the early Tran rulers owed to Ly Masters of the *Dhyana*. Dinh realized that the time had at last come when he should no longer be silent. He had to lead the conversation. "The first four rulers of our sacred dynasty," he went on to say, "have in their writings established beyond all possible doubt that they were genuinely 'enlightened' in the Buddhist sense of the term. We have survived so many trials and are peaceful today precisely because our rulers are 'enlightened'. During our conversation today, several explanations for our well-being were advanced. We were reminded that our rulers were always energetic, able to control their own often unruly family in their self-interest or otherwise, and that their prowess exceeded that of everyone else. They were also able to select and supervise their subordinates. They could punish with severity. All this is true, but why? What more should be said?"

He paused a moment. "I have kept silent until now," he continued, "but can do so no longer when Ang tells us that Buddhists are accustomed to behave according to their self-interest and Chu quotes Le Van Huu as fulminating against Buddhism because it deprived the country of its strength. I know little about Ly times, but I am constrained to tell you as clearly as I can something about the strength our rulers derive from their Buddhist beliefs and the strength the country gains accordingly. Only with some knowledge of the meaning of *dhyana* or meditational Buddhism as our rulers understand it can you know why they manage the affairs of State so successfully in spite of the numerous problems you have noted. With your permission I shall begin with what Anhton, still among us, has written about what the *dhyana* teaches."

The others knew that Dinh had been close to the rulers for many years, such was his reputation as a Buddhist scholar. He was also respected as a person whose meditative practices did not separate him from society. Indeed, some believed that he had distinguished himself during the Mongol wars. Chu, Tich, and Tan were long-standing friends of his, though only Tich was sympathetic, albeit vaguely, towards the *dhyana*. Khung had heard nothing but good of him. Ang, a younger man, was unacquainted with Dinh but pleased to have the opportunity of hearing him talk.

Dinh spoke gently. "Under the present dynasty our country has been favored with an unbroken sequence of four enlightened emperors, and there is every sign that our new ruler, Minh-ton, will be the fifth. This is the reason for our country's strength."

"But," asked Ang, "how can a layman such as I understand the meaning of 'enlightened'?"

Dinh replied in the same gentle way. "By 'enlightened' I mean a person who has suddenly, and I emphasize suddenly, experienced his Buddha-nature, and by this I mean that he ceases to retain the notion of the existence of a self. Instead, all that is left is a mind free from illusion and able to resume its normal function of perceiving its self-nature, meaning its Buddha-nature, which is a void. As the sixth Patriarch taught, one achieves this state by meditation so that there is no longer any thinking. One does not even think of a pure mind. Purity has neither form nor shape. Enlightenment means emptying the mind."

Ang needed to know much more, and Dinh chose to school him by recounting what Thanh-ton said of his own ineffable experience. "He had to be resourceful in making use of language to signify his condition. He rendered silence as a 'soundless

lute.’ He wrote about behaving naturally, without obligation, by commenting that ‘though everything is in disarray, I know it not . . . . There is nothing that needs to be done.’ He could take everything in his stride: ‘When cold and heat come, there is nothing to be felt. Nothing in the least disturbs this old man.’ He now participates in the Absolute, an experience he can only render in the following words:

‘Within me there is nothing lacking and nothing in excess,  
The Buddha does not exist! Man does not exist.’<sup>54</sup>”

Dinh noted that Thanh-ton's grandson, Anh-ton, was the latest ruler to follow the tradition of the *dhyana*. “He honored his teacher, Phap-loa (1281-1330), who was his father's disciple and teaching successor, by writing: ‘Everything is illusory, there is nothing to grasp, there are no differences. Be inactive by not cleaving to the bad or cultivating the good; be natural and eat rice when hunger comes.’ Anh-ton ends his comments with the lines:

‘The illusory self, though strong, is not worth worrying about.

It resembles drifting clouds as they assemble and disperse, or foam floating on  
water’.<sup>55</sup>”

Dinh paused to observe whether they were following what he said, but no one wished to comment. "So," he said rather solemnly, "how mistaken you would be to suppose that our rulers would act according to their self-interest when the very notion of a ‘self’ was something their spiritual training enabled them to reject. How fortunate we are to be governed by those who have trained themselves to be impartial, not anxious to be active when there was no reason for being so, and always able to take things in their stride."

Chu, who had criticized the Ly rulers for permitting themselves to be influenced by Buddhist values to the detriment of the country's strength, challenged Dinh to explain why the present rulers could behave differently. Dinh immediately replied that the Tran rulers had the advantage of having in their family two outstanding examples of those who followed the practices of the *dhyana* and who were also capable of appropriate action. They were Tran Tung, the Hung-dao Prince's elder brother, and Emperor Thai-ton, who had married Lieu's wife, a marriage whose significance we have had several occasions to mention. "We may forget that these two men, and especially Thai-ton, represent a very important part of the country's resources equally as important as our military and diplomatic triumphs."

The younger ones in the group had barely heard of Tung (1230-1291), but Tich was able to sketch his life. "He was Quoc Tuan's elder brother and had played his part in the wars of the 1280s. He was also a privileged member of the Tran family. Thanh-ton was his half-brother and the empress was his sister. Above all else, he was a famous teacher of the *dhyana*, though he never became a monk and was able to move freely in secular society, a circumstance that gave him great influence. No feature of his teaching became better known than his endless emphasis on the doctrine of 'non-duality', a doctrine familiar to Anh-ton among others. He taught us not to use our minds to discriminate between form and formlessness at the expense of apprehending our Buddha-nature, the unity which pervades every difference. When one has awakened, apparent opposites are the same. Tung could therefore make such puzzling statements as 'An ordinary person and a sage are no different' or 'Illusion and enlightenment are no different'. He defended the first of these statements in a couplet that our younger officials

can bear in mind to their advantage:

‘A meritorious reputation, riches and honors, these are as transient as floating clouds.

The happenings of a lifetime are like flying arrows.’

And of illusion and enlightenment he wrote:

‘Form and formlessness, illusion and enlightenment,  
Are but a single principle. Past and present are the same.’<sup>56</sup>”

Dinh interrupted Tich to call attention to the practical implications of the doctrine of non-duality, or the identity of opposites. "One need seek nothing. One should pay no attention to one's thoughts. As Hui-neng said, 'thoughts come and go by themselves'. It is sufficient to live in the present. Instead of recalling our successes in former times, as we tend to do in order to bolster our confidence in the face of new crises, we should exert ourselves and do what has to be done without asking whether it is in our interest to do so."

Dinh had more to say about Tung's teachings and influence. "Earlier today, when Khanh-Du's name cropped up, we were told that he seduced the wife of one of the Hungdao Prince's sons, another war hero. The son was Quoc Nghiem and, like Tung, his uncle, he practiced meditation as well as fought in battle. These two had a habit of exchanging poems on Buddhist themes. Once Tung, matching a poem of his nephew, began:

‘The *dhyana*'s influence knows neither a future nor a past.

Its essence is the Absolute. It is self-existing.’<sup>57</sup>

The scene he went on to evoke in the poem was that of the hut of the venerable

Bodhidharma, in which the founder of the *dhyana* we follow sat speechless for nine years in front of a wall, and later taught his first disciple. The happening in the third couplet, perhaps to encourage Quoc Nghiem, was that a mind such as Bodhidharma's had not the slightest thought and that speech came effortlessly."

Dinh insisted that his friends should bear in mind Tung's influence on his ruler's family. Tung was on intimate terms with Thanh-ton, his half-brother, and praised him warmly: "His sacred learning was excellent. It penetrated all time<sup>58</sup>. . . . His wisdom pushed open the *dhyana* gate and penetrated the hut where Bodhidharma sat for nine years.<sup>59</sup>" When Tung died in 1291, the emperor Nhan-ton composed an obituary notice.<sup>60</sup> Dinh quoted one passage:

Though he mingled with the ordinary world, he remained at peace and was a beam of light. He was never rude to anyone and was therefore able to transmit the Dharma-seed. He could give guidance in the basic elements. When people came to learn from him, he would teach them the essentials and enable them to concentrate the mind.

Dinh explained that Nhan-ton had every reason to be grateful to Tung. For example, Tung taught Nhan-ton that there was no merit in observing abstinences and explained that one could lead a secular life. "What then?" asked Nhan-ton. In reply, Tung uttered the following statement:

Observing abstinences and austerities

Is to cause bad and not good karma.

If you wish to know that there is neither bad nor good karma,

Do not observe abstinences or austerities.<sup>61</sup>

“It was a result of listening to Tung's unanswerable questions that Nhan-ton finally realized that his mind had to cease striving to understand before he could suddenly attain enlightenment. In Nhan-ton's words: ‘One day I asked him what was his teaching's distinguishing feature. He replied: Be sure to meditate alone and do not follow another. I suddenly attained entry to the Path. I raised my hands and honored him as my teacher.’<sup>62</sup>”

Tich agreed that Tung's influence on Nhan-ton was well-known within the Tran family and informed them that not long ago Anh-ton ordered Tran Khac Chung to compose an epilogue to Tung's *Records*. It began thus: "Tung was Nhan-ton's Lamp. From him he received the 'mind' in order to transmit it."<sup>63</sup>

"Certainly," exclaimed Dinh, "and it will be transmitted in our own day, too. Were not Nhan-ton's ashes shown to contain sacred relics only after Minh-ton, not but eight years old, spotted them, in a miraculous event that deeply moved Anh-ton and may have been why in the following year he made it clear that he intended Minh-ton to be his heir?"

Dinh brought memories of Tung to a close by observing that a sequence of rulers influenced by Tung meant that the country was in good hands. "Here," he said, "was a source of continuity so much more valuable than the institutional devices the rulers evolved to provide for orderly successions to the throne. But when did this sequence begin?" he asked. "It began with Tran Thai-ton (1225-1277), whose contribution to our country's well-being is without parallel. No one supplied more successful leadership." He added that Thai-ton adopted Tung in 1251 when his father Lieu died.

Thai-ton himself died as long ago as 1277 at the great age of sixty, and what had

happened since then, as far as Ang and Khung were concerned, was so packed with big events that they knew practically nothing about him. They encouraged Dinh to tell them something about this ruler. Dinh replied: "He is the emperor who described as clearly as is possible how he became 'enlightened' and was also able to discharge his administrative duties as ruler. In both respects he set an exceptional example for his successors. No wonder that Nhan-ton wrote a poem to commemorate the magical power of his grandfather's tomb during the Mongol wars." Dinh now held the group's attention. The older ones were glad to have their memories revived, and the younger ones wanted to learn about a revered figure.

Dinh began by explaining that Thai-ton had a troubled youth. Married to the last Ly ruler's daughter when he was still a small boy, losing both parents, brought up by a ruthless though loyal uncle, at the age of nineteen he decided that his official duties were a burden. He therefore fled to Mount Yen-tu in order to study the *dhyana* and become a Buddha under the guidance of a famous monk. The monk told him: "There is no Buddha on the mountain. The Buddha is in the mind. When the mind is tranquil, wherever the mind is, it is the Buddha, the Absolute. If you are awakened to this mind, you attain Buddhahood at once." Dinh reminded his friends that he had already mentioned what this state of mind was. It represented one's Buddha-nature and was a void.

Dinh continued. "Thai-ton's uncle caught up with him on the mountain and urged his nephew to return with him to the capital in order to lead the people. The monk lent his authority to the plea. 'Rulers must harken to the empire's wishes. An emperor's mind is the people's. But I do not want you for even one moment to neglect the study of the Buddhist sutras.' Thai-ton did what he was advised to do and studied the *Diamond Sutra*

in his spare time. Some years later, he came across the passage: 'One should develop a mind which does not abide anywhere.' He chanted this sentence and was 'suddenly enlightened'. His experience was identical with that of the great Hui-neng, founder of the southern school of the *dhyana* as the Northerners practice it. For both these holy men the *Diamond Sutra* was the great text that taught that all forms are unreal. Everything, including the Buddha himself, is a 'void'. To cease grasping at anything is to experience reality, or the Buddha-nature."

Dinh turned to nod affably at the historian Chu. "You told us that Le Van Huu was able to present our emperors as comparable in every respect with the Northern ones. In the same way, Thai-ton's enlightenment matches that of the greatest Northern practitioner of the *dhyana*." Ang smiled to himself when he heard this subtle retort.

"At least ten years had passed between 1237 and the time of Thai-ton's enlightenment, and this has an important implication," said Dinh. "It means that he had been able to combine his Buddhist studies with his imperial responsibilities. He valued his leisure but never at the expense of his duty to the country. As Thai-ton himself put it, 'I consider that *virtus* should guide the throne. It should always lead the people. Rulers must experience anxiety and toil. Each day I have to attend to many matters, but I steal some free time. The more I regret having to apply myself to public affairs, the harder I study. If I come across a word I do not understand, I work on it all night.' Here," suggested Dinh, "is how an 'enlightened' ruler can manage his affairs by being able to manage himself, and for him self-management is the ability to exclude unnecessary self-centered reflections."

Dinh had studied everything Thai-ton had written. He knew that his friends were

officials and should therefore value the following excerpt. "I depend on a loving heart when occupying my throne. The people's affairs are troubled. The State's affairs are complex. Outside, business tempts one; inside, lust scratches away." Dinh continued: "Thai-ton knew the problems of government and could distance himself from prevailing values in public life. He rejected the importance of achievement and reputation. 'They were only dreams. When one boasted of one's ability, in the end there was nothing.'" Ang winced.

Dinh took special trouble in explaining that Thai-ton's detachment was the consequence of his spiritual prowess, which derived from something different from bookish knowledge. When he said that he studied in his spare time, he did not mean that he was studying sutras. No doubt he had an extensive knowledge of the sutras, as the allusions in his writings make clear. He was also familiar with the Northern classics. He would quote from Confucius or Lao-tzu to reinforce arguments based on Buddhist texts. "But," said Dinh, "studying for him meant neither posing bullet-like questions for others to answer at once or not at all nor writing sermons on Buddhist behavior. For him, to study was to meditate to cultivate the mind of Buddha. The strength of a Buddhist ruler like him was that religious awakening could happen at any moment after one had ceased to make self-motivated mental efforts, so the affairs of the world could be attended without threatening one's spiritual self-discipline. Indeed, there was never a reason to delay action. Indifferent to the operation of *karma*, the law of cause and effect, such a ruler could take action without fear of the future. Decisions would be swift and would not involve long-term plans. No wonder that our rulers have been able to provide faultless leadership in times of emergency."

Dinh concluded his homage to Thai-ton by adding that this ruler was also compassionate. In 1237 he spared the rebel Lieu's life, and in 1251 he did not punish the Hung-dao Prince for improper behavior. He knew that few had the capacity for enlightenment, which meant that they should be allowed to indulge in superstitious practices in order to earn good *karma*. "Earlier, one of you noted that villagers were obsessed with self-interest when they made their religious devotions. This is what we call *upaya*. To tell the truth, however, Thai-ton in his heart had no time for what he regarded as 'undesirable supernatural methods'."

Dinh had spoken at some length about one whom he greatly admired and regarded as the founder of the Tran family's attachment to the *dhyana*, which accounted for its skillful management of the country's fortunes. The errors of certain members of the family were, in comparison with this emperor's achievement, of no consequence.

The historian Chu was the single person in the group who felt that he should qualify Dinh's account of Thai-ton. He mentioned that there were documents in the History Office written by subordinate scholars attached to the Tran Court at that time that gave a somewhat different account of what happened when the youthful Thai-ton fled to Mount Yen-tu in 1237. Chu went on to suggest that Thai-ton's own account would naturally ignore the event that precipitated his flight. This was, of course, his uncle's proposal that he should marry Lieu's pregnant wife in order to make it more likely that he would eventually have an heir. The proposal was repugnant to him and he fled. But his uncle followed him and even made plans to establish an imperial Court on the mountain in order to influence his obstinate nephew. The impasse changed only when the monk, far from encouraging the ruler to pursue his religious studies, begged him to return to the

capital to prevent the sacred site from being destroyed by the presence of the Court. Thai-ton thereupon agreed.

Dinh listened calmly to the alternative account of the episode, but the others were perplexed. Was it credible that Thai-ton had falsified the facts? To silence their objections, Chu described the perspective of those who wrote up the official account that was deposited in the state archives. The emperor's reputation was maintained in a manner that had nothing to do with his religious zeal, the context for his own account. The focus in the official account was on the dramatic establishment of the young ruler's authority. The uncle's tone is at first peremptory. He speaks in a strident way. Three times he repeats his "urgent invitation" that the emperor should return. He threatens to build a new imperial palace on the mountain and even orders laborers to begin work, yet the emperor only listens to the monk. He returns but with a changed status. After two weeks, his outraged brother Lieu, who had taken up arms, decides to surrender. The two brothers met on the river. The uncle was informed and rushed up to them and drew his sword, crying out, "Kill the rebel!" The emperor protected Lieu with his body and, with tears in his eye's told the uncle: "He has come to surrender, and that is all." The uncle hurled his sword into the river and shouted: "I am only a servile dependant!" The emperor is now the master of his Court, and his uncle's voice disappears from history. The transformation in the relationship between the two is as sudden as the enlightenment he later attained.

Ang could not be upset by a version of an episode that culminated with the imperial authority intact. For younger officials like him, this was a necessary circumstance at the center to guarantee the stability on which officials depended for

uninterrupted careers. Nevertheless, Chu's revision of the episode had an unsettling effect. Dinh was a respected figure, and no one wanted him to be embarrassed. They awaited his reaction with some anxiety.

They were surprised when Dinh, with evident sincerity, thanked Chu for disclosing the contents of the archives and providing valuable information about this momentous event. If Thai-ton had not magnanimously accepted Lieu's surrender, civil war could have broken out. Dinh reiterated his gratitude to Chu for intervening at this stage of their conversation. He was so moved that the others became curious. "I have three reasons for being grateful," he told them. "The first is for the impressions of those who were close to the scene at that dramatic time. Though Thai-ton was still young, he must have behaved with awe-inspiring dignity. Without raising his voice, he was able to pacify his angry uncle. His conduct after returning to the capital must have been such that Lieu realized that his brother's position was invincible. Both his uncle and Lieu felt compelled to submit to his authority. Thus, the archives have given me convincing evidence of the force of the imperial *virtus*. You will recall that in our own day Minh-ton, though only fourteen, was able to impress the Mongol envoys with his presence. The Tran family surely deserves to rule.

"The second reason why I am grateful to Chu is that, while the account was compiled to record for posterity the emperor's *virtus*, it also recorded the monk's benign influence. Only the monk could persuade Thai-ton to resume his duties. What the monk was quoted as saying could hardly have been the whole conversation. Thai-ton, who respected him, would record more in his own version.

"My third reason is that Chu has unexpectedly provided me with an example of

one of the *dhyana*'s basic teachings, which is the rejection of opposites. Earlier today I quoted Tung, and you may recall that he wrote that 'an ordinary person and a sage are no different.' Similarly, a document written by an official and one written by an emperor are no different. We are guilty of an erroneous view if we attach importance to illusory constructs of the mind. Our responsibility is not to pass judgment on either version but to pay attention to what Thai-ton taught, especially about the *Diamond Sutra* in his *Guide to the Dhyana*. And as for these two documents, some of us could become rather testy when defending our preferences and this would cause unnecessary unhappiness and perhaps lasting rancor. Rancor can sometimes lead to serious consequences.”

There was an embarrassed silence. No one wanted to criticize so obviously an affectionate tribute to the founder of Tran spirituality by some one who understood the *dhyana*. Khung, to whom the others were glad to defer when matters of good judgment were involved, spoke first. "Perhaps serious confusion could, indeed, arise if one were to insist on one document at the expense of the other. Would it not be more prudent to believe that either document could supplement information in the other? Dinh did well to remind us that the Buddhist outlook deplored partial judgments," and he glanced in the direction of Chu, who had rather self-importantly contradicted Dinh. Historians did not enjoy immense prestige among busy administrators like Khung, who went on, "But what is very important in what we have heard is that Dinh has assisted us in understanding Minh-ton's promise when measured according to the traditions of his family. He has been on the throne for several years, and this may mean that Anh-ton finds no reason to disinherit him. In light of what we have been told of Anh-ton's religious convictions, we can be confident that he does not neglect his son's education any more than he encourages

his physical appetite, and we know that Minh-ton respects his father. Does not this give us additional confidence in the future, a matter we considered some years ago when we discussed our victories over the Mongols?"

He added: "In my opinion, our conversation today is more worthwhile than our earlier one because we have dared to ask ourselves questions about the nature of our government and even to examine the basis of imperial rule and the attributes of our rulers. We have done so in light of our own experiences and have ignored Northern principles and practices." He again glanced at Chu. "But before we break up, I would like to ask you once more whether, bearing in mind what Dinh has told us, do we still really believe that we have reason to have confidence in the future as we did after discussing the wars?"

This was the careful way in which they expected Khung to intervene, and yet his challenge was not entirely welcome. Dinh thought that he had spoken enough and was not accustomed to speculate about the future. He knew that the Court had access to the wisdom of Phap-loa and Huyen-quang, two famous Masters of the *Dhyana*, and that Anh-ton could be trusted to strengthen his family's ties with meditational Buddhism. Tich, however, believed that his own connection with the imperial family during many years justified his response to Khung's question.

"I have been close to several rulers in times of grave crisis, and I have always been impressed by their ability to remain calm and resourceful when switching their priorities and roles at a moment's notice and to do what seemed natural to them. Danger never caused them to panic. On the contrary, they could preserve their detachment as though they considered that everything happening around them was transient. They

never failed to remember that there were always two ways of looking at a problem.

Thanh-ton told me that Tung once wrote:

When one climbs a tree,  
In the midst of peace one seeks danger.  
When one does not climb a tree,  
Where is the fine view?

There are always alternative considerations, but our emperors were not deluded by them and took the action they felt was necessary. They were discerning without wasting time. They were in control of their passions. Thai-ton pardoned his rebel brother Lieu; Nhan-ton pardoned the profligate Khanh Du. In both cases, the needs of the country prevailed. Their spiritual training enabled them to avoid actions that caused bad *karma*.”

Dinh nodded gravely in agreement.

Tan was the most reserved member of this group, but now he wanted to speak. "I would like to make two points. The first concerns a valuable effect on these rulers of their *dhyana*-cultivated perspective. They always accorded priority to what was taking place at the moment. The reason was, of course, that they would not wish to distinguish between past and present. For them, there were only flashes of unconnected time. For example, after the first Mongol invasion in the 1280s, Nhan-ton ordered a census to be taken. His subordinates suggested that the measure would cause hardship to the people. Nhan-ton retorted: 'This is the right time to do it. The enemy will not be able to spy on us and see that our people are exhausted.' And after the second invasion in the 1280s, he raised provincial levies to attack the Ai-lao tribesmen in the west. His subordinates again protested, and he retorted: 'This is the right time to do it. The frontier peoples will

certainly suppose that we can no longer mobilize our military resources, and this would mean trouble in the future. I am therefore taking action now to demonstrate my authority.' In both cases," explained Tan, "he was able to separate the time of the invasions from what he intended to do. He saw no connection between events of the past and what he would do in the present. These were two distinct happenings, or flying arrows, as Dinh has explained to us.

"The other valuable influence of the *dhyana*," continued Tan, "is that it has been responsible for bringing cohesion to the Tran family. Have not our rulers themselves referred to the transmission of the Lamp from one generation to the next? This means that they share values among themselves as well as adhere to a common spiritual discipline for attaining their Buddha-nature. Among other things, fathers and heirs can be expected to have confidence in each other, and this is very important in preventing dangerous rifts within the family."

None of them wanted to say anything that might be taken as a criticism of the beliefs held in high esteem by their emperors. Chu was the least hesitant of them. "With great respect," he said, "I have sometimes wondered whether our rulers, in spite of their massive contributions in the worldly sphere, have privately believed that our country should be no less than a staging ground for spiritual experiences and especially for sudden enlightenment. If so, one consequence would be that the only persons they could really respect would be like-minded followers of the *dhyana*. Buddhists of a simpler cast of mind would be ignored and especially the villagers. This might even mean that the villagers would be paid little attention except for taxation and manpower purposes. What effect did Nhan-ton's preaching tours actually have? And were not devout monks,

meditating in the countryside, more likely to be regarded as magicians than as teachers of Buddhism?"

Ang was able to comment on those whom he met in the course of his official duties. "Certainly," he admitted, "Anh-ton and Minh-ton can identify officials who are trustworthy and those who are not, but they may tend to retain the services and bestow their favors on those whom they had carefully appointed long ago. Perhaps they are reluctant to reverse their original judgment. Rulers and their officials tend to become dependant on each other. Maybe, too, there is another reason why the rulers become attached to their senior officials. Today there are not so many talented princes to be promoted to posts of trust at Court."

Khung reminded Ang that a characteristic that distinguished our Court from the Cham Court to the south was that, with us, there were no sudden and violent changes of rulers. We had evolved an orderly succession procedure. "We officials should be grateful that, provided that we are loyal, we can look forward to long and uninterrupted careers, no matter who is on the throne. Our country is not extensive and our riverine communications are ample, and the ruler can keep in touch with most of his staff."

Khung conceded that the Tran family's religious proclivities could sometimes cause problems. "For instance, what reasonable hope have we that the head of every generation in the family will be intellectually capable of studying the sutras or even want to do so? There is also the danger that occasionally a ruler may focus his attention too closely on the needs of the moment and lose sight of possible later problems. And," he concluded, "I have to admit that one day a ruler, having mastered the *dhyana*, may develop an overweening sense of his mental capacity and become inaccessible to the

views of faithful subordinates. What was once a discriminating and open-minded attitude of mind could degenerate into an inflexible and arrogant one even unable to understand that most officials expect meritorious service to be rewarded."

They were surprised that Khung, usually cautious, had been willing to speak so frankly. Tan, ever loyal and discreet, hastened to bring the conversation back to a less contentious vein. "We officials," he said, "frequently travel through the countryside on the ruler's business and amuse ourselves by recording in verse what we see on the road or river. From time to time we see temples or meet monks. Here is a poem by Pham Ngo as he returns home to Chi-linh:<sup>64</sup>

In this remote place I hasten my return.

The rain in the mountain range wants to clear.

He notes that:

The flowers are invisible. Their caps droop under their weight.

Purple haze dots one's clothing with light.

What then happens?

On the firm stones I meet the monk and chat,

And when I gaze at the clouds, worldly feelings end.

And what is the effect of this experience?

Because of my desire, my sense of other-worldliness becomes extreme.

When I return to the road, the moon in the east is bright."

Tan diffidently suggested that the progress of light effects signified the illumination

Pham Ngo gained as a result of his visit to the monk. Worldly feelings were extinguished after talking to him.

"Ngo has a brother, Mai, who also writes poetry and has written about his visit to a monk," said Tich. The Pham brothers had already caught Minh-ton's eye and were expected to have successful careers, and evidence that promising officials were able to concern themselves with the *dhyana* therefore interested Ang. "This poem," continued Tich, "shows that not only emperors are able to combine their official duties with spiritual matters:<sup>65</sup>

Putting aside my preoccupation with documents belonging to the secular sphere,  
For a moment I take my colleague to visit the monk's chamber.  
In the green valley the snow is pure. The teapot is welcome.  
Among the red trees there is plenty of wind. The bamboo courtyard is cold.  
And then?" asked Tich.

"Slowly pacing around, I want to make the most of a whole day's elation.

Discussing other-worldly matters releases me from the follies of my career.

Knowing how to render the *dhyana* in verse, I depart.

My path is filled with the fragrance of flowers and the leaves of rushes."

Dinh smiled contentedly when he listened to these two poems. "They tell us something about the influence Buddhism can have even on those who are caught up in the affairs of government. Both men seized the opportunity of spending a little time with monks and benefiting from their company. Mai gains relief from the 'folly' of his duties, and my friend Tan was right to observe how the Buddhist concept of 'light' pervades his verse. They are not sightseeing, anxious to gather a few impressions for writing their poems. For Mai, the *dhyana* is suitable material for poetry. In another of his poems, Ngo shows that he is well aware of the meaning of the term 'mind' in its *dhyana* context and

is able to endure inclement weather.”<sup>66</sup>

"Yet how many of those whom I know really practice the precepts of the *dhyana*?" wondered Chu.

Dinh replied: "You will never know because little in their external lives reveals their values. They rarely practice abstinences. They eat meat. Perhaps if you were to notice that they were not constantly pushing themselves forward to attract the ruler's attention and favor, you might suspect that there were religious reasons for their behavior, though I doubt that you would be sufficiently curious to inquire.

"But, if you were to inquire, you might find them in unexpected places. We often have occasion to remember the Hung-dao Prince who led us during the Mongol wars. Do you know that his household included the scholarly and heroic Tran Thi Kien, whose honesty Anh-ton tested in 1292 and to whom the same emperor presented an engraved tablet in 1298 to commemorate his outstanding rectitude? And how many of you know that Kien wrote the following poem to a Master of the *Dhyana*?<sup>67</sup>

Dwelling in seclusion without trees and a brook, genuine seclusion.

Leading a religious life in the temple, truly a religious life.

This day I belong to the *dhyana* as though I had suddenly awakened from a dream.

I have been freed from everything from the past. I am happy in Trao-chau.

"You will understand the allusion to the Northern scholar Han Yu in the fourth line. Tran Thi Kien compares himself with Han Yu, who once upon a time ridiculed homage to the Buddha's bones but towards the end of his life, after he had been demoted to a junior post at Trao-chau in Kuangtung, found peace in Buddhism. Here, then, is one example of

someone who had an active public life and finally found enlightenment. Buddhism need not take one out of the world forever as some of you may imagine."

Night was now approaching, and the elderly ones were restive. Dinh felt that he had the last word, and he, Tan, and Tich were content to call it a day. Chu felt a little uncomfortable and uncertain whether the conversation had gone his way. Khung had become rather bored and did not want to prolong the conversation. Every aspect of government, good or bad, seemed to have been discussed, but he could not say with confidence that the future was free from problems. And as for Ang, the youngest in the group with most to gain or lose in the coming years, he could only hope that the youthful Minh-ton's evident promise would be maintained and that he would benefit. One thing was clear to him. Khung could take all sides of the country's situation into account. His experience and judgment were admirable, and Ang would be well advised to keep as close to him as possible.

They paid their respects to Dinh and went each his own way

## Chapter Four

### **Conversations in the later fourteenth century and at the beginning of the fifteenth century**

#### A remote stockade in the Black River Region (1370)

Towards the end of 1370, in the tenth month, four officials awoke to hear early morning rain beating on their hut inside the compound of a frontier post among the mountains in the northwest. They had loyally followed the late Minh-ton's son, prince Tran Phu (1322-1395), up the Black River into the mountains. This timid prince, now nearly fifty years old and fearful for his life at the hands of a usurper, Duong Nhat Le, had decided to escape into the wilderness with a small entourage, only two of whom, Hoa and Quang, were familiar with the physical hardship they would have to endure.

For a number of years in the latter part of Minh-ton's reign, Hoa had served as *an-phu su* and then *kinh-luoc* in the frontier provinces or wherever roaming bands of peasants were disturbing the peace. He had plenty of experience of punitive campaigns and of the conditions in the countryside that were responsible for popular disaffection. His service was recently rewarded by appointment to the Bureau for Military Affairs. He was a seasoned administrator, unhappy about the state of the country but determined to soldier on following the example of his admired colleague, Pham Su Manh. Hoa was loyal to the ruling family in spite of the deplorable personal behavior of Minh-ton's son and successor, Du-ton (1358-1369), who had died the previous year. He even obeyed Nhat Le, appointed by Du-ton as his heir, until Nhat Le disclosed his treasonable intentions by murdering Minh-ton's widow. She had believed that he was her grandson

and had welcomed him to the throne. Hoa mustered a few soldiers to cover Phu's escape into the Black River region.

Quang, too, was no stranger to hardship in the provinces and was similarly loyal to the ruling family. His own family owed a great deal to the Tran Court. His father was Khung, whose career early in the century, extending well into Minh-ton's reign, was envied by all who served the Court. Khung had died over twenty years before. His family had profited by rewards of land in Hai-duong, worked by farmers who were glad to leave their plots of village land to avoid taxation and conscription and to live under the protection of a powerful family established at court. Born in 1310 and now sixty years old, Quang had been educated at home by a tutor seconded from the State College and was familiar with the various genres of Northern literature helpful when writing official documents. Quang had scholarly qualifications as an advantage when he entered public life. Minh-ton trusted him and appointed him *hanh-khien* at an early age. Early in 1370 he had become an elderly member of the Privy Council. He was often sent into the countryside on legal missions and knew how disturbed were the conditions there. He was one of those who urged the government to establish public granaries for the all too frequent times of famine. In 1363, he had recommended that able-bodied men be selected to fill the ranks of the provincial armies. The following year, he had backed Hoa's proposal that there should be a countrywide selection of young men to serve in the armed forces and that new units should be formed, as well as warships and weapons provided, in order to defend the borders, for conditions in the Mongol empire had begun to deteriorate and the Chams had begun to threaten the southern frontier.

Quang inherited his father's cynical outlook, as well as his professional skill, and

was disgusted by the collapse of authority at Court and in the country in general. His father, Khung, had prepared him to expect better standards of public life. Nevertheless, he had no hesitation in following Minh-ton's oldest surviving son into exile.

The remaining persons in the group, Loat and Man, were by no means accustomed to living so far from the capital and in such distressing circumstances. Loat, formerly in the Censorate, had been respected by Minh-ton and enjoyed an informal personal relationship with Phu. As a result, he knew Tran Nguyen Dan (1325-1390), whom some regarded as the most scholarly member of the imperial family. Dan, Tran Quang Khai's grandson, held posts at Court. He had the reputation of being a poet and had friends among senior officials. Loat was on the fringe of Dan's circle, and Phu entreated him to come with him. Loat reluctantly agreed. He had never met Hoa and he knew Quang only superficially, but he knew the fourth member of the group, Man, rather well.

Man, a younger man, was a scholar in the *Tap Hien Vien* and had opportunities to meet Northern envoys. Perhaps he unduly admired the Northern "culture." He had allowed himself to be drawn into Du-ton's company of idle flatterers. Du-ton, appointed Minh-ton's heir in 1341, was educated by the foremost scholar of the age, Chu Van An, and had literary tastes. When An criticized his former pupil's style of government, demanded the execution of seven of his chief officials, and then retired to his country home, Man was one of the few educated men who remained close to Du-ton. On account of his friendship with Loat, he encouraged Du-ton to keep in touch with his half-brother, Phu. Perhaps his influence with Du-ton helped to persuade that ruler in 1353 to appoint Phu to the highest post at Court. Perhaps, too, this was why Phu and Loat asked Man to

join them in their flight in 1370.

Loat and Man awoke shivering from their first night in the hut, sipped the gruel that had been boiled for them, and timidly looked outside. They had made most of their way here in skiffs and barely noticed the scenery through which they travelled. They were dismayed to see themselves surrounded by towering peaks. Hoa had already explained to them that the stockade, their temporary residence, was strategically located for the purpose of guarding the lowlands against attacks by barbarians on either side of the Northern border in the watershed of the Black River. The stockade was also a trading post, for this remote region was immensely rich in precious woods, minerals, and animal products. Packed rafts would often be seen on the streams flowing eastwards. Hao went on to explain that the Southern emperors always wanted to exert firm control over this strategic region. "The first thing Minh-ton did after he appointed Hien-ton as his heir in 1329 was to patrol the Black River province and fight the marauding Ai-lao barbarians, and he required Nguyen Trung Ngan to accompany him in order to write the official record. When that expedition was discussed, Tran Khac Chung tried to dissuade the emperor on the grounds that the Black River region was known to be disease ridden with fast flowing torrents of shallow water. 'What advantage to fight there? How much better to fight the Chams!' is what he said. Minh -ton retorted in language that those who served him were accustomed to hearing. 'I am the father and mother of my people. When any of them are being oppressed, I must help them immediately. How can one possibly talk of danger and advantage in the same breath?' Khac Chung could say no more than that he was too stupid to match the ruler's breadth of vision." Quang chuckled. His father had often held up Chung's ill-timed interventions as an example of how a

prudent official should not behave.

Hoa continued to stress the importance of this part of the country by telling the others that in 1334 and 1335 there were further Ai-lao wars that required Minh-ton's personal attention. In 1335 his subordinates tried to persuade him not to lead an attack because he had an eye infection. "If I do not do so, the empire will accuse me of cowardice and then the Northerners will then certainly invade us. On whom could I then depend?" Hoa explained that then had been a disastrous time on our borders, when Doan Nhu Hai, anxious to exceed everyone else in earning merit, took an unnecessary risk in battle and was killed by the Ai-lao.

Hoa, with his soldierly background, knew that Loat and Man, accustomed to the security and comfort of Court society, would shudder when they were reminded that they now happened to be in a notoriously unhealthy and dangerous part of the country, and he taunted them by likening them to Northern envoys, who conventionally let it be known that they faced hardship while making their way across their southern border to our country. "The envoys were even scared by screaming monkeys," added Hoa.

Quang was more mischievous and quoted lines from Nguyen Si Co's well-known poem written when he had to accompany Nhan-ton on the 1294 campaign in the northwest:

This feeble scholar is without hope at all.

He bows before this shrine and begs for peace.

Quang succeeded in increasing his victims' anxiety. They had no shrine to give them comfort. Nor were they being led to battle by a successful emperor. Indeed, who now ruled them and what faced them in the future?

The four gathered around the fire in the hut, and the question that obsessed them was what caused their present predicament. What had happened to strand them in this barbarous region? Loat, prince Phu's friend, was unable to contain his disgust and exclaimed: "Du-ton is to blame. It was he who, listening to his mother, Minh-ton's widow, recklessly appointed Nhat Le as his heir. He must have known that Nhat Le was a worthless imposter and that his own elder and experienced half-brother, Phu, was waiting in the wings and already held the highest post at Court. Du-ton was as irresponsible on his deathbed as he had been on the throne. Those with whom he mixed were a disgrace to a Court whose status is supposed to be equal that of the Northern Court. Worse still, he inflicted on us the melancholy sounds of the Northern opera and music, and he required those of high birth to pretend to enjoy such abominable performances. His personal example was an affront to the traditions of his ancestors. His was a corrupting influence. He encouraged gambling and drunkenness and even promoted someone who consumed an inordinate quantity of alcohol. He himself fell into a river when drunk and became seriously ill. Had not Nhan-ton executed a gambler, and had not Anh-ton overcome his affection for alcohol?"

Loat was now angry. "Du-ton squandered money on elaborate horticultural projects. He was a coward and went into hiding when a star fell in the northeast that could portend danger. Thai-ton, whom he professed to admire, faced a similar omen calmly. No wonder that the Chams continuously threatened us. No wonder that Nhat Le was able to seize control of a demoralized Court and attract followers by promising further excesses. No wonder that we now find ourselves in the Black River region!"

Loat's ill temper unsettled the others. Each reflected silently on their present

helplessness. Phu had given orders that he was to be left alone, and a bodyguard had been posted outside the stockade commander's office, which had become his temporary residence. Hoa decided to check the arrangements his escort was making to spot the movement of hostile soldiers, and he wanted to establish lines of communication to enable him to keep informed about what was happening in the capital. Quang and Loat remained silent in the hut in case Phu should send for them. Man, on the other hand, felt obliged to say something in defense of the dead Du-ton in whose company he had spent a considerable amount of time. "Should we not," he asked, "consider some mitigating circumstances that may help us to understand better why Du-ton behaved as he did and require us to be less ungenerous in blaming him for everything that happened?"

"As you will," muttered Quang.

"Let us not forget, then, the frightful accident that befell him when, still a small boy, he fell into the West Lake, became entangled with a fishing net, and was subsequently pronounced to be impotent. Can one imagine a worse disability for the prospective heir to the Tran throne? His father, Minh-ton, foresaw that this would cause a crisis one day and hoped to avert it by later accepting the unsavory advice of a Northern doctor that Du-ton should have sexual intercourse with his sister, the Thien-ninh Princess. That his father should tolerate so vile a measure is enough to show that he feared that the Tran family would have problems after he was gone. Minh-ton later came to hate that doctor. Yet Du-ton remained impotent and bore the burden of childlessness for his remaining days." Neither Loat nor Quang wished to comment on this unfortunate episode.

"This was not the end of Du-ton's suffering," continued Man. "He must have

realized that he was born with a curse. In the last two years of his life he believed that he did not have much longer to live. In 1366, a robber had attacked him when he was returning from a visit in the countryside, and he lost the imperial seal and his magic sword. Those close to him observed that thereafter he became more idle and self-indulgent. None of his ancestors had behaved in this way."

They all suspected that there could be a further explanation for Du-ton's strange behavior. His father's influence had been oppressive. They themselves had personal experience of Minh-ton's powerful personality and knew that the contrast between the two rulers was extreme. Yet neither Quang nor Loat, who had been closer to Minh-ton than had Man, wanted to blame Minh-ton for what happened after his death, and Hoa, who had just returned to the hut, would not do so as a matter of principle.

Rather than blame Minh-ton, Quang preferred to be sympathetic and to take Minh-ton's own circumstances into account and to ponder a shadow over his life that was even more tragic than what had haunted his son. "You will recall," he said, "what happened during Minh-ton's final tour of Nghe-an in 1356. On his way home, he visited the tomb of his uncle Quoc Chan, and he died not long afterwards when he was bitten by an insect. Some, at the time, believed that Quoc Chan's resentful spirit attacked him. Nguyen Trung Ngan poetically alluded to this when he referred to the sound of cicadas in the vicinity of the tomb and when, under cover of a passage in the *Shu-ching*, he referred to Minh-ton's remorse for paying attention to Tran Khac Chung's wicked advice in 1328, based on a false accusation of treason, that persuaded Minh-ton to imprison and starve his uncle to death."

Loat, too, wanted to protect Minh-ton's reputation and broke into Quang's

reminiscence. "Around the time he visited his uncle's tomb, Minh-ton wrote two poems in which he mentioned his 'error thirty years ago,' and in one of them he recorded that he had 'attained maturity for thirty years':

Silent as though enlightened,

I sit in front of the stove."

Loat explained: "what happened in 1328 no longer had any reality for him. Nguyen Trung Ngan was mistaken. He was without remorse not because he could now justify his action in 1328 but because subjective states of mind such as self-justification or remorse no longer existed as a result of years of meditation that demonstrated the folly of the doctrine of 'duality'."

Before Loat had time to explain Minh-ton's state of mind further, Man, Du-ton's former companion, interrupted him. He was astonished by this defence of Minh-ton. "Do you mean to say," he asked, "that we should not blame Minh-ton for anything simply because he had trained himself to be absolved of any blame for the consequences of his actions? Did nothing correspond to right and wrong? I take it, then, that we cannot hold him accountable for anything he ever did during his reign. This is extraordinary."

Quang retorted that that he had raised the subject of Minh-ton's personal tragedy in 1328 and not the much more complex question of the influence of the *dhyana* on his management of public affairs. "We should consider instead the responsibilities of those who rule as he himself definitely did the following year when he explained why he would attack the Ai-lao. In 1328, he was already older than any of his ancestors had been when they appointed their heirs. He was twenty-eight years old and there were no signs that his

empress, Quoc Chan's daughter, would give him an heir, though his other wives had produced several sons, including Phu. He was in the intolerable situation that his ancestor, Thai-ton, had been in 1237, but this time there was no one at hand to advise him except his uncle Quoc Chan, who advised him to be patient. Thu Do, Thai-ton's uncle, had urged him to take a risk and marry his brother's fertile wife. Minh-ton's situation in 1328 was serious and difficult. He had to choose between waiting for an heir whose mother was descended from the same branch of the Tran family as Thanh-ton, Nhan-ton, and Anh-ton had been or perhaps having no heir at all, thereby jeopardising his dynasty's future. Instead, he followed his father Anh-ton's example and chose someone with the same family status as himself, the son of a secondary wife. He often expressed admiration for his father as he did for Phap-Loa, his father's Master of the Dhyana. And so he chose Hien-ton, born in 1319 and an intelligent and educated young man, whose misfortune it was to die young."

Loat also took up the case for Minh-ton. "When Hien-ton was heir, Minh-ton was obliged to shoulder all the burdens of office, and they were increasingly heavy as Quang and Hoa know only too well. Hien-ton's premature death in 1341 must have been a terrible shock. The reason that he chose Du-ton, born in 1336 to Quoc Chan's daughter, and thereby condemned himself to indefinite rule without an adult son such as Phu to assist him, must be because he respected and resumed his family's succession procedure when heirs descended from Tran Lieu were available." Loat added that Quoc Chan's daughter in 1369 showed herself to be strong-minded and decisive when the fortunes of the Tran family were at stake, and in 1341 she would not have wanted Phu to supersede her young son. "After 1328," Loat surmised, "Minh-ton probably redoubled his

meditative exercises."

Man pointed out that Du-ton's appointment as heir in 1341 was marked by the restoration of Quoc Chan's rank and honours as though to redress the injustice inflicted on him in 1328. Loat, however, still denied that Minh-ton felt remorse. "The imperial family keeps a genealogical record, and it would have been improper to have recorded Du-ton's grandfather in any other way."

No one wanted to linger further on the tragic background to Du-ton's promotion in 1341. What continued to concern them was how much blame for their present predicament ought to be attributed to Du-ton. Should so much depend on the capability of individual rulers?

Man was quick to seize on this point. "Did not the rebel Ngo Be begin his uprising in Yen-phu as long ago as 1344 and was he not killed as late as 1360, shortly after Minh-ton's death and only after he had styled himself ruler? And was there not a rising of robbers in Lang-son in 1351 and again in 1354? The latter revolt was led by one who pretended to be the grandson of the Hung-dao Prince, and dependants of princes, along with vagabonds and robbers, gathered around him. Such was the persisting fame of the hero of the Mongol wars, who in his final testament urge rulers to treat the ordinary people justly. Surely it is unfair to attribute the collapse of authority in the countryside wholly to Du-ton. Robbers had been at large long before Du-ton was attacked. The question we want to ask ourselves is why there was so much unrest in Minh-ton's later years and where the blame lay."

Man became agitated, and his persistent defence of Du-ton irritated Quang and Loat. Each of them had been close to Minh-ton and under the influence of his

personality. As far as they were concerned, the difference between the two rulers was immense. But they also knew the truth behind Man's allusion to what happened in Minh-ton's later years. No doubt Minh-ton's reign had not been without its tragedies and problems. Yet he should not be accused of neglecting his duties, of cowardice, or of failing to appoint energetic officials, some of whom lived long enough to serve his successor. Quang and Loat rounded on Man and insisted that, in many respects, Minh-ton was an admirable ruler and had no difficulty in understanding the needs of particular situations. He could also make shrewd judgments about people and could control his own family. Hoa, though not so close to Minh-ton, saw no reason to disagree with these opinions.

Such was the vivid impression that this ruler had always left on others that Quang and Loat had no difficulty in recalling what they and an earlier generation of officials, men such as Quang's father, Khung, knew of him. Minh-ton had the reputation of speaking pithily and often brusquely. Sometimes he intimidated his senior officials. They could still hear his voice.

"His temper could be frightening," recalled Quang. "On one occasion he demoted two conscientious officials in the History Office who had dared to try to prevent him from unexpectedly entering the office when the records were being brought up to date. 'Is not this office,' he exclaimed, 'part of the Palace, and may not the Son of Heaven go where he likes in the Palace? And did not the emperor Tai-zong of the Tang dynasty in the North also inspect the records?'"

"You speak well about his temper," commented Loat. "Did he not want to execute the Northern doctor, Trau Canh, for his adulterous relationships with women in

the Palace and spared him only because he had treated Du-ton for impotence? Even when he was dying, Minh-ton never overcame his hatred of Trau Canh."

Quang also remembered that Minh-ton attached excessive importance to status as far as members of his family were concerned. "My father, Khung, was present when Minh-ton congratulated an official in 1320 who refused to change Court protocol in order to provide Minh-ton's own mother, who was not Anh-ton's senior wife, with a more impressive escort of ships. Some one had hoped to please the new ruler, but this official insisted that the distinction between high and low had to be observed."

Quang remembered something else his father had told him about Minh-ton's concern for proper behavior at Court. "In 1327 two senior officials, Truong Han Sieu and Doan Nhu Hai, quarreled in Court, and Hai laughed and walked out. Minh-ton was furious, even though Hai had served with distinction since 1299."

"Nevertheless," Quang continued, "Minh-ton, like his father before him, handled his subordinates with skill. He did not hesitate to criticise and even punish those of princely rank. He scolded the impetuous Chieu-nghia Prince for his conduct in the Cham campaign of 1329, and he tracked down and executed the Bao-uy Prince for theft in 1347. As far as his officials were concerned, he could be as firm as he was towards Hai in 1327 and also with another distinguished official, Nguyen Trung Ngan, whom he temporarily demoted in 1326. My father, often at the center of affairs, described what happened when Truong Han Sieu was accused by a colleague of accepting a bribe. Minh-ton promptly ordered an investigation both of the accused and of the accuser. Sieu haughtily objected because, he said, he was a senior official, no less than a *hanh-khanh*, and should not be treated in this way. Indeed, according to my father, he had belonged to the Hung-

dao Prince's entourage. But Minh-ton brushed aside Sieu's objection: 'Both of you hold posts of trust. Why should I trust one and not the other?' Here is an example of the care he took to avoid seeming to be partial in his human relationships." Loat agreed. Minh-ton seemed to have trained himself not to show bias.

Quang continued. "I was at his bedside when he was dying and heard the advice he gave his sons. 'You must follow the conduct of the men of old and ignore what is bad. Why worry about your father's teaching!' Here is an extreme instance of his freedom from bias even in his own person and suggests that his influence on Du-ton was not so oppressive as Man would have us believe. He also said something else, which bears on what we just said about his impartiality. He insisted that he had never chosen his officials because he liked them. Instead, he chose only those who were a 'projection' of himself. Their qualities reflected his own."

Quang's memories came flooding back. They were fond ones because they were often associated with his father, whom he admired. "My father," he said, "sometimes felt that there was an almost intuitive relationship between Minh-ton and certain subordinates. For example, he claimed to know in advance that Bui Moc Dac was an honest tax collector and did not have to be tested (1326). Similarly, according to my father, he could 'put his mind' into Mac Dinh Chi and know that he, too, was honest (1313). My father saw in Minh-ton the large-minded influence of Prince Nhat Duat, who had raised him in his youth."

Loat's knowledge of Minh-ton had gained from what prince Phu often told him. Phu admired his father and had been close to him. "Another trait," suggested Loat, "was his generosity towards those whom he had come to respect. Among the few poems that

happened to survive his deathbed instruction that they should be destroyed because they were valueless are a few he presented to faithful subordinates when he was still young."

"Why did he have an affection for them?" asked Quang.

Loat replied: "Phu knew nothing of two of them, Tran Bang Can and Tran Sung Thao, even though their services had been rewarded with the surname of the imperial family."

"My father never mentioned either of them to me," said Quang. "Perhaps," suggested Loat, "Minh-ton honored them simply because of their unquestioning loyalty. In his poem on Tran Bang Can's portrait, Minh-ton goes out of his way to emphasize Can's ability to endure.<sup>68</sup> Perhaps he appeared as a welcome difference from the cantankerous and arrogant Sieu, Khac Chung, and Hai, all of whom were capable of contradicting him or even misbehaving in Court. Minh-ton tended to judge others by his own standards. He paid Can the supreme tribute of writing that that it was difficult to portray his loyalty in his picture."

Loat enjoyed poetry and was happy to talk about Minh-ton's poems. "In my opinion, his final couplets in honor of others often have a special force. In some poems they seem to express reservations about the reach and reliability of one's vision. The final couplet of his poem to Can may be read in this way. Another function of his final couplets in honor of others was apparently to contrive elaborate assessments of how their achievements were superior to those of others. Thus, of Tran Sung Thao he writes:

‘ Let it not be said that one's sons and grandsons take care of the future.

You brought your remaining strength to serve three Courts.’

Thao had served the future beyond what should be expected of his generation. He was an

extraordinary person. Minh-ton gave the same kind of superlative tribute to someone whose name may be fragrant even today. I am sure that you remember Pham Mai.”

"Of course," exclaimed Quang. "It was the Censor Pham Mai who protested in 1328 in connexion with the murder of Quoc Chan and was dismissed. Minh-ton never tolerated defiance. But an enquiry was later held, which established that the charge of treason against his uncle was false. Minh-ton reinstated Pham Mai to his previous post and wrote a poem in his honor. In the second and final couplet he wrote:

‘The dignity of the Palace is now safeguarded by the ardour of an eagle and tiger.

The reputation of such a one is surely meritorious.’

No greater zeal could be attributed to a Censor.”

Much of the discussion about poetry was beyond Hoa's understanding. Nor could he claim so close a connexion with the dead ruler as Quang and Loat apparently enjoyed. But he could speak about him from the point of view of an official who had spent most of his career in the countryside. He reminded them of what he had said earlier about the ruler's concern to protect the borders. Minh-ton might even have visited the stockade where they were taking shelter. "He was certainly a good judge of his subordinates, and he could sum up the needs of situations. Nothing would deter him from campaigning in the northwest. No one would accuse him of being a coward. Perhaps his prudence was a consequence of his talent in seeing all sides of a question and passing a balanced judgment. Reckless attempts to earn merit was something he despised."

Hoa continued. "In later life he was not strong enough to lead his soldiers into battle, but his vigilance was undiminished. When rural unrest grew in the 1340s, he enlarged the number of provincial staff and created new posts. This was the time when I

had the the chance of becoming better known.”

"He chose his staff well," agreed Loat. "He also knew how to manage his family. All Tran emperors needed the assistance of their closest relatives, but Minh-ton had no brother to help him as Quang Khai had helped Thai-ton. He had only his uncle Quoc Chan. Furthermore, his successive heirs were usually too young to assist him. Nevertheless, he remained faithful to his family traditions. He held his father, Anh-ton, in the highest esteem and was kind to his father's womenfolk. He was furious when a flattering official suggested that Minh-ton was wiser than his father (1327). 'He who says such a thing,' he shouted, 'himself lacks a sense of family duties!' Always well-informed, he knew that the flatterer lacked filial piety. He was also furious when an official tried to overturn a decision Anh-ton had made concerning his widow's burial (1332)."

Loat told a further story about Minh-ton's devotion to his father. "Not long after the tragedy of 1328, he withdrew to Thien-truong down the river, where he was observed eating vegetables by a junior prince. This prince disliked Buddhism and Taoism, and Minh-ton knew this. 'What is the value of such a diet?' asked the prince. The ruler snapped: 'I follow my father's practice. I do not know its value.' The prince, discomfited, withdrew in silence. Quang was quite right to attribute Minh-ton with an ability to read another's mind."

Quang added that this was not the only time that Minh-ton rebuked a prince. On one occasion he rejected a prince's claim to a higher rank for his services in the Cham campaign of 1337. The prince had unwisely invoked the example of Khanh Du, the famous warrior in the Mongol wars, and Minh-ton was able to point out a flaw in the comparison. Khanh Du had built a boat in Cham territory, whereas this prince had done

so in our southern province of Nghe-an. Another prince was denied merit in 1326 because his grounds were found to be false. Minh-ton cited Anh-ton's hardship on a similar occasion to humble the prince. Minh-ton did not have much luck with the junior princes."

"Quang assured us that Minh-ton made a practice of being impartial when handling his subordinates," said Loat. "He was equally impartial when educating his young sons. When he was in Thien-trung in 1329, shortly after he had installed Hien-ton as his successor, there was a discussion on teaching and the need to teach only examples of goodness in the history of the imperial family. Minh-ton disagreed. 'Good and bad subjects must be considered impartially. If my sons are wise, they will follow what is good when they hear about the good and avoid what is bad. Both must be taught.' And on his deathbed," Loat added, " he urged his sons to practise poverty rather than to seek wealth. In this way, they would distinguish themselves as persons of rank. He was always attentive to matters of rank. He knew that he was descended from famous ancestors and he must have wondered what would be the fate of his dynasty. Perhaps his forebodings are now realized! Indeed, a strange happening in the palace was, according to his wife, an inauspicious omen affecting her three children, including Du-ton, and she advised him to hush it up."

Man had listened uncomfortably to the praise that had been accorded Minh-ton and continued to be loyal to the unfortunate Du-ton. "It seems to me that you have been able to give Du-ton's father a great amount of credit without wishing to explain why we are now hiding in the Black River region. How, I am still bound to ask, could so accomplished a ruler have allowed things to go so wrong in the later years of his reign?"

Man's remark worried Quang and Hoa, two senior and conscientious officials. Had Minh-ton become feeble and slack in his old age? Or had his officials, such as themselves, failed in their duties? The tension in the hut grew. Man sensed the others' resentment and decided to leave. Hoa also left in order to inspect the lookouts. Quang and Loat decided to pay their respects to prince Phu.

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A few days later Quang and Loat made their way to Hoa's headquarters. Hoa, who held himself responsible for Phu's safety, continued to send out patrols to discover rumours about events in the capital. In particular, he wished to get into touch with the elderly Tran Ngo Lang, who, though pretending to serve Nhat Le, was in Phu's confidence and had secretly told the troops sent to capture Phu to defect on Phu's behalf. Hoa did not entirely trust Lang. Years ago Lang had mocked a brave but modest general, Pham Thuong Coi, whom Minh-ton greatly admired, not least because the general never sought to boast about his achievements. More recently, Lang seemed to be on sufficiently close terms with Du-ton that the latter visited him in the country. That Nhat Le should trust such a person was suspicious. Yet everything now depended on him, and Hoa was worried that there were still no signs that Lang had been able to influence army commanders to join Phu's brother Kinh, along with Prince Nguyen Dan and Phu's half-sister, the Thien-ninh Princess. Before Phu fled, Kinh and he had agreed that Kinh should raise loyal troops in Thanh-hoa. Hoa gave orders that boats travelling upstream on the Black River should be halted and their crews interrogated.

Hoa had described to the others prince Phu's last moments in the capital. Hoa was very impressed by Phu's half-sister, the Thien-ninh Princess. Though Phu was

considered to be the prince best qualified to recover the throne from the usurper, he was reluctant to make a move. Phu's virtues were scholarly rather than soldierly. He was goaded into action only when his sister cried: "The Empire belongs to our Ancestors. Why hand it to another? You must be active. You must go, and I and the family dependants will put down this rebellion." Phu took her advice.

Quang and Loat, learning that there was still no news from the capital, decided to walk in the forest. Man's remark about the unrest in Minh-ton's latter years still troubled them. They genuinely admired the late emperor, and Quang had nothing on his conscience as far as the discharge of his duties was concerned. Moreover, men such as Hoa had done all they could to pacify the countryside. "What went wrong?" asked Loat of his companion.

Quang wanted to resume yesterday's conversation without Man's presence. In Loat he could confide and admit that Minh-ton was aloof to the extent of being inscrutable and often unapproachable in times of emergency. It was not always easy to talk to him. He preferred silent officials. "His temper was familiar to us. We respected his sense of self-importance. We also knew that he valued our services. We were continually promoted and are now in our old age. Yet we could hardly claim to know him."

Loat, on account of his closeness to Phu, knew more of Minh-ton's personal life. "Several reasons for his aloofness occur to me," he said. "He may have felt uncomfortable among officials because of what he did in 1328. After all, an enquiry was held and Khac Chung's crime was exposed and Minh-ton's bad judgment was revealed. Or again, provided he was satisfied that his officials were loyal and competent, he was

content to trust them and even ignore them because he regarded them as his creatures, 'self-projections' as he admitted at the end of his life. And there is a further possibility. He believed that he was infinitely wiser than anyone else in his Court."

Quang was startled. "Yes," continued Loat, "he lived in a different world from most of us, including myself. We know that he had no time for merit earning and the quest for imperial favor, which could lead to unseemly competition and bickering. In this respect he resembled what we have been told of Thai-ton and for the reason that they and the other emperors who succeeded Thai-ton were practitioners of the *dhyana*. In this respect, too, he was a faithful follower of his family's tradition. The question has to be what was the influence of the *dhyana* on him and on his view of the country's affairs."

Quang recalled that his father spoke discreetly about Minh-ton's private religious concerns but had never felt it to be his business to suppose that his king had nothing in common with his officials' outlook on life. He could not remember that he or any of his colleagues had given much attention to the *dhyana*.

At that moment they found themselves by a small ruined pagoda with a magnificent view of the Black River swirling beneath them. They sat on a stone, enjoyed the scene, and continued to chat. "Minh-ton was certainly difficult to approach. At times his thoughts seemed to be far away even if urgent business had to be discussed," remarked Quang.

Loat again reminded his companion that the emperor's religious perspectives had to be taken into account in order to understand him better. "I have to admit that I am not familiar with so esoteric a system of beliefs, but over the years I observed that, when the pressure of public affairs was very great, he would still find time to be alone with a

elderly monk. This monk had great admiration for Minh-ton, understood very well how heavy his responsibilities were, and also knew that I was close to Phu, whom the emperor liked. Sometimes he would try to describe some elements of the *dhyana* that affected the emperor's conduct of affairs."

"If it required a monk to understand how Minh-ton chose to govern, would the best interests of our country be well served?" inquired the perplexed Quang.

"It is true that the crucial happenings as far as he was concerned were spiritual ones and indescribable at that," replied Loat. "My friend, the monk, called my attention to some of Minh-ton's thoughts expressed in his surviving writings, and they defy understanding:

'The sutras! Do not read them. The Buddha-nature is not delineated there.

Why treat one's eyes. They are of entirely trifling value.'

Here is another couplet that seems to contradict the view that Minh-ton ever took his official duties seriously:

'When in simple antiquity the Three Emperors were governing,

Neither seeing nor hearing, such were their minds.'

So important to him was this state of mind that his poem continues:

'To be tranquil in the finite and impermanent world for half a month

Is like stealing a thousand pieces of gold.'

In one instance he dismisses his faculty of sight. In the other, he praises the ancient rulers of the North for ruling without the assistance of their hearing as well as of their sight. Indeed," continued Loat, "he seems to mean that such mindless government was also good government because it was 'simple'. I made this point to the monk. He smiled.

'I believe that you are right,' he said, 'though a monk at the end of the Ly period wrote that unseeing and unhearing were the essence of the *dhyana*. Such a person would be what we monks consider to be enlightened. And in another poem Minh-ton himself claimed that he had achieved the state of mindlessness or, in other words, enlightenment.'

Quang was now finding it difficult to imagine that such a ruler could oversee an efficient government. An uncomfortable question remained. Does the responsibility for what went wrong in the later years of his reign have to be placed on the officials' shoulders, who should have compensated for their ruler's neglect? And yet, if they had undertaken whatever measures that they thought should be made, what would the ruler have said when he realized that his subordinates were making decisions that only he should make? Quang had never forgotten the ruler's outburst when Quat and Manh proposed a change in the administrative organization. Minh-ton retorted: "From the time when the State had its system of government, the South and the North have been different. If I were to listen to young and inexperienced scholars without talent, there would be disorder." The ruler probably barely listened to what was being said to him. These officials were not suggesting a major change in the system of government but only some administrative ones. Yet he could even refer to those two senior and loyal men in a demeaning fashion. These thoughts flashed through Quang's mind, but he preferred to keep them to himself. All he could bring himself to say was: "Minh-ton was always ready to ignore his eyes. You will recall how he would not allow an eye infection to keep him from going on campaign."

Loat realized that what he had told Quang had unsettled his companion and

hastened to correct the impression that Minh-ton was bound to be ineffective when it came to practical matters. "You must never forget that he remained a layman to the end of his days in spite of the value he attached to withdrawal and silence in his poems. Of course, one cannot read his poems on meditation without being struck by the language of inactivity. He would use such terms as 'desist', 'without sound', 'darkness', and 'mist'. On the other hand, he did not conceal the fact that he was not a monk. If you have any doubt, keep in mind the following couplet:

‘Overnight I have achieved the state of mindlessness though I have not yet  
abandoned the world of the senses.

I play at wearing the monk's patched robe. Mine is the body of one who is half a  
monk.’"

Quang was confused by Loat's description of the ruler's state of mind. "Are you telling me that he was familiar with the *dhyana* system of ideas without wishing to practice them? It may be that he was torn between the needs of religion and of the outside world. In this case one would suppose that he tended to be indecisive and therefore an unreliable ruler."

"I, too, was unable to understand his state of mind until I questioned my friend, the monk, who told me that laymen could, in fact, live in the world of the senses and yet be detached and behave with impartiality. The monk went on to insist that this combination of lifestyles was an advantage for the ruler and therefore for the country as well, because it meant that the ruler would interest himself in what was happening around him and also would be able to make balanced judgments when he had to make decisions."

"Remember," he added, "Minh-ton was on a tour of inspection even in the last year of his life and was accompanied by the young Du-ton. He could not afford the blessing his father and grandfather enjoyed of being able to go into more or less permanent religious retreat. He did not stifle his sensibilities when he travelled. He could find pleasure in reflecting on an evening scene:

‘I enjoy the moonlight as I face the setting sun by the bridge.

Trailing willows on the two banks brush their down against the clouds.’

This is the first couplet in a poem on a religious theme.”

"How was it possible for him to have the best of both worlds?" asked Quang rather mockingly.

Loat replied: "Minh-ton probably regarded the world of the senses, always close at hand because he could never permit himself to go into prolonged periods of retirement, as something for him to observe without being seduced by beauty. Some of his poems were expressions of self-discipline that proved to him that he could remain detached in spite of the temptation to yield to the delights of what he viewed as the phenomenal world. Thus he could write:

‘This old man has forged his mind as though it was iron

And will never again allow such beautiful things as pear blossoms importunately to invade his dreams.’"

"If, then, he was constantly resisting distractions," asked Quang, "would not the effort have itself been a distraction when he should have been giving attention to the increasingly urgent affairs of the country even though the threat from the Mongols had vanished?"

"For two reasons I do not think so," replied Loat. "The first is that his way of life did in fact allow him periods of intense meditation and flashes of mindlessness. The second is that the practise of detachment when still aware of the world of the senses was a source of self-confidence, and this quality would be a great advantage to a ruler. And we have no evidence that he was becoming feeble towards the end of his life."

Loat, by now almost persuading himself that Minh-ton was faultless, added that the ruler on his deathbed eschewed the consolation of Buddhist ritual to prolong his life. "He was free from all kinds of superstition."

"Not quite," said Quang. "I seem to remember the story of how he promised to honor the guardian spirit of Bach-hac in the northwest when he was fighting the Ai-lao in 1329, provided that the spirit assisted him."

"You have not remembered the whole story," laughed Loat. "After his victory he forgot to honor his promise and was reminded by a message sent to him through a prince." But Loat did not remain amused for long. Mentioning Bach-hac brought back to him his present peril.

Hoa now came on his way back to the hut. The only information he had was unsatisfactory. No one had heard of troops moving against Nhat- Le. Apparently, there were drunken orgies in the Palace. Nhat-Le had proclaimed the Duong dynasty, and his mother was behaving arrogantly. There was no news of Phu's daughter, now Nhat-Le's "empress". There were, however, rumours that officials of the new Ming dynasty in the North were appearing close to the Lang-son border.

The three companions slowly made their way back to the hut, and Quang told Hoa about their conversation in his absence. They had remained loyal to Minh-ton even

though they never really understood what went on in his mind. They were not Buddhists and had no idea what he meant in his poems when he referred to "mindlessness". "In fact," Quang had to admit, "we really did not know whether we should regard him as a credible ruler. Was his version of Buddhism a disabling influence in his conduct of affairs when conditions in the country were worsening? Should there have been a limit to our loyalty? And yet how different he was from his successor."

Hoa had rarely met Minh-ton and knew nothing of his writings. "I have spent most of my career leading soldiers on pacifying campaigns in the provinces. We never succeeded in suppressing all rebels, but we did our best and believed that Minh-ton valued our efforts. We did not misunderstand his orders. Rebels could never be allowed to challenge his authority and end up usurping the throne he had inherited from his ancestors."

But Quang could not suppress a question at the back of his mind ever since they began to discuss Minh-ton, a discussion that would never have been so frank if they had not been reduced to their present plight when all imperial authority seemed to have disappeared. "Was pacification the limit of his vision of his country? Was he unable to cherish the possibility of something more noble than mere obedience?"

Hoa could not comment. Loat, however, did not forget what his friend, the monk, had told him about some of Minh-ton's poems and what their message was. "I was often out of my depth because the language and the religious allusions were too often unfamiliar. 'Mindlessness' means nothing to me. What could he have meant when he wrote that he had 'attained maturity for thirty years'? What was the meaning of 'tranquility' for one for whom ordinary words had ceased to have ordinary meanings?"

"Yet my conversations with this monk helped me form several impressions of Minh-ton's vision of our country, and the monk was never more insistent on his interpretation of Min-ton's view than when the disorder was most evident. The first of these impressions is that he never supposed that he was without those who shared his *dhyana* convictions. He was so convinced of this that he had no difficulty in uttering *gathas* for the instruction of others. He uttered one of them before he was thirty years old in honor of the Third Patriarch, Huyen Quang, who died in 1330:

'Princes and officials alike respect him.

The Buddha's Way continues unceasingly.'

He did not feel alone.

"Another impression is that he was able to think of the country in a special way that absolved him from the charge of being indifferent to its well-being. He wrote several poems on what he saw when he travelled. When I first read them, they seemed to be free of Buddhist associations and had a common theme, which was the oneness of the country. Even the tribal people on the northern side of our border belonged to the society on our side. This poem on the Viet border is particularly interesting because in it he regretfully admits to one difference when he distinguishes between 'Northerners and foreigners', though it was a difference that he attributes to Northern eyes rather than to his own.

"These poems show how complete was his vision of the countryside and how he was able to see everything hanging together. He wrote: 'I treat the people all alike as my kith and kin', an expression he took from the Northern scholar Han Yu, and he goes on to insist that he would not wish to cause anyone unnecessary hardship.

"I told my friendly monk that I enjoyed these pastoral poems. 'You may not, however, have got to the heart of them,' he replied. 'They were written by a Buddhist.' I asked him to explain. 'If you had been better informed when you read these poems, you would have realized why he could take everything he saw into account. He had no preferences in what he wanted to see. He did not choose certain aspects over others. This is an instance of what we Buddhists call non-duality. We avoid recognizing differences, and so Minh-ton made the most of what the people on either side of the northern border had in common with him. But his sense of the oneness of his country had another and profound significance. Like other Viet followers of the *dhyana*, he had studied the Avatamsaka Sutra and trained himself to perceive the country as spiritually one and a realm that was sustained by those who taught the transcendent spiritual unity that underlay everything and in which all differences were dissolved.'"

Quang, who had inherited from his father a sceptical outlook, was unable to follow this explanation of Minh-ton's understanding of his country. "What did all this mean in practice?" he demanded. Loat replied, "If you were familiar with these poems, you would know the answer even though you might deplore it. Minh-ton not only perceived a fundamental unity. He also saw a happy state of affairs."

Hoa, who was listening respectfully, could not help exclaiming that, if this were so, the ruler must have been blind or unwilling to read the reports his subordinates frequently submitted about the state of the country. Quang was similarly incredulous. Loat realized that the conversation was now getting out of hand. "First hear what Minh-ton wrote and then let me try to justify his policy.

'The corner of the ocean in the frontier lands has returned to orderly rule and

learning.

Those on the horizon are living happy and simple lives.’”

"Why," asked Quang, "did he choose language more suited to Northerners? Did he really believe that he ruled only a corner of the ocean?"

"Of course not," said Loat. "Always very educated and intelligent, he was showing how he felt about the Northerners, who had given his ancestors so much trouble. His ironical intent was to proclaim that the country they referred to so disparagingly was fending for itself outside the control of the North. It could do so in just the same way as the North did, which was by orderly rule and learning, though these policies were not necessarily the same as policies in the North. Indeed, the final couplet of the same poem stresses how far away the North is and insists that he has no intention of narrowing the distance:

‘Whenever did the dragon's nose peck among the birds ?

The skiff has ceased to drift. The Five Lakes are far away.’

The dragon is, of course, the Northern emperor, and the Five Lakes represent the North. Minh-ton's unspoken thought must surely be that, because of the distance, our laws and learning could not be the same as they were in the North."

Quang commented somewhat acidly: "Surely he was writing for his own benefit. This poem does little to justify the way he conducted his government. He was merely shutting his eyes to the situation in the provinces."

Loat was careful to remind the others that he did not share Minh-ton's respect for *dhyana* teachings. "I cannot possibly imagine what was the peace of mind he gained from his flashes of enlightenment and sudden perception of the phenomenal world as

space available for spiritual growth. These abstruse matters are, however, connected with a feature of his outlook which we know well, and this was his conviction that nothing good would come to Vietnam if Northern expedients were introduced as measures for controlling the disorders. We can all remember his outburst late in his life:

‘From the time when this country had its system of laws, the South and North have been different. If one were to listen to inexperienced scholars, seeking to obtain their objectives, disorder would break out.’

And, indeed, he had a sense of the limit of the authority he should sensibly exercise, as we may remember when he rejected his officials' advice that he should take action against those who were not registered in the villages and did not pay their taxes or render their services. 'If this were not the case, how then would one maintain peaceful order? You want me to scold, but what would come of it?' He was equally unresponsive when he was urged to take action against subordinate staff who did not go to the countryside and fulfil their instructions.

Quang had never understood why Minh-ton spoke in this way. "Who among us would have sought to introduce a Northern style of government? We do not have a sufficient number of educated officials to govern the provinces according to written instructions. Not all of us are literate. Furthermore, our country is small enough for the ruler's personal influence to make itself felt on his officials. Another difference between North and South is that we in the South are constantly threatened by barbarian tribes just beyond our borders who are capable of raiding the lowlands. We, at this moment, are taking refuge close to these tribes. In the North, on the other hand, the heart of the empire is thousands of miles away from such.

"Minh-ton must also have known that all educated persons, such as himself, have always regarded the Northern classical books as being no more than an inexhaustible source of eloquence or fragments of other people's experience which we can, at our will, tap to reinforce or embellish our own statements. How could we possibly approach these books as a source of moral, social, and civic wisdom that would integrate all aspects of our lives no matter our status in life or where we lived. We have never been in the habit of planning far ahead, let alone attempting to remold the people's social and political behavior. We cope with problems as they arise, and that's that. Minh-ton knew all this. He must have misunderstood what conscientious officials such as Manh and Quat were advising him to do. He may even have been irritated by their importunity."

Loat, on the other hand, was not so inclined to be harsh on Minh-ton. His palace career had protected him from some of the unfortunate features of government in Minh-ton's later years. "Instead," he argued, "he held so firmly to his conviction that the country, seen through his enlightened mind and wisely ruled by him, possessed a fundamental unity that had to be protected against any disturbing influences that he, in his wisdom, did not initiate. His officials were only projections of himself. Could his independent-minded officials be expected to perceive the way every feature of the country was part of a whole? Even he was careful not to scold negligent officials. In the same way, in the earlier years of his reign, he had not hesitated to criticize those whose efforts were extreme in seeking merit. He must have known what the Northern monk had taught: 'There is no place in Buddhism for using effort'. But we would not be fair to him if we supposed that he was lethargic. He tells us that he had 'forged his mind as though it were iron'. We should take these considerations into account before we

condemn him for avoiding unnecessary repression when outright rebellion was not involved. As a Buddhist, he would be compassionate. When he was dying, he refused to allow animals to be sacrificed to prolong his life.”

Loat paused, somewhat exhausted and slightly surprised that he had again managed so spirited a defence of the late ruler. The three of them realized that they were broaching questions that they would not have dared, or even wished, to consider in those happier days when they were preoccupied in the daily events at Court or in the provinces. And to discuss Minh-ton was to revive memories of times when, in spite of serious problems, they had the satisfaction of knowing that they were at the center of things and were trusted by their emperor.

They were in no hurry to return to their hut. Instead, they ate a jackfruit and turned their gaze to the river and their hopes for reassuring news from the capital.

"I have been thinking about Minh-ton's poem in which he extolled the happy and simple lives of those who lived in a certain part of the country. Where and when was that idyllic situation?" inquired Quang.

"That poem," replied Loat, "was written when he was visiting the country estate of the Nhan-hue Prince, whom some of us may remember as Khanh Du. The prince died in 1339, and the ruler would have written the poem no later than then. Perhaps he had heard that the prince was ill. Why do you wish to know these details?"

"I wanted to know what part of the land justified such a confident poem. What you have just said makes me even more curious. We can certainly remember Khanh Du, a brave general, no doubt, but also some one who earned the reputation of rapacity at the expense of the people. How strange that Minh-ton should have been able to indulge his

fancies on that estate. Could it be there that he had a glimpse of the unity that bound together all his subjects? I confess that I am surprised that he should want to keep such company."

Loat replied: "The poem makes it clear that he was referring to the country in general and to the quality of his rule. His rule and the learning he encouraged made for happy and simple lives, and he stresses 'simplicity' by referring to his subjects as 'fishermen and woodcutters' rather than as 'farmers and scholars' as the Northern quotation would have permitted him to do. What is interesting in this poem is the attraction 'simplicity' had for him. This is not the only instance. In his poem about meditating on a spring day, he is comparing his state of mind with that of the ancient Northern emperors, who, when they governed, neither saw nor heard. Though he was concerned with Northern antiquity for only metaphorical reasons, yet his description of antiquity is significant. That was a 'simple' time. And how did he understand 'simple'? It meant that writing was still brief and refined."

"You are right," replied Quang, "to call attention to the way Minh-ton chose to define good government when he was not parading his esoteric *dhyana* language. It seems that he, and others too, were sensing some kind of connexion between good government and unsophisticated behavior among ordinary people and also a connexion between good government and good teaching. You are acquainted with Tran Nguyen Dan, the prince who is close to prince Phu and, I hope, is now playing his part in resisting Nhat-le. Minh-ton, always a good judge of men, appointed Chu Van An to teach his young son, Du-ton. Dan admired An and deplored, I believe, An's loss of influence and retirement when Du-ton's Court began to become scandalous. Did not Dan associate An's

influence with the theme of 'simplicity'?"

Loat replied: "Dan regarded An, whose father had come from the North, as a talented, austere, and vigorous teacher. He rejoiced that An could attract senior officials such as Manh and Quat. Indeed, he would teach only those officials who were good men. Standards of behavior had been slipping, and this was why Minh-ton sought him out from a village school and appointed him to a post in the State College. By means of examples found in the Northern classics, and well aware of growing disorders in Minh-ton's later years, An insisted that public life should exemplify the highest standards of personal behavior. Merit-seekers and time-servers should be removed from office. This was the kind of influence that the ruler wanted to encourage, and Dan, a loyal member of the Tran family, chose to hail Chu Van An as another Han Yu in the sense of representing a fresh start. Remember it was a time when aging officials of the quality of your father were retiring or dying and when worthy successors needed to be brought into public life. Minh-ton was well aware things were going wrong. Did he not institute a body of 'critics' to advise him of dangerous developments? And so it was that Dan, looking back at that time of renewed promise, was able not only to see a connexion between the ruler's initiative and An's teaching influence but also a cleansing of local 'customs', by which Dan would have meant problems as specific as slack officials, extravagant service to the Buddha and his monks, and avoiding one's duties to the government. Perhaps, too, dissolute forms of entertainment were beginning to arrive from the Mongol North."

As Quang listened to Loat, he remembered what his father had told him about the way of life nearly a hundred years ago. There were only a few outbreaks of unrest. The countryside had settled down from the chaos that had overtaken it during the decline of

the Ly dynasty. There had been a notable rallying around the dynasty when foreigners began to invade. The Hung-dao Prince's fame and cult grew. But then, in Quang's father's later years, there was a succession of floods, droughts, and other natural disasters that caused famines and harmed the villagers. No wonder, Quang reflected, that the estates of the rich and of the temples became places of refuge for the starving. Unfortunately, too often landowners demanded too much, and so it was that armed gangs began to roam the countryside. Minh-ton tried to halt the decline. Du-ton's attention was elsewhere. The comparison between what his father remembered and what he now had to endure was intolerable.

There was silence. No one wanted to comment on Loat's remarks. Chu Van An and the hopes associated with him belonged to the past. "Enough," said Quang, "We have sufficiently probed Minh-ton's mind and have become entangled in matters we shall never fully understand. Perhaps his ancestors were equally unfathomable, or maybe their contemporaries had more urgent concerns than their emperors' religious values. All we now know is that we miss Minh-ton and never more than at this moment. Somehow or other, he would have given us confidence. Now we have none."

Hoa agreed. "No one who does not share his religious convictions should ever claim to have known him. But we can speak of ourselves. What have we done over these dismal years? Have we done the best we could, or should we shoulder blame for our present plight?"

Loat, always loyal to Minh-ton, welcomed this shift in the conversation. "Indeed. Minh-ton had to rely entirely on his officials, and he always trusted them. Have they managed problems with the blend of firmness and compassion that he showed?"

Hao began a spirited defence of colleagues whom he had come to admire. "Why," he began, "have these problems been largely in our lifetimes? I believe that we are dealing less with the nature of the problems than with the leadership available for handling them. No problem could have been more formidable than the Mongol invasions. But in those days the rulers were assisted by their sons and heirs and by their talented brothers, uncles, and cousins. The Tran family was large, united, and gifted, and its leadership was felt throughout the country. The way it coordinated military strategy in 1285 was brilliant."

Loat could not help agreeing and quoted Tran Quang Khai's poem in celebration of the imperial family's return to the capital:

“At Chuong-duong Ferry, I seized spears.

At Ham-tu Port, Tran Nhat Duat captured Mongols.

In peace let's keep and build our strength.

Forever live these streams and hills!”

Hoa continued. "Moreover, the villagers and, I understand, the tutelary spirits, responded to the crisis. The villagers, at their own expense, even denied food supplies to the enemy. How different was Minh-ton's situation! He alone could assume leadership. Prince Phu, with whom, among his relatives, he was on the closest terms, was, dare I say, hardly the person who could be expected to lead armies against rebels."

"Do you mean," asked Quang, "that in our country good government requires leadership shared among the senior princes? If so, are you not condemning us to a fragile fortune? How can we be confident that those at the top of society will always be capable of dealing with emergencies? You are surely underestimating the assistance the ruler's

officials can give him."

Hoa was embarrassed. He wanted to defend Minh-ton but not at the cost of the reputation of colleagues whom he had admired, whose illustrious example was the result of their own self-respect as well as of their loyalty to the ruler whom they served. He began to reminisce about some of those he had known in public life, and Quang and Loat, who respected him and were grateful for his protection, did not interrupt him.

"Some of us could not help feeling depressed," he said after a pause. "We knew that we were getting old but were duty-bound to carry on."

Loat broke in by saying that Le Quat was such a one, and he quoted a poem Nguyen Dan had sent to Quat:

“Fifty years have rolled on. You are now half way into declining old age.  
Experiencing the world, what is your countenance when you enter its bustle?  
Cold is the Nhi River by the capital at night beneath the ancient moon.  
Peaceful is the ancestral village in daytime, a wind on the stream.  
Forgetful of oneself in all vicissitudes of fortune, your mind is unmoved.  
Involved in State affairs in all circumstances, your place is at the center.  
When the Court is in recess, you call for tea. Anxious about the concerns of  
ordinary people,  
You rest, unroll well-worn scrolls, and teach your son.”

Hoa sighed. "How true Dan's poem is! We knew that our days were numbered, and we often felt homesick. Yet we also knew that we were needed and that the country was in trouble."

Loat, who was on the fringe of Dan's circle, was able to quote from one of Quat's

poems that left one in no doubt about his unhappy mood:

“In recent years the world's affairs are at odds with my mind.

I long daily for my ancestral home and recite poems of homesickness.

In this watery land Heaven is cold and sends a shiver through the year's end.

The magnolia flowers have wilted on the wooden rail. There is driving sleet.”<sup>69</sup>

Loat eagerly explained the force of this language. "Every word drives home the meaning: ancestral home, cold, end of the year, sleet." He suggested that Quat became almost obsessed with the problems of old age and even wrote a poem to celebrate the gesture of bestowing canes on old men during the Han dynasty.<sup>70</sup>

Hoa was again moved. "Quat," he said, "had travelled far and wide. He knew better than most that this was 'a watery land', where an official spent as much time on the rivers as on land. His duties were onerous, and he had first-hand knowledge of how appealing the monks and their temple lands were to villagers. Villagers were only too eager to give their services to the religious estates with the hope of supernatural reward."

"Nguyen Dan, Quat's friend, was another unhappy person in Du-ton's reign," said Loat. "Much disturbed him. There were summer droughts and heavy autumn rains. The rice fields suffered terribly. But he was also haunted by a sense of his own futility. He came to regard himself as a futile scholar who should have retired. His mood of helplessness is revealed in a poem written to a friend who had sent him condolences when he was ill:

Summer hurries on. Age does not stand still.

I drift with feeble bones, wrapped in a light garment.

Wine spilt and singing finished, conversation is about human suffering.

The chrysanthemum flowers are decaying, plum blossoms are just out.

Enjoyment is ever rarer.

I mock myself for being a trimmer without calculating skill.

Was I, with a scholar's collar around my neck, ever decisive?

Relying on getting away with it and nothing more.

A white-headed servant of the family, with no plans to offer.

Every couplet expresses his poor morale."

Loat went on to say that Dan had become a bundle of affectations. When he wrote this poem, he was only in his forties. He had no intention of giving up his learning. The poem's message was no more than that practical measures were then necessary to deal with the problems facing the country. "In another poem, after there had been bad weather, he wrote:

Thirty thousand scrolls of writing are of no use.

This white head vainly carries a mind that loves the people."

"Dan had every reason to be depressed in recent times," commented Quang, "but there were also those who were worried many years earlier. I am thinking in particular of Truong Han Sieu, who had been brought up in the Hung-dao Prince's household but died only sixteen years ago. My father often mentioned Sieu's name as an energetic but unpopular official who never hesitated to speak his mind. He had no time for his peers, with whom he never mixed. He preferred more lowly company. He had the reputation of being obstinate."

Hoa scarcely knew Sieu though he had been told of the two famous inscriptions Sieu had written about thirty years ago and which were still visible in the countryside.

"Sieu seems to have been a harsh critic of Buddhism as villagers practiced it. He is supposed to have said that this *upaya* kind of Buddhism appealed to 'the stupid and ignorant, the superstitious and unenlightened' and made them concentrate their efforts on doing good works in order to earn good karma. He hated the monks who stole so much land for the upkeep of their temples and attracted villagers to work in their fields."

Quang was familiar with these inscriptions. According to his father, they created a stir. Both were outspoken to the extent that they uttered views never uttered in Court circles. In the first of them, he attacked his fellow officials. In the second, he attacked a prominent follower of the *dhyana*, whose teacher had been close to Anh-ton.

"The former inscription criticized his peers for not instructing villagers in their duties towards their families and thereby preventing them from deserting their villages in order to work on temple land. Sieu felt very strongly about this matter, though he was at pains not to attack the *dhyana*. He wrote that the villagers' way of life was based on 'depraved customs', and their superstitious form of Buddhism was no less than 'heterodoxy'."

"Surely," interjected Loat, "his thinking was close to Minh-ton and some of us who wanted behavior to be according to 'simple' standards. A short while ago I recited Minh-ton's poem in praise of orderly rule, learning, and simplicity, the qualities associated with his realm. Sieu wanted to eradicate anti-social behavior by insisting on family discipline, and he chose to emphasize this point by invoking the example of those who advised the Chou rulers in the North in ancient times. He certainly did not want to write an inscription for all to read that showed him to be at odds with the emperor's personal values. In fact, he described Minh-ton as also wanting to suppress depraved

customs. He referred to normal behavior as 'the correct way'."

Quang resumed his account of Sieu by remarking that the inscription had clearly indicated a major cause of the unrest, which was the monks' harmful influence on villagers that caused the decay of discipline. Sieu deplored this situation thirty or so years before and it had not improved since then. The temples had acquired a great deal of land in Du-ton's reign; his half brother, the late Prince Trac, murdered by Nhat Le, had been involved in this trend as recently as 1368.

"Another of Sieu's inscriptions," continued Quang, "criticized the monk Tri Nhu, one of the Patriarch Phap Loa's disciples who died early in Du-ton's reign. Minh-ton admired Phap Loa. Tri Nhu had restored a ruined temple and had invited Sieu to write the inscription in honor of the occasion. Sieu was indignant and wrote a very different inscription in order to accuse monks of destroying social relationships. You, Hoa, will surely understand two sentences of this inscription only too well: 'People wandered and followed whomever rose up as leader. Few were they who were not devils, demons, and debauched.' Sieu was shocked that Phap Loa's disciple should have been responsible for persuading villagers that the repair of the temple was the result of a miracle."

In this group only Quang knew so much of Sieu's writing. "My father, though never his friend, would sympathize with his views and wondered how much attention Minh-ton really gave to conditions in the villages. At least he expanded the provincial staffs not long after Sieu wrote his second inscription in 1342."

Hoa knew that Sieu had made a stir at the time but had not realized the extent of his anxiety. Loat, who was closer to Minh-ton's family circle than the others and was the best disposed towards that ruler, suspected that Minh-ton would have objected to Sieu's

language and especially the distinction he made between the Northern classical texts and the 'heterodox' aspects of Buddhism. "I am sure that Sieu made that distinction only for dramatic effect, yet none of us sees himself and our way of life in those terms. Northern texts are not for us the repository of 'orthodox' principles, and I hope that we are not unduly influenced by the notion of *karma*. We take Northern classics, the sutras, and *karma* in our stride, invoking one or the other according to the needs of the moment."

Loat paused and then said: "When I come to think about these matters, which is hardly ever, I suspect that we share Minh-ton's distaste for what he called 'scolding'. We, too, do not like to be over-regulated. Sieu wrote pompously about 'social relations' as if the Northern scholars were the only persons interested in the relationship of ruler and subject, superior and inferior. The differences between North and South are seen in clothing prerogatives and speech and not in the rigmarole of moral duties that the Northern philosophers illustrate endlessly. Sieu's and Quat's references to 'schools' should not mislead us. All they wanted to do was to call attention to the need for more self-control among the rural population. Nguyen Dan understood us perfectly when he downgraded bookish learning. So, I dare to suggest, did Minh-ton himself when he equated the learning he regarded as acceptable with what encouraged a 'simple' way of life. Probably all he meant by this was that some of his officials should be literate, maybe to the extent of earning the reputation for writing good poetry, but not at the expense of being obedient and reliable."

Hoa added: "The superiority of our way of life is seen when we compare it with that of the Chams and Tai beyond our borders. They constantly surrender territory to us; we never surrender territory to them. And how often have the Chams changed their

rulers in our lifetime? We, however, remain loyal to our dynasty and can enjoy unbroken careers. Our poets sometimes praise those who served three rulers.”

Quang muttered that the Sung and the Mongols behaved likewise to the extent of hanging on to moribund dynasties, and his companions knew what he was suggesting. Perhaps there were disadvantages when one remained loyal at all costs.

Hoa now felt bound to break in and say that their reflections had not yet paid proper attention to one feature in the situation. "By all means blame the dissolute Du-ton for our misfortunes. Perhaps Minh-ton was too lax in enforcing the laws. But let it not be thought that there were not those who were prepared to soldier on simply because they owed it to themselves to serve the ruler, no matter who the ruler was. Manh's poems should be borne in mind. He was proud to suffer hardship on the ruler's behalf even when the ruler was Du-ton.”

Loat rose to the occasion. He had reasons for wishing to humor Hoa, his protector, and he was familiar with Manh's poems written when he was patrolling the northern provinces. He began by noting that Tran Nguyen Dan also respected Manh, Quat's friend. Manh had written to Dan when on patrol in Tan Binh, and Dan matched the poem by paying tribute to the behavior that Hoa justly praised even if Manh's circumstances were unhappy ones. Dan wrote that Manh did not flinch from danger. Manh was glad to face danger in order to repay the ruler's trust in him. "I recall the first two couplets (143):

A scholar of high integrity who would prefer to bid farewell in order to tread the  
ocean's dangers,  
Singing loudly, gasping with delight, and trusting Heaven.

A man grave in appearance in all seasons, he repays the enlightened ruler.

Among the tigers' lair and serpents' haunt, he pacifies distant peoples."

Loat could not help shuddering when he recited the last line.

Quang admired Manh too and had been given copies of his poems. "In his own words, he was 'a fearsome suppressor' who 'protected the world' when he led his troops among the lofty peaks of Lang-son Province in the north. He admits his old age but without a trace of self-pity. What I most recall in these poems is his sense of carrying heavy responsibilities. Everything he did was on his ruler's orders. He always performed his duties with confidence. He always succeeded in pacifying disaffected territory or restoring good government by rooting out corruption and extortion.

"What is noteworthy about his poems is that he never has occasion to refer to the ancient sages of the North, as Sieu did in his inscriptions and as Manh himself did but only condescendingly in a poem of 1367 to a Ming envoy. On patrol he is concerned only with keeping the peace and securing obedience. He never mentions earning merit. The only antiquity he invokes is when he is in the northwest, close to where were are today, and he chose to recall how in our own antiquity the rulers of Van-lang were able to exercise unquestioned authority."

Hoa wondered why Manh thought it necessary to refer to so unfamiliar a place in so remote a time. Loat explained. "He, as others of us, have come to believe that the area known as Van-lang in ancient Northern books was where the Hung kings once ruled. Even today there is a Hung shrine not far from here. The reason why Manh mentioned Van-lang was because he was on a pacification campaign in the same area, and it caught his poetic fancy to imagine that he was restoring good government there and bringing it

up to the standards of ancient times. He may also have wanted to emphasize the extent of today's disorders by contrasting them with times when imperial authority was unchallenged:

Then, when for ten thousand miles were writing and chariots, the frontier soil  
was peaceful.

But for a thousand years there have been disorders in the world. "In Van-lang times," Loat explained, "there was a standardization of measurements, for this is what we mean by 'writing and chariots'. Script and wheel axles are uniform, and this is possible only because the ruler can enforce uniformity. If you wonder why Manh writes that there have been disorders for a thousand years rather than in the last thirty or so years, the reason is that he was writing what poets refer to as a couplet in parallel verse, and he needed to match 'ten thousand' with a suitable number. He was thinking, however, of changes since Anh-ton's reign. There is no doubt that Manh was well aware of heroic episodes not so long ago. He was once in sight of the famous Bach-dang River, where the final victory took place in 1289, about which he wrote:

Until today the people of the four seas  
Keep talking of the year when the foe was captured.

Or again, a memory of Dan's ancestor, Quang Khai:

Until now the old men in front of the village  
Still talk of how the Chief Minister, pacifying the bandits, passed this way."

Quang brought the conversation back to Manh's poem on Van-lang and observed that the expression "script and axles" was taken from ancient Northern books and referred to a very simple form of writing. Thus, Manh and those of us who think like him wish to

express a belief that respect for authority is connected with notions of simplicity in the sense of good behavior, which brings to mind what we were talking about a little while ago in connexion with Minh-ton's preference for simplicity rather than clever Northern ideas. Dan thought on the same lines and even praised Chu Van An for teaching simple behavior. If Minh-ton had but realized it, he and Manh were not far apart. In fact, they could have been very close, for Manh held Buddhism in respect."

Loat sighed. "Such is the effect of our now being separated from our customary affairs and prejudices that we are able to see differently the world in which we live and how much we have in common with Minh-ton. Perhaps we never took sufficient trouble to understand him. We may have been too busy carrying out commands. Sieu may have been wiser than we are. He admired an official who later went into retreat and performed good works."

"And he also cultivated unworthy relations with a temple guardian's daughter," added Quang.

The conversation again came to a pause. Quang continued: "Manh's confidence when on patrol impresses me. He seemed able to derive hope from sources inaccessible to others. One poem on patrol and also other poems mention magical powers possessed by the landscape as though he felt that our country was under supernatural protection. He was not referring to the territorial spirits worshipped by villagers but to a timeless quality in the soil to which he may have attributed our country's ability to endure hardship and danger. If this is so, he had something in common with those in earlier times who believed that things would always turn out well for our country. I doubt whether, if he were with us, he would have wanted to look for scapegoats for our present

situation."

Hoa thanked Quang and Loat for speaking so movingly about Manh, whose loyalty and courage he had long admired. They all wondered where he was now and felt embarrassed that they should have spent so much time earlier that day on their own misfortunes.

"I am grateful for another reason," said Hoa. "I never disclosed that Phu, just before he fled here, managed to send his younger brother, Kinh, a poem in which he referred to Minh-ton's achievements. We all know that Phu mourned Minh-ton excessively, and his poem shows that he continues to do so. The poem even suggests that Minh-ton's memory has given him confidence that he will return to the capital. In fact, some of us believed that the poem was a prophesy. What you have been saying about Minh-ton, and especially the favorable opinion you reached about him, gives me hope that Phu, who will certainly become our next ruler, will have in his father a fine example of how to rule. I thought it prudent for me to have a copy made of the poem. Loat is better qualified to read it."

Hao produced the poem from inside his coat and respectfully handed it to Loat. Loat bowed low and proceeded to intone:

The throne has been grievously defiled, and I therefore abandoned my post.  
I shall turn my back on the capital and cross mountain ranges into barbarian lands.  
I shall glance at the seven imperial tombs behind me and shed a thousand tears.  
I shall search my heart over ten thousand miles. My temples are streaked with  
grey.

The Wu empress was expelled in order to preserve the Tang shrines.

Liu Bang was the protector so that the Han imperial style would again be beheld.  
Minh-ton's achievement you must remember,  
And then the day when the capital will be recovered and we return will be  
assured.

Loat was moved by the poem. "Phu's situation and the scene awaiting him could not be more distressingly described. The historical allusions in the third couplet must be why the poem can be regarded as a prophesy. The Tang and Han dynasties were restored by heroes, and our dynasty will also survive as the result of Kinh's heroic efforts. What a carefully written poem! The Tran tombs will be preserved as were the Tang tombs. Minh-ton's achievement will be restored as was the Han imperial style. The destinies of the two empires are comparably glorious. The usurper will be overthrown."

Hoa thanked Loat profusely. "We must be patient. Hopeful news will come soon. Let us have confidence in the Tran princes."

It was now approaching nightfall, and Hao begged permission to withdraw in order to inspect his sentries. Quang and Loat made their way back to the hut where they found Man awaiting them and showing signs of embarrassment. He knew that his defence of Du-ton had been untimely and was surprised and relieved that his companions had returned in a cheerful mood. "Is relief on its way?" he inquired. "No," replied Quang, " but it will arrive before too long."

\* \* \*

A few days later they were awakened in the early hours of the morning by loud shouts. Hoa had inspected his soldiers during the night, and it was he who now hurried back to the hut with the joyful news that prince Kinh with many soldiers had advanced up

the coast towards the delta. According to the loyal general who brought this news, the usurper controlled no troops and the way was clear for prince Phu to join his brother and sister in Nam-dinh. The general had vessels that would convey Phu and his entourage with the honor due to one who would soon be hailed emperor. Hoa hurried away to pay his respects to prince Phu.

#### Lying low on a farm in Hai-duong (1400)

Late in the year of 1400, Vong and Ke, father and son, were on the verandah of the family farm in Haiduong province in the northeastern part of the country. Ke had just arrived from the new capital in Thanh-hoa in the south in order to celebrate the Winter Festival in honor of the ancestors. It was in the afternoon and they were enjoying the lovely scenery. Vong thumbed a copy of Pham Su Manh 's poems and turned up two couplets called "Crossing Hoang Long". Manh had been a respected neighbor during the lifetime of Vong's father, Quang, and Quang, who had died in 1373, was very much in their minds at this festival time.

The river's waves crest in the wind from Hiep Thach.

A tall ship, toweringly high, sails by the Hoang Long cave.

The spate of water flows like a piece of jade.

Shapely contoured, peak after peak comes into sight.

"Everything moves," exclaimed Vong. "Waves crest, wind blows, the ship sails, water flows, and peaks move into sight."

"Also," added Ke, "Manh's vision moves on two planes, the surface of the water and the heights of sails and mountains. Nature is driving his verse."

"An honorable official throughout his long career, always on the move on the ruler's behalf, as nimble as his poetic vision," commented Vong.

Each of them fell silent as they reflected on how recent events had also moved at a giddy pace. The family whom Manh had served so faithfully had just been swept aside. The throne was now occupied by Le Quy Ly, an elderly relative by marriage of the Tran, who had forcibly removed the last three rulers of that dynasty. The capital was now in Thanh-hoa. A particularly disturbing reflection was that the surviving members of the Tran family had, at the beginning of the year, been compelled to beg Le Quy Ly to ascend the throne. Le Quy Ly had taken "Ho" as the name of his new dynasty. It was the name of a Thanh-hoa family that had come from the North many centuries ago, which Le Quy Ly claimed as his ancestors.

The change of dynasty was no ordinary matter for Vong and his son, whose family had served the fallen dynasty honorably for a hundred years. Vong was now in his sixties and had retired to the family farm not long after 1388, when Le Quy Ly had managed to persuade Nghe-ton, known to Quang in 1370 as the prince Phu, to depose his nephew. The nephew hanged himself soon afterwards, having ordered loyal generals not to take up arms in his defence. Vong's career had not been so successful as Quang's or his grandfather Khung's had been. He was never appointed to the post of *hanh-khien*. Instead, he served on several Boards and especially the Board of Rites. Rarely did he have occasion to visit the provinces.

This did not mean, however, that his life was sheltered. He was on his farm in 1390 when the Chams last attacked the capital, but in 1370 and 1377 he had to hide when the Chams ransacked the palaces. He remembered how the capital became dark

when news arrived of Due-ton's death in Champa in early 1377. Lamps had to be lit in the market place. In 1378 the capital was again raided, and Le Quat's son, refusing to bow to his Cham captors, died a hero's death. Our lands continued to be raided in the 1380s, when Nghe-ton, who fled in 1370, took shelter for a number of years in a temple north of the capital.

During these disturbed times Ke managed to avoid danger. He had passed the graduate examination in 1384 but never distinguished himself and was soon overtaken by Hoang Hoi Khanh, who had just been promoted to the Secret Council by the "Ho" ruler, now called Ho Quy Ly. Ke remained an obscure official in the Han-Lam Academy. Nor had he earned fame by daring to criticize Le Quy Ly in 1392 when the ever-confident relative by marriage contrived to extol the Duke of Chou, the protector of the young Chou ruler in Northern antiquity, and to elevate himself to the top of the scholars' pantheon. Le Quy Ly was already reserving for himself the role of protector for the young junior emperor. Ke, as did many others at the time, suspected that the powerful official had treasonable intentions but did not protest.

"Are we worthy of our ancestors?" wondered Vong. "At least I was never disloyal to the family they served." Ke hastened to maintain that he, too, had never taken up arms against the former emperors even though he had not openly supported them. His father did not chide him because he had to admit to himself that his retirement after the downfall of the ruler in 1388 had been so discreetly arranged that no one could accuse him of wanting to protest.

No one would have considered either Vong or Ke worthy of much attention. Yet they were not entirely insignificant. Vong exhibited as well as inherited his forebears'

detachment. He had a propensity for calling attention to the obvious when others would elaborate their observations in sententious remarks culled from Northern books. He had smiled, albeit grimly, when he was told of the exchange of classical quotations between Due-ton and his general on the eve of the fatal battle with the Chams in 1377. He also possessed his family's standards for judging the quality of imperial leadership and could not help concluding that Nghe-ton was a coward. Nghe-ton prided himself on his scholarly attainments but was pitifully dependant on his cousin, Le Quy Ly, and fell easy prey to comforting assurances of his cousin's ability to help him withstand foreign invasions and internal rebellions. Nghe-ton, perhaps reluctantly, had to admit that Le Quy Ly would rise to all occasions, if not for utterly loyal reasons.

Vong had a cynical attitude towards what was happening around him. Like Khung and Quang before him, he could spot and despise shifts in allegiance to throne and patron alike, behavior responsible for the prominence in public life of so many people who were eager to disclose where their personal interests lay. He realized how easily Le Quy Ly had been able to pack the Secret Council with six ambitious henchmen in 1388. That action had warned the young ruler of the increasing passivity of Nghe-ton, the senior emperor, toward his cousin and had precipitated the ruler's unsuccessful attempt on Le Quy Ly's life.

Vong inherited further attributes. He tended to be uncommitted about the future, and never was this trait more timely than now. He and his son survived the dynastic change and the bloodbath that had preceded Le Quy Ly's coronation earlier in the year. He believed that his family could escape the usurper's informers. After all, both of them had been careful to avoid contact with those who were known to be disaffected. Vong

was anxious on only one count. He knew that Le Quy Ly since 1397 was planning to reduce the size of the Tran family estates and also of others like himself, whose ancestors benefited from donations of land in return for their services. He shared this concern with his son. "Did not the senior *hanh-khien* Ha Duc Lan recently confide to his family that the ruler was stealing the people's land, a remark that came to Le Quy Ly's angry attention? Ha Duc Lan was one of the large group of Tran loyalists who last year made a final and again unsuccessful attempt on Le Quy Ly's life. I wonder how much longer we shall be able to possess our farm," he sighed. "And what will happen to the estates of our neighbors such as the Pham and Truong families?"

Ke suspected that his father was more worried about protecting the family's possessions than about the country's well-being. "Where," he asked himself, "do the *nho*'s loyalties lie in times like these?" The Ham-lam Academy had just been transferred to the new capital in Thanh-hoa, and he was well-informed about measures the new ruler and his energetic son Han Thuong were introducing to undo the harm done in the country for many decades. He could not help approving plans to restore law and order. Action was taken last year to reduce the number of vagabonds by conscripting them for public works. Efforts were also being made to promote village education. Of particular importance was the effort taken to improve the performance of provincial officials.

Ke wanted to divert his father's thoughts to less depressing problems than the prospects awaiting their farm, and he therefore suggested that the new dynasty would vigorously tackle some of the grave problems tormenting the country for so long. "Let us look on the hopeful side of the present situation," he urged his father. "Surely widespread disaffection threatens our family as much as the ruler's land reforms. A few

months ago senior officials were sent into the provinces to investigate how local officials were treating the population and to promote or demote them accordingly. The ruler knew very well that negligent officials were responsible for much of the unrest. As long ago as 1392 action was taken to fine those who refuse to take up their posts in the country. We must have hope in the future when the new dynasty gets into its stride."

Vong seemed to recall that his father, Quang, had told him that, though he could not help admiring Minh-ton, that ruler tended to be indifferent when his staff urged him to punish disobedient provincial officials who refused to take up their posts. "Perhaps they feared the villagers who no longer held imperial representatives in awe," suggested Vong. "Or perhaps they departed their posts for the sake of their families." His son's unexpected defence of the new regime worried him and also made him think of the exciting but brief years of the "restoration" in his youth, when in 1370 Prince Phu, the future Nghe-ton, was escorted back to his capital and his dynasty restored. His father had been present on that memorable occasion. The scholarly prince Tran Nguyen Dan was prominent then, and his future son-in-law Nguyen Phi Khanh later wrote of him that "he calmed anxiety when the State's fate hung on a thread." Dan had high hopes for the future. Vong recalled Dan's poem on the occasion of the graduates's examination of 1374, where he proclaimed the equality of the Southern and Northern Courts in respect of the importance attached to "literary examinations to select men of superior talent."

"In those days," said Vong, "this kind of self-reflection was still permissible. But our hopes were extinguished not long afterward. Though officials protested that order should be restored at home before military campaigns were launched abroad, Due-ton, Nghe-ton's younger brother and the first of that miserable ruler's heirs, impetuously

attacked Champa and was killed in battle. Everything began to go from bad to worse, and it was then, dare I say without risking my life, that Le Quy Ly seized his first opportunity to establish his reputation as someone who would steer the country through dangerous times."

"You," continued Vong, "seem willing to hope that things will improve. I would like to agree, but throughout my life I have been haunted by frightening prophecies, alarming omens, and fearful forebodings. A hundred years ago the mood was, according to tradition, very different. In times of war our soothsayers uttered cheerful prophecies. There were victories against the Mongols, we were stirred by the exploits of the Hungdao Prince and guided by wise rulers. People were in the habit of facing the future with confidence. Even when Nhat Le usurped in 1370, there were those who never gave up hope. One such person was my father's colleague, Hoa, the famous *kinh-luoc su* who so admired our former neighbor, Pham Su Manh. But soon afterwards my father became depressed. Threatening omens circulated. The news was divulged that Minh-ton had found ominous writing in a fish's mouth that foretold tension among his children. Some years later Du-ton foretold his early death. The disastrous year 1388, when Nghe-ton betrayed his nephew and heir, was announced by a falling star in the west that should have warned us that Le Quy Ly from Thanh-hoa was planning to destroy the Tran dynasty. And we all knew that Due-ton's ghost mocked Nghe-ton in a dream just before his death, for ruining the Tran heritage."

Vong paused. His memories were now treasonable as well as painful. Had not mourning for Nghe-ton been defiled in 1394 by Le Quy Ly's murder of two Tran relatives and also a scholar because they had mentioned the execution of another Tran relative in

1392? It was common knowledge that the ineffective Nghe-ton did nothing to save the lives of his unfortunate relatives. He had even allowed his son, Ngac, to be killed.

"Why," Vong asked his son, "were the Tran relatives unsupported in their attacks on the powerful official?" Ke replied that the reason must have been that the Tran dynasty was no longer seen as possessing *virtus*.

But Ke had to admit to himself that nearly four hundred brave Tran loyalists had attempted to kill Le Quy Ly in 1399 on behalf of a Tran ruler who was only three years old. Perhaps the reason for their act was sheer revulsion that the usurper should have ordered the strangling of the former ruler, who was still a young man. Ke sensed that his father felt nervous about the direction their conversation had taken and suggested that they should retire to the interior of the house where they would not be overheard. Vong readily agreed. He was an old man and had some morbid satisfaction in reliving the past. He himself had done nothing remarkable, but he had witnessed and survived some extraordinary events.

Vong resumed his account of the dismal topics of discourse which increasingly occupied the attention of his friends. "The censors seemed always to prophesy disasters. In fact, in 1391, after Ngac had been killed, Le Quy Ly playfully chided a censor who remained silent, so accustomed had he become to signs of his ill repute. Another instance of the foreboding that was never absent in my lifetime was the plea of one of Due-ton's wives to cancel the campaign against the Chams. She foretold defeat because the country was not in a condition to go to war. The mother of the emperor murdered in 1388 also foretold tragedy when he was appointed heir after Due-ton's death in battle. How right was Tran Nguyen Dan to remind his friends that there had always been examples of

prosperity and failure and to complain that they took so little interest in what the books had to teach them. He was convinced that times were now so bad that he had to lie low on his estate just as I am doing. So depressed Dan became that he even advised Nghe-ton to respect the Northern emperor as his father and to love the Cham king as his son! His ancestor, Tran Quang Khai, would have been disgusted."

Ke remarked that Dan managed to make his peace with Le Quy Ly in order to safeguard his children's prospects in public life and that his son-in-law, Nguyen Phi Khanh, was now beginning the successful career that Nghe-ton had never allowed to him. "Here are examples of those connected with the former dynasty who are looking ahead to a more promising future. I, too, look ahead. No longer need we be anxious as so many were whenever Le Quy Ly manipulated Nghe-ton to advance his own interests. No longer need we be dismayed by Nghe-ton's indifference when his kinsmen were in danger. Soul searching to discover our duty is a thing of the past. As for Dan, we took it amiss that he chose to make his final withdrawal in 1385 soon after our graduate examination in 1384. It was as though he and others who were depressed had no confidence that the new graduates would bring fresh and beneficial influences to public life."

Ke was not entirely comfortable when he recalled the examination of 1384 because his father and he knew that two of the graduates had later shown a great deal of courage. In 1392 Doan Xuan Loi protested when Le Quy Ly assigned the Duke of Chou preeminent status in Northern philosophy at the expense of Confucius in order to legitimize his intention to serve as the protector of Nghe-ton's young heir. He was demoted. And Le A Phu had been executed for his role in the conspiracy against Le Quy

Ly that led to the young emperor's death in 1388.

These somewhat shameful reflections required Ke to bolster his self-respect and also his resolve to serve the new ruler. "You may not know," he told his father, "that in recent years a number of prose poems (*phu*) have been circulating, sometimes anonymous ones. They always have a moralizing tendency, though not everyone is able to understand their purposes. The authors cleverly manipulate materials found in texts purporting to come from Northern antiquity and pack their comments with references to sayings by Northern sages, though some very unfamiliar persons are mentioned. But these writings have one thing in common. They teach principles of good government, sometimes in roundabout ways but always as if their authors were well aware that many of us have been pondering this question for years."

Vong heard rumors about these texts but had shown no curiosity in order to avoid incurring suspicion. Naturally he wanted to know where their sympathies lay, and he took this opportunity of asking his son.

Ke chose not to answer his father directly. "You have just mentioned that you have frequently been disturbed by omens. The *phu* are also interested in omens but in a different way. The omens they refer to are auspicious ones that appear because rulers possess *virtus* and govern well. Human rather than supernatural qualities are what matter."

His father asked where the writers' sympathies lay. Ke, having prepared the ground by stressing that good government was their major concern, suggested that they probably supported Le Quy Ly. "For example, Tran Cong Can's text mentions the rise of the Chou dynasty in the North at the expense of the Shang; an omen foretells this event."<sup>71</sup>

Le Quy Ly's interest in the Chou family is well known. Another *phu* praises the enduring influence of the Duke of Chou's descendants expressed in the sound of Chou music. In those days rulers with virtue would study this music in order to understand how to govern well. The *phu* concludes by stating that sacred learning is now in the ascendant.<sup>72</sup> Perhaps this is an allusion to the rise of Le Quy Ly.”

"Do any of these texts actually attack Nghe-ton?" asked Vong. Ke thought that Nguyen Phap's *phu*<sup>73</sup> could be understood in this way. "The subject is the unfortunate Tang emperor Xuan-zong. Early in his reign he showed that he had been endowed with excellent *virtus*. His government was good because he made it known that 'simplicity was the people's priority'. The young Xuan-zong was an energetic ruler with wise assistants."

Vong interrupted by remarking that scholars and officials in his own youth had bandied about the expression "simplicity" as the sign of good government. Ke, who was familiar with the materials that his father had in mind, added that this *phu* actually associated *virtus* with the purity and simplicity of the people's customs. He went on to suggest how a particular passage in this *phu* seemed to point to Nghe-ton. "Xuan-zong's reign had begun gloriously, and Dan similarly had written admiringly of Nghe-ton's early reign: 'Everything was done that should be done.... When can this old official hope for a return of such times?'<sup>74</sup> The *phu* states that Hsuan-tsung's early reign followed in the steps of the founder of his dynasty. Nghe-ton began his reign, you once told me, in Minh-ton's steps.

"Another *phu* may be in honor of Le Quy Ly before he came to the throne. It extols the importance of historians who use the pen to utter warnings. They choose the

correct words to describe what happens. Perhaps the author may have had in mind the *Viet su luoc*, which reads like a parable to laud Le Quy Ly's loyalty to Nghe-ton, who had become as feeble as the last Ly ruler. Or, it could be that Le Quy Ly himself was being praised for offering hope of future leadership when all seemed in decline, just as the Tran princes had done during the years of the Ly dynasty collapse."

Ke realized that he had read these texts in a light favorable to Le Quy Ly, and he hoped that his father would be reconciled to his continuing to serve a usurper. To make this point, he noted that the *phu* associate the practice of *virtus* with the ruler's employment of talented officials. "Here," he suggested, "may be an acceptable reason for serving the new ruler, who is as energetic as the youthful Xuan-zong was. Moreover, my loyal service may be a guarantee that our family property will be protected."

Ke saw that his father was confused, and, to influence him further, he decided to read to him a passage in a poem Nguyen Phi Khanh had just written that would reawaken in his father's heart the glowing sensation of serving an emperor. The poem is addressed to someone who had been appointed a *kinh luoc su*, a post once held his grandfather's friend Hoa:

With dignified authority liberally bestowed by the highest,

You are gloriously transferred as *kinh luoc su*, wielding an official's power.

Your plans will permit some display of your skill in affairs of state.

Repulsing the enemy in the final reckoning depends on a 'worthy' who saves the  
times.

Vong was not pleased that his son should wish to associate himself with Khanh's flamboyant sentiments. He was reminded of Nguyen Trung Ngan's professional conceit

preserved in his youthful poems, which Dan could not help acknowledging in the poem he wrote to congratulate Ngan on a senior appointment.

It was now nighttime. Ke intended to return to the Western Capital early the next morning and was glad to do so because he suspected that his father disapproved of his defence of the new ruler. They were preparing to withdraw for the night when an agitated maidservant entered the room and respectfully informed Vong that an exhausted fisherman had just arrive and had begged her to allow him to speak with her master. "He knows you."

Ke was alarmed and showed it. Vong, too, was startled and hesitated. "He is in a pitiable state," said the servant. "May I at least give him some food and shelter in a barn for the night?" Ke wanted to send the stranger away, but his father decided that he could not do otherwise than to see him. The servant was ordered to admit the fisherman.

Soon afterwards a bedraggled peasant, evidently travel weary, was shown in, and at once Vong and Ke recognized him as their neighbour, Coi, and Ke's fellow graduate of 1384. His career had been promising, and not long ago he had been appointed as a senior provincial officer in the northwest with the responsibility of implementing Le Quy Ly's land reform of 1397. He was based in Son-tay, west of the former capital.

Coi collapsed on a bench and paused to get his breath back. "I claim the friendship between our families to beg of you one night's shelter and a change of clothes to enable me to leave unnoticed early in the morning." Vong called the servant back and ordered her to provide a plate of hot food. Ke checked that the shutters were fully drawn.

Coi finished eating and thanked his hosts. "What has happened?" asked Vong.

"I was serving in Son-tay when news of the attempt on Le Quy Ly's life in the

fourth month of 1399 reached me and of my uncle's execution on suspicion that he had been connected with the plot. I was told that Le Quy Ly's wrath was intense and that he was determined to extirpate all with the slightest connexion to the conspirators. Immediately some of my colleagues began to avoid my company. I recalled Le Quy Ly's record of ruthlessness towards the senior Tran princes and the invariable way he always managed to hear of hostile activities. Quite a number of officials have disappeared after being suspected of disaffection. I therefore decided to lie low and persuaded an old monk in a temple close to the Ai-lao territory to allow me to work as a temple servant. There I remained for more than a year. Recently, however, I heard rumors that suspects were still being rounded up, and I decided that I would never again have peace of mind, let alone an official career. My uncle will always be held against me. Furthermore, those of us who have been brought up in the northern provinces cannot help knowing some members of the Tran family whose lands sprawl everywhere and who bitterly resent the rule of Le Quy Ly, their 'relative by marriage' as they contemptuously refer to him."

Coi paused a moment and noted the worried look on Ke's face.

"I made up my mind. I will escape to the North. Others have done likewise during the past ten years. Perhaps this so-called dynasty will be short-lived. And so I disguised myself as a fisherman and cautiously made my way eastwards. I have had to sleep in the open and eke out a living as an itinerant fisherman. When I reached Hai-duong, where I am most likely to be spotted, I thought it best to take a risk and throw myself on your mercy. I shall soon reach the sea and find a boat to take me to Guangdong."

Coi's request worried Vong, but his son showed signs of fear. He had been in the

Western Capital ever since the plot had been discovered and knew that Le Quy Ly had now firmly established his family on the throne. His son was now "emperor" and he the "senior emperor". Ke also knew the terror that the new government had unleashed against all who were only remotely associated with the conspiracy.

"Coi faces disaster and so do we if it is found out that he has been in our house. I did not want to distress you," he said to his father, "but a remorseless search is on for suspects, as the unfortunate Coi surely is. This is what is happening throughout the country. Coi's family and all the other families have been struck off the register of names and are therefore outlaws. Their daughters have been forced to become servants and their males buried alive or drowned."

Vong was now very shaken. "And this is not the limit of the ruler's fury," continued Ke. "Those of us who are in any way related to the plotters have nowhere to go. Households have been warned to report visitors and guarantee that they are innocent, and villages are required to send out patrols day and night to seize suspicious wanderers. Coi is being hounded and we are running a grave risk if we shelter him. Le Quy Ly is frightened as well as furious. He has even banned oath taking ceremonies in case they are connected with further conspiracies, as happened just before the attempt on his life."

Vong restrained himself from insisting that Coi leave at once, and his son continued. "Le Quy Ly has every reason to be scared. The brave general Tran Khac Chan actually instructed two rebels with drawn swords to desist when Le Quy Ly, preening himself like an emperor, was in his house. Yet this did not spare him. When Chan was executed last year, the nearby mountain gave out three loud warnings, and it was noted that for three days Chan's face was as though he was still alive and insects did

not dare to molest his corpse."

Coi wept. "I know that some of his victims were distinguished men. Nguyen Buu's ancestors had served the Ly Court, and others distinguished themselves in the Mongol wars."

Ke was better informed about the casualties. Several senior *hanh-khien* were killed, including Ha Duc Lan, who had grumbled about the reduction in the size of estates. Le Quy Ly took the opportunity to punish him. Luong Nguyen Buu also died. He had been ordered to transfer treasure from the old palaces to the New Capital and lost much of it in a storm. No doubt this incident was taken into account. But no death was more cruel than Khac Chan's. He had served the country well and had been responsible in 1390 for killing the formidable Cham king in battle."

Vong remembered the event and also how the cowardly Nghe-ton had gloated when he saw the Cham king's head and let it be known that he should be compared with the Northern emperor, Han Cao-de, after a victory over barbarians. Nghe-ton had a special affection for Khac Chan. Chan was a cautious general, but caution in 1399 caused his death."

For Vong, what he had just been told was new information, and he was terrified. "I am willing to shelter you tonight, but you must depart very early in the morning and not in Ke's company." Coi asked whether Ke was still in the ruler's service. "Of course he is," snapped Vong. "No matter what has happened, this is not the time to give up one's duty to the country and especially when there is a new and powerful dynasty in the North."

The servant brought in more refreshment for Coi, and the disturbed Vong decided

to retire for the night. "Be careful to see that every door is locked and the lights extinguished," he warned his son. "And remember that you are returning to the New Capital at dawn." He gave special emphasis to the last remark as though to remind Coi of the difference in their situations.

Ke understood the implication of his father's parting remark. He felt more determined than ever to keep on the right side of the new regime and never expose himself to Coi's fate. Of course he could not help feeling sorry for his fellow graduate, the innocent victim of his uncle's misfortunes. He lowered his voice and enquired whether his uncle had in fact been involved in the plot. "Certainly not," replied Coi. "He was merely known to be on good terms with one of the conspirators."

Coi knew that Ke was uncomfortable, even frightened, and wanted to put him at his ease by changing the conversation. It had been months since Coi had been able to chat with his peers, and he wanted to make the most of this chance. "I wonder," he asked, "what happened to our fellow graduate, Doan Xuan Loi, after he criticized Le Quy Ly's revision of the Confucian hierarchy in favour of the Duke of Chou? Educated officials knew at once what Le Quy Ly had in mind, and to contradict his views of this esoteric issue was to denounce his political ambitions. Loi was a brave man."

Ke was drawn into conversation. "Indeed, we all knew what was afoot at Court. On important matters, we always like to wrap up our thoughts in apt passages of Northern literature in order to give them rhetorical effect. My colleague, Nguyen Phi Khanh, whose future is now so promising, once told me how his famous father-in-law, Tran Nguyen Dan, reacted when he found out that Khanh had seduced his daughter. He exclaimed at once that such things happened in ancient times. Si-ma Xiang-ru, another

humble scholar, had done likewise, and Dan let it be known that he wanted Khanh to become equally famous. He could justify his forbearance with an appeal to a well-known precedent recorded in literature."

Coi nodded his agreement. "Le Quy Ly realized that his prospects depended on his relationship with the aging and indecisive Nghe-ton ever since the first Cham sack of the capital in 1371. The Cham threat lasted until 1390, and each crisis brought Le Quy Ly further to the fore, even though he was known to be a coward. The Duke of Chou, the most famous 'protector' in literature, provided him with a dramatic allusion for reassuring Nghe-ton of his loyal intentions towards the Tran family. He also knew that Nghe-ton, though an educated scholar, had inherited from his father, Minh-ton, a prejudice against Northern institutions, and no institution was more venerable than the Confucian hierarchy. Nghe-ton in fact endorsed Le Quy Ly's pamphlet setting forth his argument on behalf of the Duke of Chou, and this meant that he also approved of the principle of protectorship. Nghe-ton had already burned his boats when he allowed himself to be persuaded by Le Quy Ly in 1388 that his nephew, the emperor, was plotting against Le Quy Ly, a disgraceful slander that caused the emperor to die."

Ke added his mite to this episode. "In 1388 Le Quy Ly's henchman, Pham Cu Loan, persuaded him to take the initiative as soon as he heard, and he always heard sooner or later, that the young emperor was entertaining unfriendly thoughts."

"Yes," said Coi, "and how unlucky we were that the young emperor was supine and would not allow his supporters to assist him. He actually sent away loyal troops that had mobilized to protect him. From that moment, Le Quy Ly had no doubt that he would eventually succeed. He had only to wait for Nghe-ton to die. He realized that the Tran

family hated him, but he no longer feared it. As for Doan Xuan Loi and his like, he could afford to ignore them because, familiar with Court affairs, he knew that there would always be plenty of those who could spot a rising star and would flock to his side. By that time one had to be personally close to the Tran princes to retain any respect for them."

"It is true," remarked Ke, "that we always live for the present. The past matters only when it bears on our present needs, and no one today can pretend that the Tran family has any influence. In 1388 and 1398 the young emperors failed to confront their enemy in spite of having loyal supporters. Here is an instance of what happens when *virtus* runs out and a new leader builds up an entourage. This is why I hope to continue in official life provided . . . ." He stopped because he remembered that Coi's presence beneath his family roof endangered his prospects and even his life.

Coi smiled gently. "I can respect your resolve. I would be doing the same if I were able to do so. Even in your distinguished grandfather's day this country was facing serious trouble, and we in our own lifetime have known nothing else. Le Quy Ly grew up inside the ruling family, with which his own family was linked by countless marriage ties. He knew very well the Tran tradition of indulging imperial relatives, but he must soon have realized that he would always be regarded as no more than a 'relative by marriage' in a family that, sooner or later, was bound to collapse. Already rebels in the countryside were assuming imperial titles. The Tran family's greed was intolerable. Had not Le Quy Ly quite recently taken action to expel Tran relatives from land near the coast?"

Ke was grateful that Coi could understand the choice he had made, and he felt

entitled to make his final defence of the new ruling family. "Le Quy Ly must have concluded that a clean break with the past was necessary and especially when a new and traditionally-minded dynasty had come into power in the North. I believe that he took harsh measures against the Tran family only because that family stood in his way when he sought to undertake drastic social reforms that represented a similar break with the past. Did he not change the names of the provinces and the provincial staff? He even changed the colors of the officials' clothing. Before you came tonight, I was trying to explain to my father that even he is likely to benefit when law and order is restored in the villages. For decades far-sighted officials have deplored the collapse of family discipline in the villages and the unsettling influence of the monks. Trung Han Sieu and Le Quat were still invoked in the countryside to warn of the harmful effects of popular Buddhist teaching, but it was left to Le Quy Ly in 1396 to reduce the size of the monkhood and to guarantee that those who taught really understood the sutras. I can assure you that one no longer sees idle monks at Court. And in 1397 he also intended to supply the three most disturbed provinces with schools."

Coi was a more accomplished scholar than Ke and had immediately understood why Le Quy Ly had interfered with the Confucian hierarchy. "I agree with everything you say on behalf of the new ruling family. I too was prepared to serve it. I never plotted against it. Yet the decision in 1397 to move the capital to Thanh-hoa distressed me. Even his loyal henchman, Pham Cu Luan, advised him against the move, as did others. I know that the Duke of Chou, Le Quy Ly's role model, had moved the capital, but I can not help thinking that he was turning his back on our broad plains, easy communications, shrines of tutelary spirits, and everything in our past that represented our imperial status.

What kind of empire can be ruled from a place close to the barbarian Chams? Indeed, I have to ask myself to what kind of career are you committing yourself?"

Taunted, Ke muttered that at least he hoped to be buried among his ancestors. Both were tired and had no more to say to each other. Ke led his friend to a storeroom, found him a rug, and said farewell. "Please thank your father for his hospitality in spite of my circumstances," said Coi. "I shall leave quietly very early in the morning. Perhaps we may meet again in more peaceful times."

Ke was relieved that the evening was over. He hurried to bed and fell into an uneasy sleep.

\* \* \*

Vong arose long before dawn to see his son off. His had been a restless night. Coi had already disappeared and Ke was drinking hot gruel. Neither of them was in a happy mood. Vong was scared by the possibility that Coi would be captured and compelled to reveal his visit to the farm, while Ke was having difficulty in persuading himself that it was his duty to serve so ruthless a ruler. He tried to reassure himself with Coi's admission that he would be doing the same so if it were safe for him to do so.

Ke finished his meal, said goodbye to his unhappy father, and made his way to the boat. As soon as he had left, his father summoned the servants to warn them not to reveal anything.

#### Northern captivity (1412)

One morning in the spring of 1412, Ke, now about fifty years old and in failing health, was planting vegetables in a prison field on the outskirts of Nanjing. He had spent

five unhappy years there since his career in the service of the Ho ended abruptly in 1407. He had been an official in several bureaus in the Western Capital, where his record was undistinguished. He had never been selected to undertake responsibilities in the hectic years of the Ho regime.

The most notable duty he performed was in 1404, when, as an official in the Ministry of Rites, he helped to organize a complicated and long-term schedule of examinations down to the level of the villages.<sup>75</sup> When he looked back on that episode, he ruefully reflected on how confident he had once been that his uneventful but secure career would continue indefinitely. He had avoided dangerous missions to the Northern emperor or arduous duties in the border provinces to strengthen their defences against the possibility of a Ming invasion. He never wanted to become a member of the small group of henchmen such as Hoang Hoi Khanh who were always at the disposal of the Ho family.

Yet, he realized that he had committed himself to serving that family and hoped that Ho Quy Ly and his son, Han Thuong, senior emperor and emperor respectively, would be able to keep the Ming at bay by prudent and time-honored diplomacy. In the meantime, he managed to retain possession of the family farm in Hai-duong. His father, Vong, died not long after his visit at the end of 1400, an occasion made memorable by the appearance of the fugitive Coi, which had worried father and son alike. Coi was captured and executed not long after he was given shelter on the farm. But he did not betray his benefactors.

Ke remained in the Western Capital when the Ming armies invaded from the north in 1406. News of a Southern victory in early summer that year cheered him, but

another invasion took place at the end of the year. Soon there were rumors of defections in the north, where the Ho government had never been popular. The prominent Mac family, descendants of Mac Dinh Chi, surrendered to the Ming and were given posts. At the same time, the Ming generals issued proclamations that they intended to restore the Tran family to power. Early in 1407 Ho Quy Ly and his son had to return temporarily to Thanh-hoa. Their forces then regrouped for a final and unsuccessful attempt to recover the north. Soon news of the swift Ming advance southward reached him, and in the fifth month of that year it was known that the Ho family had been captured and sent to Nanjing in cages. There were many captives. The news became so alarming that senior officials in the Western Capital decided to approach Ming forces in order to give themselves up, and Ke followed the example of Nguyen Phi Khanh and others.

Unfortunately for Ke and his colleagues, the Ming generals were in an angry mood. They had faced unexpected resistance and were surprised that more local officials did not offer their services. Ke was sent immediately to Nanking and confined in a prison camp, where he had languished ever since.

A few months later, Phiem arrived in the same camp, and the two became friends. Phiem, a younger man, was also a native of Hai-duong, a graduate of 1400 and a person of considerable talent. He had risen quickly in public life, and the fatal year of 1407 saw him as a senior member of the Han-lam Academy. The Ming generals had been told by defectors that Phiem had a fine reputation and was of "pure substance". Thus, when later that year they announced that well-qualified scholars were to be sent North for special training prior to joining the staff of the newly constituted Province, Phiem took the precaution of going into hiding in the mountains. He was captured not long afterwards

and punished by being sent to the Nanjing prison, where he met Ke. He was better able than Ke to endure hardship and misfortune, but he respected Ke on account of Ke's honorable lineage.

Ke was resting on his spade when he saw Phiem approaching rather cautiously. The two friends sat down, and Phiem spoke softly. "I have just read some poems entrusted to a man named Nhan, another captive who arrived here last night. He was an attendant in the service of a Tran prince, known as the Gian-dinh Emperor, who was captured in 1409 and executed in Nanjing. Nhan escaped but was recently captured and sent here in the same convoy as Le Canh Tuan, who wrote these poems during his journey north. Le Canh Tuan told Nhan that I was a fellow graduate of 1400, that we had kept in touch during the Ho regime, that he had heard that I was in this prison, and that he hoped that I would be able to conceal and preserve his poems."

"Who is Tuan, and why should he be so concerned about the safekeeping of his poems?" asked Ke.

"According to Nhan," replied Phiem, "Tuan had become a famous teacher and, like me, refused to serve the invaders. He had to go into hiding but later ventured out to discover what was happening in Thanh-long, where he resumed teaching. But, unfortunately for him, Ming officials were angry with Buu Ba Ky for refusing to cooperate and spending too much time with former officials. They raided Ky's house and found an appeal that Tuan had written to him some years earlier. In this appeal, Tuan urged Ky to assure the Ming that there were still Tran survivors who could become Northern vassals and to resign his post under the Ming if the Tran were not restored. Tuan went so far as to write that, unless Ky did this, he would be known as a greedy and

self-serving person. The Ming identified Tuan, arrested him towards the end of 1411, and sent him here. The enemy is so angry with him that he is to be forwarded to the emperor for punishment. He spent last night recovering from an exhausting journey by land and river. He does not dare take his poems with him further north and asked Nhan to find out whether I was here and, if so, to beg me to look after them against the day when I or someone else is allowed to return to our own country.<sup>76</sup> The poems are now with me and I shall do my best to prevent their being destroyed."

Phiem's news agitated Ke, who had never reconciled himself to captivity. As prisoners were wont to do, he was always anxious to pick up scraps of news about the outside world from newly arrived captives and especially news about home. He feared that the present Northern occupation would last as long as the previous one and occasionally he secretly wondered whether it might be in his best interests to make his peace with the enemy. But he checked this kind of thinking by noting the courage of men such as Phiem and also by remembering his family traditions.

Phiem observed his friend's emotion and decided that it would be unwise to show him the poems until another time when he was calmer. Phiem was moved by Tuan's confidence in him and was determined not to give his captors reason for suspecting him and removing the poems. He was also disturbed by what Nhan had managed to tell him about conditions at home. Apparently Nhan was not to be sent on to the emperor, and there would be other opportunities for talking to him.

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Several days later Ke and Phiem were weeding as usual. The guards were some distance away and happened to be friendly ones. Prisoners were shrewd judges of their

captors and knew from experience that these guards regarded them as harmless. Phiem waited for the lunch break and then cautiously showed Tuan's poems to Ke. Nhan, already accustomed to the prison's routine, quietly joined them, glad to have companions in this friendless place.

Ke read the poems quietly and tried to control his feelings. He came across Tuan's poems in which he referred to his father's and mother's anniversaries. He could not help thinking of his own father, Vong. Ke, as Tuan confessed about himself, was also without talent and did not excel in his career. He, too, was in a foreign land, and such anniversaries intensified his grief. "Creepers and grass," he sighed, "are certainly untended at my father's grave, and who is there to make offerings?"<sup>77</sup> Tuan writes that his mother died long ago, and yet he, eight thousand miles away, still recalls the anniversary of her death and is unendurably sad.<sup>78</sup>

Ke pulled himself together and made an effort to express a general comment. "It is rather strange that these poems do not refer to our country beyond mentioning family graves. He frequently describes himself as 'travelling' and a long distance away, but from his village. He also describes himself as 'two months' or 'ten thousand miles' from the Northern capital,<sup>79</sup> but never refers to his own country as such. Moreover, he refers to the past only once, and it is to the past in the North,<sup>80</sup> and only to make the point that thinking of vicissitudes in the past increases his sorrow."

Phiem reminded his friend that even Northern poets preferred not to think about familiar scenes when they wrote poetry on their way into exile. Nhan, who had accompanied Tuan, felt obliged to say more about the circumstances responsible for these poems. "You seem to forget that Tuan was under close observation during his journey.

His poems were often taken from him, and he did not want them to be confiscated. This must be why he refers to 'the Phoenix City'<sup>81</sup> and 'the Sacred Court'.<sup>82</sup> He needed to disarm his captors."

Nhan paused. Remembering the journey disturbed him. He continued. "You have also probably forgotten the painful sensation of being torn from one's home. Being captured and treated harshly are humiliating experiences that leave one numb and incapable of thinking beyond one's personal sorrows, and we should not be surprised that he was overwhelmed by grief. The misery of our journey through the enemy's southern provinces in cold weather was extreme. What he had to go through is described in poetic language in his third couplets. He had 'to tread on stones and cling to creeping plants, with ten thousand hazards still ahead'.<sup>83</sup> Even more moving is his sense of sheer helplessness. He can make no plans; he is indifferent to what is happening, doing no more than following changes in the weather.<sup>84</sup> 'He has already lived half his life in a state of uncertainty'.<sup>85</sup>"

Ke regretted his insensitivity. Phiem remarked that Tuan usually seemed to announce his sense of being separated at the beginning of his poems to create the maximum effect. Such was his unhappy situation. Perhaps the Northerners, if they read his poems, would suppose that he was acknowledging his situation and be contented. "The poems begin with expressions such as 'going to a different place, far away from my ancestors' graves,'<sup>86</sup> or 'wandering aimlessly without a family,'<sup>87</sup> or 'a lonely wanderer,'<sup>88</sup> or 'half his life has had a sufficiency of uncertainties'.<sup>89</sup> We ourselves do not know," Phiem exclaimed, "what will happen to us next, and so it is with this poet. He travels with a 'drifting state of mind'.<sup>90</sup> He is unable, and probably does not want, to pay

attention to the passing scene. It is enough that he is often on a river boat. Only once does the scene move him to write a poem, and this is when he sees a table at the Mong-ly stage post at sunset. It was a 'magic moment.'<sup>91</sup>”

"Tuan's poems are invariably sad," sighed Ke. "His first couplets are not only about separation. He also admits to a 'torn heart' and to 'tears.' He asks 'when shall I return?' One poem ends with his lamenting that he is a 'prisoner in chains.'<sup>92</sup>”

These mournful reflections upset Nhan, Tuan's companion into exile. He knew that Tuan was courageous had more cheerful moments. Naturally, he was sad on New Year's Day.<sup>93</sup> "What were his prospects?" posed Nhan. "Yet some of these poems throw off depression. His poem on 'detachment' insists that his resolve is firm in spite of his age. And so he can conclude by saying:

Self-confident everywhere, he who is a man must cope.

Walking through the mountains and rivers is also extraordinary.<sup>94</sup>

This is the poem where the happening in the third couplet is described in terms of ten thousand hazards."

Nhan, wanting to protect Tuan's reputation as someone who could withstand adversity, reminded the others that one poem was called "Singing one's longings on a boat."<sup>95</sup> "It ends thus:

The green spring accompanies my village, and this is good.

What Heaven has bestowed on me has also been plentiful.”

Phiem and Ke agreed that Tuan was not wholly cowed. "My sense of duty is intact, not flinching from death'," intoned Phiem from one of the poems,<sup>96</sup> and they fell into silence for the rest of the day in honor of Tuan.

But Phiem had difficulty in getting to sleep. He remembered Tuan as a fellow graduate who scorned service under the Ho, and he went on to wonder what his influence as a teacher had been. Perhaps in other times he might have been another Chu Van An. But Phiem also found himself turning over in his mind a particular feature of the poems. In half of them the poet rendered the bitterness of lengthy travel with phrases even more unbearable by associating it with the unending movement of time, as though the passing of time always brought home to him the great distance of his journey. Phiem surmises that Tuan's meditations on New Year's day and anniversary days while travelling inspired a play on time and distance. Tuan continually uses this device. The scene in the second couplet of one poem<sup>97</sup> combines an agitated lifestep with what would seem to him to be ten thousand miles on a boat in a foreign land. The scene in another poem<sup>98</sup> is almost identical. His journey is long, and the seasons are revolving. In yet another poem,<sup>99</sup> the same effect appears in the first couplet. The spring solstice has returned as time speeds by, and he is a lonely wanderer. In yet still another poem,<sup>100</sup> what happens in the third couplet is reserved to time and travelling. The poet has travelled eight thousand miles from his village and lived for nearly half a century without a mother.

Finally, Phiem recalled, Tuan writes on the occasion of New Year's Day:

I remain a traveller in an inn.

The year has gone, spring returns.

This poem of two couplets inevitably ends with:

When will be the day of my return?

It will be when the plum trees in the ancient garden are very old.<sup>101</sup>

Phiem kept on admiring what Tuan had contrived to write without a scholar's library at hand to stimulate his imagination. But he also brooded on his own fate, which could only be endless exile. He had a restless night.

\* \* \*

Ke, Phiem, and Nhan saw little of each other during the next few days. They understood that Tuan had been despatched to face the emperor but preferred not to think about his prospects. Ke and Phiem became more anxious to hear Nhan's news about the situation he left behind before he was arrested. They broached the topic during another lunch break in the garden.

Nhan briefly described what had happened since Ke and Phiem were sent to the North in 1407. He had witnessed the desperate efforts of Nghe-ton's descendants to rally supporters against the Ming and a lack of trust between the Gian-dinh Emperor and his nephew. The emperor mismanaged everything. At the end of 1408 he had ordered the execution of more than six hundred simply for not showing sufficient zeal on his behalf. He killed Tran Nguyen Dan's son, whom the Ming had appointed to a post in Dien-chau. The crime was that he did not rally behind the emperor soon enough. There was no limit to the Gian-dinh Emperor's folly. He even executed Dang Dat, whose early victories against the Ming gave hope of eventual success against the invaders. Two scholars had falsely accused Dat of plotting treason.

Ke interrupted Nhan to enquire what had happened to his contemporary, Hoang Hoi Khanh, who had served Ho Quy Ly for many years and was probably his most trusted servant. He had been ordered to supervise the northern defences. "I know little about him except his final months," replied Nhan. "The Ho had sent him to control

Thanh-hoa in the south, where Dang Dat was the local official. When the Ho were fleeing from the Ming, he was told to recruit into Dat's army some of those who had been resettled in former Cham lands and to appoint a Cham there to placate the Chams. But the Chams rebelled against us, and Khanh withdrew. Another local official, Ro, took charge of the settlers but was resisted by Dat. Ro fled to Champa, and Dat ordered Khanh to return to his post, where he killed himself."

"These have been terrible years," continued Nhan. "Our countrymen were anxious to fight the invaders. Rumors of the way the Ming looted in the north had reached us in the south, and there was widespread anger as well as fear. A particular sign of the times was the prominence of local leaders, some mere bullies, who organized resistance. By 1410 they were more active than the ruler's troops. Alas! Some of them were only interested in improving their personal fortunes. There was also prolonged famine."

Nhan, distressed, went on to tell his listeners what most upset him, which was the conduct of educated men such as themselves. "The Ming authorities knew that they could not control the country without our help, and there were not a few who were attracted by offers of high posts. The Ming wanted especially those with a reputation, such as Nguyen Phi Khanh's son, Nguyen Trai, who managed to avoid them by lying low. Le Canh Tuan was another of these brave men. Those whose ambition and avarice brought them into the Ming camp were often killed by indignant villagers. There were, of course, others who supported the Tran princes as long as there was hope. Early in 1408 the situation was promising, but Dang Dat did not follow up quickly enough on his victories, and then everything went from bad to worse. The Trung-quang Emperor,

Nghe-ton's grandson, suspected the senior emperor, Gian-dinh, whom the Ming captured. The influence of local leaders grew, but there was no unity among them. The emperor, with the assistance of Dang Dang, Dang Tat's son, fought on, but with dwindling support. He unsuccessfully sought vassal status, but the Ming emperor intensified his appeal to local officials and our emperor was chased to the extreme south of the country, where I was captured and sent here."

By now a number of prisoners had gathered around Nhan, and some guards observed what was happening. They broke up the group, and led Nhan away for questioning. Phiem and Ke had no wish to talk further and returned to their vegetable plots.

\* \* \*

Meeting Nhan and reading Tuan's poems humiliated Ke, and his health began to decline rapidly. A few weeks later he was admitted to the prison hospital ward. Prisoners knew the ward as the place where one went to die. There was hardly any medicine, and the diet was meagre. Only those with stubborn resolve managed to leave it, and Ke was not one of them. Phiem sometimes visited him and brought fruit from the garden.

One afternoon in the summer of 1412, Phiem found his ailing friend in unusually low spirits and even remorseful. Ke had left a son on the family farm in Hai-duong, but Nhan had brought no news of him. His son had shown no interest in public affairs, and Ke hoped that this would protect him from being conscripted into the service of the Ming. The father wondered what kind of example he had set his son. Tuan's life had been redeemed by his capture. Ke had merely surrendered.

Such was Ke's mood when Phiem arrived. Both men had served the Ho. Did Phiem, Ke asked, think that those years had any merit? Ke shuddered when he recalled instances of Ho Quy Ly's vindictiveness. Had anything been gained by arranging to poison the heads of border villages which he had been persuaded to hand over to the Ming? He recalled with disgust how Ho Quy Ly had executed two scholars who had unwisely made known a poem he had written to his two sons enjoining them to cooperate. He suddenly remembered something his father, Vong, had told him about Minh-ton. Minh-ton took great but unsuccessful precautions to prevent a family secret concerning his children from becoming common knowledge. In both cases palace women were involved. Perhaps rulers were accustomed to feeling most vulnerable within their own family. He now wondered if he had done enough to distance himself from the over zealous group of graduates who advised the Ho to harry Tran supporters.<sup>102</sup> Ke was bound to approve of the reduction of manpower on the princely estates but not the enforced resettlement of landless people on former Cham lands in the south.<sup>103</sup> But again, Ke certainly applauded when the Ho took over more and more of the Cham lands. He no longer knew what he should have done.

By now he was sinking fast. Tuan's poems had brought home to him the supreme sorrow that he would not be buried among his ancestors. This train of thought led him to meditate upon his ancestors, Khung and Quang. Ke's father Vong was not an impressive figure, but he had passed down vivid memories of his father and grandfather. But once more the hapless Ke was torn by conflicting reflections. Khung and Quang had held high office and the emperors' confidence, such as he never did. They had lived in troubled times, especially Quang, but managed to survive them. Khung grew up among those who

had fought the Mongols. Quang, though once a refugee, lived to witness the Tran restoration. For both of them, there seemed to be new beginnings. They believed that the unity that had been mustered against the Mongols always awaited genuine leaders. This had been in Ke's mind when he decided to follow the Ho, and he recalled that he had tried to explain this to his father and to Coi. But thinking of Khung and Quang reminded him of what his father had said of them, that they were never quite certain about how the future would turn out.

Phiem, by his side, caught the drift of his mumbling words and whispered to himself that the Ming in their edicts had also promised a new beginning and that there were those who responded. Phiem tried to cheer his friend up by offering him some tea. "My ancestors," murmured Ke, "always distrusted those who sought merit for merit's sake and not for the sake of good government. Perhaps our country has fallen into such disastrous times because of this pursuit of merit." He again fell into silence and tried to decide whether those who placed their hopes in the Ho reforms were unambitious. After all, few of them seemed to enjoy the perks of office.

During their captivity, neither Ke nor Phiem had spent much time brooding over the past. They worked busily in the gardens, swapped rumors, and scratched casual poems on the ground. They had well-stored memories and were able to relive exciting episodes in Northern history. But Tuan's poems had set in train memories of their own country and made them ask questions about why the Ming had succeeded when the Mongols had failed. "Everything on which we once depended has now failed us," mourned Ke. "The senior members of the Ho family were as prominent in affairs as were the Tran princes. They were probably even more prepared for invasion than were the

Tran. Did not the Hung-dao Prince in his appeal for support say that the country had become too accustomed to peace? We in the Western Capital had no doubt that the Ming emperor was becoming impatient with our rulers."

Ke became increasingly resentful. "Yet the Ho rulers seemed unable to coordinate their military tactics. In 1407, the Ming armies withdrew to Ham-tu River crossing, the scene of a great victory over the Mongols, celebrated in poetry by Tran Quang Khai. We heard that those in the neighborhood of the Old Capital had become restless under the Ming. Everything seemed promising. Many wanted to join our forces in order to earn merit. Our armies advanced on both banks of the river but ran into disaster. Some said that our generals were at cross-purposes, a situation that never happened under Tran leadership. A trusted supporter advised Ho Quy Ly and his son to kill themselves to avoid capture and was beheaded for his pains. The Hung-dao Prince's tactic of planting stakes in the estuary of the Bach-dang River was followed on an elaborate scale but to no effect. What took place then? Our captors took delight in telling us that old men living near the Old Capital begged the Ming to restore the ancient Northern Province of 'Annam' and, believe it or not, 'renew the people'! This is precisely what my colleagues and I had hoped to be doing when we served the Ho."

Ke became exhausted and lay back on his bed. "Nothing," he sighed, "went right for us. Time-honored diplomacy no longer protected us. The Tran emperors did not hesitate to pay their humble respects to the Northern rulers because they were confident in their imperial status."

Phiem listened patiently to his friend's rambling and did not want to upset him by arguing. "Alas! We could never have won," he whispered. "The unity of our people that

prevailed during the Mongol wars had long been dissipated as the result of decades of collapsing confidence in our rulers' ability to protect our interests. Memories of Minh-ton vanished long ago. The futile Nghe-ton, who lived too long, was all we could remember of his family. Many of us could have told the Ming that Tran princes were still available, but who would have wished to have made a plea of their behalf? From what Nhan told us, it seems that the Gian-dinh Emperor illustrates all too painfully that skills of leadership in the Tran family have disappeared."

Nhan's name was sufficient to reduce the unhappy Ke to tears and he slipped into a coma-like state of mind. The faithful Phiem stayed by his bedside for an hour or more until he recovered consciousness and sought to console him by assuring him that the odds against their country had been too great. Phiem knew his friend well enough to know his tendency to seek a justification for whatever he did or whatever happened to him. He was never to blame for anything. Phiem always respected Ke for being descended from forebears who enjoyed an honorable reputation in their lifetime, and he did not want to disturb what seemed likely to be the last hours of his life. He wanted to absolve him from a sense of personal shame, though he privately knew that Ke himself had never contributed much of value to his country's wellbeing.

"We had lost our will to resist," he suggested gently. "Do you remember how, towards the end of 1405, the Ho rulers ordered all provincial officers to come to the Westen Capital to confer with the officials there so as to decide whether we should fight or make peace?" Ke recalled the dramatic occasion. Phiem went on: "Opinion was divided. Ho Quy Ly's son, Ho Nguyen, remarked. 'I only fear whether the people will be with us or against us.' When the Tran ruler put the same question to village elders, not to

officials, the answer was unanimous: 'Fight.' And how dispirited was the people's response to the Ho conscription orders! The southern settlers had already been sufficiently disturbed by their experience of the Ho rulers and would probably have preferred to go under Cham control. Who led the final resistance when the Ho family was captured? Local leaders who, according to Nhan, were quite unable to work together."

By now Ke was barely conscious, and Phiem was talking to himself. "No wonder that our wretched officials began to think that their remaining duty was to their families and that they should submit to the Ming. Perhaps I should have done likewise." He then pulled Ke's tattered rug over his shoulders, bowed respectfully before him, and left. He knew that he would not see his friend alive again.

Ke died that night. Phiem carried on without him and became steadily more convinced that he, too, would end his days in prison. He would never make his peace with the Northerners. A few months later he developed a foot infection and died shortly afterwards.

## Chapter Five

### New Voices in the Fifteenth Century

[The author initially planned this chapter as an exposition of writings from three well-known fifteenth-century figures, Nguyen Trai (poet, propagandist, and statesman), Phan Phu Tien (scholar and historian, compiler of the Tran dynasty annals), and Ngo Si Lien (scholar and historian, editor and critic of the Tran dynasty annals). The author intended to shift from dialogue to monologue in this chapter as a way to dramatize how the new Le dynasty in the fifteenth century endeavored to establish for itself a vision of virtue and permanence, thereby setting a context for the dialogues in Chapter Six, which occur in the shadow of Le dynastic failure in the early sixteenth century.

Only the first of the three projected parts of this chapter was completed, “Nguyen Trai’s poetry of renewal (1428-1432),” and, as can be seen in chapter seven, the author reconsidered this chapter as being comprised of this only; but as can also be seen in chapter seven, the author was beginning to consider publishing this elsewhere, thereby taking it out of the manuscript altogether.

The author wrote in an early draft that Nguyen Trai’s poems, written in the glow of victory over the Ming occupation forces immediately after 1428, “while not referring specifically to the Tran period are celebrating the restoration of the country to its eminence at the peak of that dynasty.” This is in contrast to Phan Phu Tien and Ngo Si Lien, who wrote a few decades later. In an early draft, the author wrote: “The compiler and editor of the Tran Annals (i.e. Tien and Lien), on the other hand, relive the Tran past but from the point of view of those whose minds were shaped by developments in the

fifteenth century.” At another point in an early draft, the author further explains his view as follows: “Themes emerging in Trai's poems discussed here were familiar to those who lived in the fourteenth century. What happened to them a hundred years later will be considered in the following chapter, which will resume a conversational mode and introduce two characters, officials with very different personalities. The outlook of one of them (Loc) had been shaped by intellectual developments in the fifteenth century. The other man (Kien), for reasons that will be explained, had access to points of view reflected in public life during Tran times and, having becoming aware of different preoccupations, he was not altogether ill-disposed towards those whom he gathered were honored in their day.”

Chapter Six begins with an “altercation,” or rather heated argument, between two officials, Loc and Kien, early in the sixteenth century. The crux of the argument has to do with different ways of evaluating and remembering the Tran dynasty. Loc’s opinion simply reflects the official court historiography of the Le dynasty in the late fifteenth century, i.e. the views of Tien and Lien, which is a necessarily critical view of the Tran dynasty as a flawed and failed predecessor without any features worthy of emulation. Kien’s views were shaped by access to more heterogeneous historical materials and he is more sympathetic toward the achievements of the Tran dynasty.

As a way of gaining some understanding of what the author apparently intended in the unwritten second and third parts of this chapter, one can read two of his published articles. “Possibilities for a Reading of the 1293-1357 Period in the Vietnamese Annals” is a textual analysis of a portion of the Tran Annal to propose that its compiler, Phan Phu Tien, had a certain understanding of the Tran dynasty as a time when the relation between

kings and officials was one of achievement and reward in the context of an entourage rather than one of bureaucratic operations, which became the ideal of Le government by the end of the fifteenth century.

The article entitled “What Else May Ngo Si Lien Mean?” is an analysis of Ngo Si Lien’s critical comments about the Tran dynasty to suggest that Lien did not understand how Tran government actually worked. The author believed that Lien’s critique of the Tran dynasty came from an unfortunate and rigid reliance upon Chinese norms of government and a foolhardy determination to intervene in village affairs that led to the collapse of the Le dynasty in the early sixteenth century. This article is a good introduction to the argument between Loc and Kien that opens chapter six.

The author’s unpublished essay on Nguyen Trai’s poetry is included below by way constituting a chapter five.]

### **Nguyen Trai’s Poetry of Renewal (1428-1432)**

Although Nguyen Phi Khanh was transported to the North as a prisoner by the occupying Ming forces, his son, Nguyen Trai, remained at large in the South and successfully avoided capture. Nevertheless, the poems he wrote during the Ming occupation (see Appendix 10) reflect intense unhappiness. He seems always to be in a state of someone who no longer has a home or a country. He is nowhere and in a silent world. He, too, is silent, an unemployed scholar in hiding and a stranger in a now unfamiliar land.

But things changed dramatically. Le Loi belonged to an important landowning family in Thanh-hoa and had disdained Ming cajoling. Instead, he gradually built up a defiant military base at Lam-son Mountain in Thanh-hoa. When news of this reached Nguyen Trai, he joined Le Loi, became his scholar in attendance, and fought alongside him until 1428, when Le Loi founded his dynasty.

Trai witnessed the promise of that exciting time and celebrated Le Loi's triumph in four poems. These poems are famous items in anthologies of Vietnamese literature. I have tried my hand at translating them because only in this way can I begin to study the function of Trai's poetic usage and how he generates meaning.

#### 1. Beholding warships<sup>104</sup>

This year the whale has been destroyed in the northern seas.<sup>105</sup>

In peacetime one must still give heed to controlling weapons.<sup>106</sup>

Fluttering banners and flags reach high into the sky.

The roar of gongs and drums shake the earth with sound.

The ten thousand armed men are dazzlingly bright, fierce as wild animals.

A thousand ships in fine order move like cranes and geese.

The sage's will is that the people should have relief.

When government is based on learning, in the end there must be peace.

#### 2. Celebrating returning to Lam-son (1)<sup>107</sup>

Clever schemes are needed to extirpate treachery.

Benevolence and righteousness keep the country at peace.

The offices of government are each crowded with scholars.

On the borders there is no trouble. The military camps stand at ease.

Those from distant places bring jade and silk. Their dress is strange.

China's style of behavior resembles that of the Han officials.

The foul vapors from the North are already cleansed. The whale's wash has  
become calm.

In the Southern province, our country will endure forever.

### 3. Celebrating returning to Lam-son (2)<sup>108</sup>

Recalling Lam-son of old, where we studied books on warfare,

Our resolve is now the people's resolve.

As soon as the banner of righteousness pointed at China,

The Imperial Council already knew that the great enterprise had succeeded.

Distant places have responded to the ruler's *virtus*.

A myriad of untaught people have recognized the sound of authority.

As soon as the soldiers had, so rapidly, pacified the land,

The armor was washed, the bows hung up, and peace was enjoyed.

### 4. About the Sword<sup>109</sup>

In Lam-son from ancient times there slept a magical dragon,<sup>110</sup>

Yet it was already known that the affairs of the world were to be in our hands.

The great mission had returned, and Heaven announced a sage.

A glorious era suddenly dawned, a tiger caused a storm.

The country's enemies have been washed clean away, a thousand years of shame  
are gone.

A golden casket is buried forever with ten thousand generations of  
achievement<sup>111</sup>

Now that the world has been brought back under control,  
Who among us will again count these heroes?

T'ai's mood is very different from what it was during the Ming occupation. He is no longer self-obsessed. He suppresses references to himself and his personal feelings. Le Loi's generals and subordinates are nameless in the armed forces and are mentioned only in poem 4 as those who achieved merit on behalf of the hero. Unlike in his poems during the occupation, he can now refer cheerfully to "the mountains and rivers" and he is not lonely. Instead, he is one of a multitude who rejoice in victory. Instead of silence there is the sound of overwhelming movement and arms, as we read in poem 1:

Fluttering banners and flags reach high into the sky.

The roar of gongs and drums shake the earth with sound.

The ten thousand armed men are dazzlingly bright and fierce as wild animals.

A thousand ships in fine order move like flocks of cranes and geese.

Whereas he had formerly felt that he was nowhere, now he is in a crowded land where signs of the presence and influence of the victorious sage are everywhere. The scene in poem 2 strikingly reveals how things have changed out of recognition:

The offices of government each are crowded with scholars.

On the borders there is no trouble. The military camps stand at ease.

The happening couplet in poem 3 stresses how complete Le Loi's victory has been:

Distant places have responded to the ruler's *virtus*.

A myriad of untaught people have recognized the sound of authority.

When the sage's influence extends everywhere, the people are bound to become the beneficiaries, and therefore poem 1, specifically referring to the sage, ends with the reflection:

The sage's intention is that the people should have relief.

When government is based on learning, in the end there must be peace.

During the Mongol wars the people had been indispensable to the Hung-dao Prince, but in Le Loi's wars they are not celebrated as agents of victory. The closest he gets is in the second line of poem 3, where he refers to the people's resolve as an extension of the resolve emanating from the ruler. Le Loi shares his success with no one. In a poem Trai writes about the famous victory at Bach-dang River in 1289, he is willing to concede that there were two factors at play on that occasion: geography and human courage. Others at the time held the same view. This is not the case with Le Loi's victory. Trai's view resembles that of Truong Han Sieu in his *phu* about Bach-dang: a sage alone is responsible. As Trai puts it, "Heaven announced a sage." One cannot imagine that Trai would tolerate a discussion about alternative reasons for Le Loi's victory.

In his third couplets, Trai stresses the significance of the victory. In poem 1 military power is displayed, submission is signified in poem 3, and the scale of the achievement is measured in poem 4. The third couplet in poem 2 even suggests the wide context for celebrating the victory:

Those from distant places bring jade and silk. Their dress is strange.

China's style of behavior resembles that of the Han officials.

The couplet bears comparison with the final couplet in one of Pham Su Manh's poems addressed to a Ming envoy who arrived not long after the accession of that dynasty:

The new dynasty in a single stroke has eliminated barbarian (i.e. Mongol)  
customs.

Rites, music, and official clothing have returned to the Han style.

Almost smugly, Manh praises the restoration of the "Han style", and Trai is happy that the "Han" officials' "style of behavior" can be seen in China. The reason for this similarity of language is likely to be that each poet had particular cause for relief that the Northern rulers had reversed their predecessors' policy towards the South. In the South, and as a result of Le Van HUU's History, the Western Han period would be regarded as the time when Trieu Da managed to retain his imperial sovereignty, and it therefore represented the time when the existing model relationship between the two countries existed. The final couplet in Trai's poem reflects the favorable happening alluded to in the third couplet:

The foul vapors from the North are already cleansed. The whale's wash has  
become calm.

In the southern province, the country will endure for ever.

Perhaps Trai is here also indulging himself with a double irony. He attributes foul vapors to the North, something conventionally associated with the South by Northerners, and he refers to the South as a "province" in the same way that the now defeated Northerners had done. The exultation comes through in Trai's poem on crossing the Than-phu estuary, with its memory of Ho Quy Ly's attempt to repel the Ming fleet. Here are the two final

couplets:

The scene is as yesterday. Only the hero is no more.

Heaven and earth are pitiless. Things change all the time.

Now happily to be seen as one family are Northerners and Southerners.

Henceforth in the world the whole is at peace.

Perhaps the expression "one family" alludes to the comparability between the two countries that had become a matter of principle in Tran times. Alternatively, it is merely an echo of a conventional expression at least as old as 1289, when the emperor Tran Nhan-ton ended a poem to a Mongol envoy:

The world is like a loving heart. There is neither South nor North.

How unfortunate it is that storms cause trouble.

The conviction that his country has regained its normal way of life underlies Trai's rendering of victory. The return of "peace", frequently proclaimed, is the most evident instance of normality. Another manifestation of normality is the use of the "cleansing" metaphor. The reflection in the poem referring to China's return to the Han style of officials is that:

The foul vapors from the North are already cleansed. The whole's wash has  
become calm.

In the southern province, our country will endure forever.

The happening in poem 4 provides an extreme example of recovery:

The country's enemies have been washed clean away, a thousand years of  
shame are gone.

The golden casket is forever buried with ten thousand generations of

achievement.

In 1289 the emperor Thanh-ton, returning to Thien-truong, had written:

The world has been cleansed, the dirt removed.

Enjoying oneself in the countryside this year is better by far than in previous years.

Cleansing implies that once upon a time there had been purity, now restored. What is again pure is indicated in the following two couplets. The first is at the end of poem 4, which celebrates the sage Le Loi's Heaven-inspired appearance and achievement:

Now that the universe has been brought back under control,

Who among us will again count the heroes?

Here the emphasis is on regulation, implying obedience. Obedience is the happening in poem 3:

Distant places have responded to the ruler's *virtus*,

A myriad of untaught people have recognized the sound of authority.

The notion that obedience is restored is now explicit. We are close to what the fourteenth-century officials hoped they would one day behold.

These poems contain a considerable amount of repetitive language. Trai's poems of the Ming occupation do likewise. We continually read of "peace", "cleansing", "power everywhere", and "the sage". Of particular interest are references to "achievement" or its equivalencies in each of the four poems. In poem 1 the whale is destroyed. In poem 2 the foul vapors are cleansed. In poem 3 the great enterprise succeeds. The final couplet in poem 4 celebrates the return of the universe to obedience, but the poet also wonders whether the heroes are being forgotten. In the previous couplet he alludes to Han Gao-

zu's burial of the golden casket with the names of those who assisted him in his bid for the throne. Trai is surely referring to those who achieved merit on behalf of Le Loi. When these two couplets are read together, they give a sense of finality. The victory is complete even to the extent that the question now is how soon those who contributed to the "achievement" mentioned in the third couplet may be forgotten.

I have not read these four poems as a group, couplet by couplet and alongside each other. Though they share several poetic features and are unquestionably inspired by the sensation of victory, they are separate poems and celebrate particular aspects of the victory. I shall now translate four more poems that celebrate something that happened several years later. They seem to reflect the same associations of victory and are consistent with the view that Trai saw the years after the expulsion of the Ming as a restoration of the habitual way of life in the South. They read as the culmination of the restoration that began with the expulsion of the Ming.

I shall read these poems as a group because this is how Trai intended them to be read. They hang together but not because of their repetitive language, as was the case with the other group. They are the product of a complex military and political situation and do not allow for a straightforward reading. Yet I believe that the group represents a coherent whole.

Early in 1432 Le Loi led a punitive expedition against the Muong-le people in the upper reaches of the Black River along the Yunnan border. A Thai group, the Muong-le had attacked and pillaged the northwestern provinces. Their leader was Deo Cat Han, who was temporarily allied with a Lao (Ai-lao) chief. In this region, though not so far into the mountains, the future Nghe-ton had fled in 1369. Le Loi, though old and in ill

health, assumed personal leadership and quickly defeated the rebels, perhaps in less than one month, at the beginning of 1432.

5<sup>112</sup>

The barbarian chief dared invade our borders.

For years he committed numerous and very cruel wickednesses.

The sage ruler took heed of this and pitied distant customs.

For ten thousand miles the imperial chariot braved pestilential vapors.<sup>113</sup>

The rebel frontier guards in the mountains have already heard that Nguy-bac is  
recaptured;

The imperial inscription is also seen at Yen-nhien.<sup>114</sup>

Henceforth within the four seas axles and scripts will be uniform.

The imperial *virtus* is more abundant and the achievement greater than that of any  
in antiquity.

6<sup>115</sup>

Treacherous subjects and wicked children, their crimes were hard to endure. In the end they were ha

In nooks and corners how can one bear that they should continue to breathe?

And so the Court has responded and displayed great merit.

Horns sound over ten thousand miles of moonlit streams and hills.

Flags and banners flutter on a thousand hills like vegetation in the wind.

Henceforth the four seas will be forever pure.

Armed soldiers have secured peace.

7<sup>116</sup>

The sage's Court pacified those in distant places and pitied the foolish.

Did they not know that such conduct would cause self-destruction?

For several generations there were bitter enmities and grudges against  
neighboring lands.

Offending Heaven is a great crime that requires death from supernatural beings.

Do not let earlier generations embroil this one.

Do not make a loyal subject become a rebel and prisoner.

When thereafter one wreaks vengeance on a border post,

One repeats the same disastrous error (i.e. the traveler's cart follows the track of  
an overturned chariot).

8<sup>117</sup>

Insulting Heaven and slandering the ruler and then saying that Heaven is in the  
distant heights!

Heaven's laws are everywhere and all the more inescapable.

Beyond human habitation and among the mountains, strategic posts are set up in  
vain.

Like birds perching in the trees and never returning to their nests.

Far off among the barbarians' streams and distant paths, the imperial chariot  
twists its way.

In the general's tent profound plans were laid and revealed the tiger's strategy.

Only now the four seas are entirely at peace.

To know beforehand and then enjoy ease is truly to serve the people.

I noted above that the second group of Trai's poems make for less straightforward reading than the previous group. One way of approaching them, though only provisionally, is by first considering the final couplets. With the exception of poem 7, the final couplets reflect similar sentiments. The restoration set in train by the victory against the Ming has culminated with the submission of a chief in a remote border region. It is as though a piece of unfinished business has been finally completed, for the chief had been causing trouble for many years. "Henceforth" (in poems 5 and 6), "only now" and "entirely" (in poem 8), and "forever" (in poem 6), the "four seas" are at peace and also obedient. For obedience there is an interesting equivalence.

Henceforth within the four seas axles and script will be uniform.

The imperial *virtus* is more abundant and the achievement greater than any in antiquity.

The reference to "axles and script" is an echo of a linguistic usage in Tran times, when scholarly officials such as Pham Su Manh were policing disturbed areas (see Chapter 4 and Appendix 5). Trai's father, Nguyen Phi Khanh, had used a similar expression in a poem to his brother. The third and fourth couplets read:

For the heroes of a hundred years ago, here was a battlefield.

For all time this territory has guaranteed the country's survival.

I rely on my poem to record the scene,

And suggest that you are observing a country of carriages and script.<sup>118</sup>

The coupling of imperial *virtus* and obedience is an emphatic statement of Le

Loi's latest success and resembles the "happening" couplet in poem 3 above:

Distant places have responded to the ruler's *virtus*.

A myriad of untaught people have recognized the sound of authority.

Trai may even hint that the Black River victory is more notable than the victory against the Ming: "the achievement greater than any in antiquity."

His mood is on account of what the poems tell us has happened. The third couplets in poems 5 and 8 describe a show of force. The third couplet in poem 5 is reserved for Trai's allusion to comparably famous successes in Northern history.

But these poems are more complicated than their third and fourth couplets suggest, and problems begin to arise when one considers the first and second couplets, which describe situations and scenes. Unlike the corresponding couplets in the first group, where the contents are almost identical, the contents in the second group are by no means so. One way of approaching them is to read them in chronological order, which is how I believe Trai intended them to be read.

Thus, poem 5 unambiguously records the shocking behavior of the "barbarian chief" and Le Loi's energetic retaliation. The scene in its second couplet reveals the sagely ruler in action. His imperial chariot braves "ten thousand miles of pestilential vapors." The barbarians' environment is depicted in the pejorative language the Northerners used when they referred to the South, and the presence of "the imperial chariot" in the same line makes it appropriate to do so.

A casual reading of the first two couplets of poem 6 may suggest an elaborate version of those in poem 5, but it would be elaborate to such an extent as to invite a reconsideration of their meaning. The scene in the second couplet of poem 5 celebrates

the ruler's military response. However, the scene in the second couplet of poem 6-- "handing over to the meshes of the law"--describes a different style of response and one that would be hardly appropriate for a barbarian rebel who deserved to be chastised in battle.

Indeed, the first line in poem 6 makes it likely that this poem concerns a much graver topic than border raids. The expression "Traacherous subjects (*than*) and wicked children (*tu*), their crimes were hard to endure" as a way to signify rebels has a long history in Chinese writing. It can be ultimately attributed to Mencius,<sup>119</sup> who wrote that, when the world again fell into decay and subjects (*than*) murdered their sovereigns and sons (*tu*) their fathers, Confucius was afraid and wrote the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, the work for which he thought he would be remembered. This would seem to be an unusually portentous condemnation of a border chief.

Gasparone's study of Le Loi's campaign up the Black River provides the background to this unexpected line.<sup>120</sup> The nineteenth century Vietnamese emperor Tu Duc was surprised that Le Loi, already a famous victor in battle, should have campaigned in person against barbarians in a remote region, but Gasparone shows why he did.<sup>121</sup> Among Trai's collected works there appears a proclamation, in the name of Le Loi but composed by Trai, describing the rebellion and its suppression in great detail. In this document is a sentence that resembles so closely the first line in poem 6 that both document and poem must refer to the same event. The sentence in the proclamation is as follows: "I consider that rebellious subjects (*than*) and wicked children (*tu*) should be chastized by the entire empire."<sup>122</sup> The line in the poem refers to the need to punish "subjects" and "children" who behaved disloyally.

Who are being condemned in such solemn terms? In the proclamation, the allusion to Mencius precedes immediately the assertion that the local chief of Thainguyen had been instigated to rebel by [Tran Nguyen] Han and that Deo Cat Han had rebelled as a result of [Le Van] Sao's intrigues. Han and Sao were executed some time before the proclamation was issued (the dates are obscure). This information greatly enlarges the significance of the revolt and explains why the aging Le Loi personally suppressed it when its suppression was not going well. Han and Sao had earned great merit in the war against the Ming and had been accorded high honors. Moreover, Han was descended from Tran Nguyen Dan and therefore from the Tran imperial family. Although much more needs to be known, Le Loi may have suspected that Han intended to establish a military base in the northwest in order to challenge Le Loi's imperial status.<sup>123</sup>

One can suppose that Trai deplored the death of his kinsman Han even though poem 6 referred to this aspect of the campaign. Some have surmised that he was imprisoned for a short time.<sup>124</sup> Perhaps he, the man of letters in the Court's service, dared not refuse to celebrate in verse a victory of such importance to the founder of the new dynasty.

I have suggested that poem 6 begins by alluding to a conspiracy between the frontier chiefs and two high-ranking Vietnamese. If this were so, the third and fourth couplets would refer less to the military victory than to the establishment of imperial authority. "Henceforth the four seas will be for ever pure" suggests finality. The consequence of this reading of poem 6 is to raise the possibility that poem 5, the first poem in the group, was intended to announce the victory, while the other three poems

dealt with particular aspects of the event such as, in poem 6, treason. After all, poem 5 alludes to the recapture of disaffected territory and Le Loi's inscription by means of the metaphors "Nguy-bac" and "Yen-nhien." "Axles and script" would be a suitable metaphor for complete obedience. If, then, poems 5 and 6 deal with particular aspects of the victory, the victory itself and the treasonable behavior of two subjects, then what aspects are dealt with in poems 7 and 8?

The first couplets of poems 7 and 8 convey the notion of inevitability. "Did they not know that such conduct would cause self-destruction?" (poem 7) "Heaven's laws are everywhere and all the more inescapable." (poem 8) The second couplet of poem 8 strengthens the notion of inevitability when it refers to the rebel's strategic posts set up in vain. These two poems, taken as a whole, make it clear that the "barbarians" are being addressed. Moreover, the notion of inevitability as well as the scale of the barbarians' crime is reinforced by coupling the ruler with Heaven: "Insulting Heaven and slandering the ruler." (poem 8) In these circumstances, punishment is inevitable, and those who have to be pacified are "foolish." (poem 7; "foolish" also appears in the Proclamation to describe subjects of Le Loi involved in the Thai incursions).

What, then, are the particular aspects of Le Loi's victory in the Black River region which are presented in poems 7 and 8? I suggest that poem 7 presents Le Loi as he who punishes lawbreakers. His empire's independent status is that of a divinely appointed institution, and it bears comparison with its status in the *Viet dien u linh tap*, where Heaven assumes the responsibility of appointing tutelary spirits. In the poems and in the tales alike the divine dispensation assures success. Understood in this way, the victorious ruler is administering justice, and perhaps this is how one should read poem 7, couplet by

couplet. It expresses a judge's advice, which his poet faithfully transmits. The sage ruler in his capacity as a judge pities foolish people in distant places who do not know that breaking the law inevitably brings with it self-destruction. He warns them that inherited enmities and quarrels with neighbors are an offence against Heaven. Do not, he exclaims, involve the present generation in these matters. Perhaps the third couplet refers to Han and Sao, loyal subjects who become prisoners. He ends with advice: Do not act in such a way that earlier mistakes will be repeated. His would not be the only example of a Southeast Asian ruler who assumed the authority of the teacher of his people.

Poem 8, the last in the group, continues in the same didactic vein by again stressing the inevitability of punishment and ending by noting that Le Loi's foresight shows how a ruler best serves his people. The advice is reminiscent of Minh-ton's justification for his campaigns in the same region.

Gasparone concluded his study of Le Loi's campaign by saying that, "in leading the expedition in person, [he] completed the work that founded his dynasty."<sup>125</sup> The eight poems studied in this essay are Nguyen Trai's celebration in verse of Le Loi's achievement, culminating in the Black River region. The achievement was the restoration of his country's independence and the prospect of strong government in the future. It would have been the fourth restoration in about half a century and followed Nghe-ton's "restoration" of 1370, Le Quy Ly's ambitious but short-lived dynasty of 1400, and the "newly created land" advertised by the Ming army of occupation.

Both groups of poems celebrate aspects of Le Loi's victory, but the second group is more carefully organized as a group. This group represents a single poem in four parts. Perhaps Trai, wounded by the Han episode, wanted to keep his personal feelings under

control and could do so by systematically setting himself several headings: the victory, the treason, the ruler as a judge, and the predictable finality of the whole enterprise.

Trai's sense of a final restoration of normality can, however, also be seen as representing the fulfillment of the chief preoccupations of earlier generations of his countrymen, including his grandfather, Nguyen Dan, and his father, Nguyen Phi Khanh. His texts assimilate features of their texts. The occasional overlapping of the language of the poems and that of the proclamation after the Black River victory is predictable; the same pen was at work. The linguistic echoes of his family's writing is more interesting and is evidence of continuities over the decades as far as cultural aspirations were concerned in spite of the enormous social and political upheavals that the country endured.

I have already noted that Trai renders obedience in the terms of uniform "axles and script," which his father, Phi Khanh, using the related expression "carriages and script," had associated with strong government during the Mongol wars. The need for an obedient countryside had been an increasing preoccupation among the elite in later Tran times and one temporarily addressed by Le Quy Ly.

There are further instances of intertextuality. Trai attributes to Le Loi the intention of bringing relief to the people (poem 1) and harnessing learning to the aid of government (poem 1). Dan and Khanh would have rejoiced. Dan ended a poem addressed to Khanh's brother as follows:

Bringing peace to the people and succoring everything, this is the business  
of all.

When you wander aimlessly, singing, do not be lonely.<sup>126</sup>

Again, according to Dan:

Thirty thousand scrolls of writing are of no use.

My white head vainly carries a mind that loves the people.<sup>127</sup>

Dan scoffs at books. Le Loi, according to Trai, values "learning." (poem 1) Khanh, out of office in Nghe-ton's reign, mocks those in office:

I disdain one who, promoted a grade, boasts to his country neighbors.

Who is to say that he has a purifying character when he does not bring relief to  
the poor?<sup>128</sup>

The term for "purifying" is the same as Trai uses in poem 2 in respect of "the foul vapors from the North."

Trai associates Le Loi with talented officials and secure borders (poem 2).

Again, Dan and Khanh, tormented by the Chams, would rejoice. Dan, looking back on the failed "restoration" of 1370, recalled that:

After the civil examinations were over, one was held in military arts.

When can this old servant [of the dynasty] expect a return of those times?<sup>129</sup>

The "civil examinations" were to test "learning," and "learning" was the basis of Le Loi's government (poem 1). Khanh also mourned that:

The country in former times was an empire with scholarly officials.

Today ordinary men serve in the Secretariat.<sup>130</sup>

Khanh was able to serve what he would have regarded as Le Quy Ly's promising regime but ended his life a prisoner in China.

Men such as Dan and Khanh would have recognized the language of Trai, their grandson and son, and would have similarly responded to the victory that Trai celebrated.

His language would have been familiar simply because what he was saying had been on their own minds. The matters urgently discussed by those who spoke in chapter four would continue to be discussed after the Ming had been expelled and were bound to be reflected in Trai's meditations on Le Loi's victory.

I shall end the essay on Nguyen Trai's "victory" poems with a brief statement suggesting the nature of the restoration they celebrate. I shall do so in the form of a monologue which one can imagine being uttered by Trai himself.

\* \* \*

"Under our sage emperor's brave leadership, the South has regained its rightful status in the world. Military pacification and righteous government have restored peace within the four seas. The land has been cleansed of Northern defilement. Our vassals bring tribute, and the North has reverted to its former relationship with the South. Equality between the two parts of the civilized world has now returned. The dawning of this glorious age of normalcy is the result of our emperor's *virtus*, to which everyone everywhere responds. He is our Heaven-appointed ruler and has all the attributes of a sage. He takes to heart the needs of the people. He selects men of talent to serve him. He protects the border with overwhelming might. He fulfilled Heaven's will by punishing a distant barbarian chief who dared disturb our lands. He even did not hesitate to execute two traitors of high rank who had plotted with wicked border chiefs. Divine retribution was inevitable when he enforced the law. The entire empire is now under control. All are obedient. The Southern empire will endure for ever."

## Chapter Six

### Conversations early in the sixteenth century

#### Altercation in a temple (1509)

Late in 1509, Loc and Kien had taken shelter from a violent rainstorm in a temple on the outskirts of the capital. They were in their early forties, and they had entered government service in the heady days of Le Thanh-ton (1460-1497), the admired patron of scholars as well as a ruler who combined strong government and justice. Since then, however, the country had fallen into hard times. Hien-ton (1497-1504) was Thanh-ton's worthy son and heir, but he died in 1504 and his son Uy-Muc's accession was a dreadful shock for those who had grown accustomed to a Court that inspired educated men to sing its praises.<sup>131</sup> Uy-Muc was dissolute and cruel, and there seemed to be no prospect of improvement. The contrast between the present ruler and his distinguished ancestors disturbed men of principle and caused them to ponder anxiously how this sorry situation came to pass.

Loc and Kien were, however, dissimilar characters. Loc came from a wealthy family of officials with a mansion in the suburbs of the capital. He was not particularly clever but had cultivated those who rose high in government. Moreover, he was a fervent admirer of the teachings of the Song Confucianists and had been encouraged by Le Thanh-ton to suppose that these teachings provided an infallible blueprint for good government, stable society, and faultless personal behavior. Because he was not gifted, he no doubt found congenial a philosophy that seemed to take care of every eventuality in human affairs. He preferred to live by the rules.

For most of his career he had served contentedly in the Board of Rites and was satisfied that nothing more was necessary than the proper regulation of human relationships, be they between ruler and subject, husband and wife, or father and son. Those working with him heard him tut-tutting discreetly when news of Uy-Muc's murder of the empress dowager came to his ears. He abominated excesses of all kinds as a matter of principle, and the present style of Court life caused him to dread the effect of such a bad example by those at the top of society. At the same time, it was increasingly clear that heavy taxation and onerous demands for manual labor were having a disturbing effect on morale in the countryside, and this increased his alarm.

Loc had read the Tran Annals, compiled by Phan Phu Tien (1455-1460) and edited by Ngo Si Lien in 1479, and noticed how harshly Lien warned his readers against the dangerous practices of the Tran dynasty. The readers were, of course, those whose lives and fortunes were inextricably affected by Court practices and who knew very well that official historians, such as Tien and Lien, were required to teach the lessons of the past. Lien believed without doubt that Tran government provided a recipe for disaster, and it was therefore hardly surprising that the Ming were able to occupy the country. Only the wise rule of the present dynasty had restored peaceful conditions, but now the precious heritage was in danger of being squandered.

Kien, also sheltering from the storm, was worried by what was happening as well. He, too, had read the Tran Annals, but his experiences in public life had been more varied than Loc's. He had been born on the southern fringe of the country, and some even hinted that he had Cham blood in his veins. In fact, Kien was wont to explain his nonconformist tendencies by a supposed Cham origin. He traced his origins to Ho Quy

Ly's forcible transfer of landless farmers to newly conquered Cham lands.<sup>132</sup> His family had benefited from court-sponsored educational facilities in the provinces and from Le Thanh-ton's enlargement of the mandarinat. Kien would claim that he belonged to two worlds: the formal and self-consciously educated world of the plains near the capital and the more open society of the south.

He had served in the provinces and also in the History Office at Court, where he could not help being familiar with Ngo Si Lien's comments on the previous dynasty. But Lien's comments were not the limit of his interest in the past. Part of his duty in the History Office was to assemble every kind of miscellaneous material to be available for future historians. One manuscript that greatly interested him, however, was an "unofficial writing" (*da van*), dated "1400," which had come to his notice before he worked in the History Office. It purported to be an account of famous people in Tran times and how "gentlemen" in those times reflected on what was happening. The sources it claimed to have consulted were local traditions and especially some prose writings by Tran officials who were ancestors of the family who owned the manuscript.

Kien's provincial duties had brought him into contact with this family, farmers in Hai-duong who eked out a humble living. But they had proud memories and knew that their ancestors had been important and wealthy in the fourteenth century. The head of the family, Ke, had decided to serve Ho Quy Ly, and this was the family's nemesis. Ke was taken prisoner to the North and those members of the family left behind were saddled with the reputation of being disloyal to the Tran dynasty. This was why, Kien was told, the last date in the document was 1400, even though the compilation was undertaken in Le times. The compiler did not want to be associated with the Ho family. None of them

again ventured into public life, but Ke's brother (Ke died as a prisoner in the North) decided, after the Ming had been expelled, to collect the family's literary remnants as a tribute to the family.

Perhaps it was Kien's lack of haughtiness and his utterly unassuming manner that helped him win the confidence of this family. He joked with the family members about his Cham ancestors who had lived when their ancestors had known the highest figures in the land. He sometimes returned to the farm for short holidays, and one day he was shown a manuscript in the form of an unofficial history, which he read and reread, and which he used as a means of obtaining supplementary information from the family. At the same time, he read with a new interest other records from Tran times, and when he began to work in the History Office, the manuscript's interest gradually dawned on him, and he remembered passages to which he could relate fragments of other information in the office.

The manuscript began to open up a vision of the country that differed from what he had been trained to take for granted. Heroic performance was different. There were Buddhist laymen of intellectual distinction. There were conscientious officials who were not absorbed with Song philosophy but could still observe honorable standards of behavior. Above all, and at the very least, it seemed that different points of view could be held in the fourteenth century among friends. Kien once commented that the prominent members of the family seemed able to keep a distance between themselves and their contemporaries but without quarrelling with them.

When conditions began to deteriorate under Uy-Muc, details in the "history" would come to Kien's mind, and he began to think of Tran times in a favorable way. In

particular, he likened Uy-Muc to Tran Du-ton, whose dissolute behavior was so vividly described in the Annals, or with the usurper Nhat-Le, who killed the empress dowager just as Uy-Muc had done.

Such was Kien's mood when when he found that he was sheltering from the storm with Loc. They recognized each other but had never known each other. They were both in an irritable mood on account of what they had heard about Uy-Muc's latest excesses. Fear and anger among people at court was rising as Uy-Muc increasingly used murder as his prime method of government. They nodded at each other, and Loc grunted something to the effect that the Le dynasty could well be on the way to disappearing just as the Tran family did after Tran Du-ton became emperor. "But," he hastened to add, "the present situation is not as desperate as that. Du-ton's family was doomed from the beginning by his ancestor Thai-ton's appalling decision to seize his elder brother's wife and marry her." Loc hoped that he had not spoken amiss about the reigning dynasty.

Kien retorted that Loc was merely echoing Ngo Si Lien's judgment, which in turn echoed that of Phan Phu Tien, who compiled the Annals. Tien chose to attribute Du-ton's conduct to Thai-ton's example in disregarding the proprieties of social relationships. "Lien could find little to say in favor of Thai-ton. According to Lien, Thai-ton foolishly indulged his elder brother by improperly bestowing a high title on him, which he says was the origin of his brother's rebellious heart.<sup>133</sup> Lien also thought that Thai-ton's adoption of his elder brother's son as his own was comparable to Nhat-Le being recognized by Du-ton as the son of his elder brother,<sup>134</sup> and that both events are examples of behavior that doomed the dynasty. Lien regarded Thai-ton's marriage policy as nothing less than scandalous. He even gave his earlier wife in marriage to a general.<sup>135</sup>

But Lien says not a word about Thai-ton initiating a dynasty or about Thai-ton's leadership against the Mongol invaders, when he sensibly entrusted the armies to his elder brother's son. How stupid it was of him to associate Thai-ton and Du-ton when they were so utterly different from each other."

These remarks upset Loc, who admired Lien and Le Thanh-ton's standards of government that Lien applauded. "Who can deny that marriage relationships and every other human relationship are the basis of stable government?" retorted Loc. "In truth, Thai-ton was barely educated and had little understanding of the Principle (*li*) that pervades all things and was so clearly investigated by the Song philosophers. His skill in reading portents had nothing to do with his having the 'sincere' heart of a sage; it was only the knowledge of divination and magical calculation.<sup>136</sup> The best that may be said in his favor is that his own marriage and his connivance in the Hung-dao Prince's marriage came from his family's advice." Loc could not stop himself from adding, "No wonder, too, that Thai-ton's Court was poorly regulated and practiced simple customs. Even the censor, far from counseling restraint at banquets, joined in the revelry. Lien rightly condemned this.<sup>137</sup>"

Kien retorted in irritation, "I am as aware of Lien's prejudices as you are, and I, too, was trained in Song philosophy. But, I also believe that not so long ago there were loyal officials who were well educated without needing to understand such esoteric matters as the Principle or what is meant by 'sincerity,' yet this did not prevent them from attributing sage-like qualities to the Tran rulers."

Loc was shocked by what he considered to be words bordering on heresy. "Where have you picked up such ignorant ideas?" he asked, knitting his brow. "How do

you dare to wear the clothing of an official when such wicked thoughts are being nourished in your mind?"

Kien was unwilling to let Loc know of the existence of his friends' manuscript and said no more than that he had occasion to read miscellaneous documents in the History Office as well as manuscripts hidden away in temples. He had also read poems by Tran writers, some of whose works Phan Phu Tien collected. "We cannot put the clock back," he said, "but we need not criticize differences between those times and ours in Lien's harsh terms. We must accept it without bitterness that our forebears did not see everything as we do."

Loc was now hoping that the storm would abate so that he could leave such distasteful company, but this was not to be. All that he could say in reply was: "You are talking nonsense. Do you mean that they could not see the same natural elements? Or were they less concerned than we are with what happens beyond our northern border?"

"Would you be surprised," asked Kien, "to learn that there were those who regarded Tran Thai-ton not as a bad example to posterity but as an example of a ruler who was worthy? And that he was worthy because he was 'enlightened' as were also his four successors who ruled when the Tran family was at the peak of its fortunes? One of them was Tran Anh-ton, whose example even Lien praises."

"And what did they mean by 'enlightened'?" muttered Loc.

"The term need not be too subtle for one who claims to understand what is meant by 'Principle'," replied Kien. "An enlightened person is one who suddenly experiences his 'Buddha-nature', and this means that his mind is free from illusion and especially from the illusion that he possesses a self. His real nature is a void, and this is what he

experiences as a result of intense meditation."

Loc became interested in spite of himself. "The Song philosophers would reject this notion. For them, and for us, nature in all its forms contains 'Principle'. 'Principle' underlies all human society." Warmng to his subject, Loc continued. "The state as well as society also partakes of Principle, and the sage ruler must govern himself so that he does not allow the influence of the phenomenal world on him to impede the manifestation in his government of all the Principles that lie within. Here is the foundation for the unity of ruler and governed in the best interest of the latter and therefore an admirable situation unavailable in a state ruled by one who claims to be 'enlightened'." Loc felt that he had scored over his adversary.

Kien was now impatient, and he recalled an impression the Hai-duong family's manuscript left on him, which was the ability of an "enlightened" ruler to react promptly to the needs of the present without wasting time on thinking about the past. He recalled that meditative Buddhism nurtured trust within the Tran family. He also recalled a particular note in the manuscript. It recorded the impression made on Khung, the first member of the family to be mentioned in the manuscript and evidently an important official in the mid-Tran period, when a Buddhist layman commented on what a historian said had happened when Thai-ton fled to a monastery in 1237. The episode was preserved in the Tran Annals. The Buddhist layman noted how Thai-ton's will had prevailed over his angry uncle's will even though Thai-ton never had to raise his voice. His was the voice of a ruler with genuine *virtus*. Apparently Khung, though not himself a Buddhist, had sufficient confidence in the Buddhist tradition within the Tran family that he was prepared to give the youthful Minh-ton the benefit of the doubt simply because

his father, Anh-ton, had selected him as his heir. Anh-ton was one of a sequence of enlightened emperors.

Kien was sure that there was more to be said on behalf of Tran rule at its best than Lien and his disciple, Loc, were prepared to concede. "The Tran emperors could evaluate the practical needs of a situation without allowing themselves to be distracted by extraneous considerations. Thus, in 1237 it was urgently necessary that Thai-ton should have an heir, and he refused to be influenced by Northern teachings about social relationships. Lien unimaginatively criticized the Tran system of imperial succession on the grounds that the status of emperor was given to the heir even when his father was still living. Lien realized that this was an expedient to provide for emergencies by giving the heir training under his father's supervision. Nevertheless, according to Lien, it was against the Way, by which he meant the moral order that represented the Principle for organizing the state and society.

"Never once," exclaimed Kien, "did Lien ever show any indication that he understood Thai-ton's need to protect the succession from the consequence of the crisis of 1237. But most of the Tran princes, though sometimes unruly, remained loyal. Even Lien acknowledged that their armies rallied against the Mongols and also against Nhat-Le.<sup>138</sup> Yet he condemned the Tran family succession system for being 'different,' by which he meant different from the practice of the Three Kings in Northern antiquity. He even implied that Mencius would not have approved.<sup>139</sup> Lien was always intent on spotting 'differences' or what was not 'correct' in what Thai-ton did."

Loc was silenced, and Kien took the opportunity of continuing. "In the temples even today," he said, "one can sometimes find sermons by a famous monk called Tung,

who seems to have never tired of criticizing those who made much of difference. He is recorded as saying, for example, that 'an ordinary person and a sage are no different'.

What an uncontentious way of life our ancestors must have enjoyed!"

He went on: "I wonder whether there were those at the time who were ever aware of what Lien regarded as defects." He suddenly recalled a note written by Khung, which mentioned a reservation he had entertained early in Minh-ton's reign about what would happen if the head of the ruling family should be incapable of becoming "enlightened." He shared this point with Loc. "Such a question never occurred to Lien," he added.

"No matter," he continued. "There was, in fact, a sequence of 'enlightened' Tran rulers, whom even Lien did not presume to criticize except for trivial reasons such as Nhan-ton's going into religious retreat. Even Lien could hardly fail on the whole to admire their conduct of the wars against the Mongols. Lien's judgment on Anh-ton and his fine example for families to follow was extremely generous. Yao and Shun had not done better."

Under the strain of arguing with Loc, whom he now despised, Kien remembered more and more of the saliency of his Hai-duong friends' *da-van*; two flaws in Lien's comments on the Tran leapt to mind, and he challenged Loc to defend his hero. "I am ready for more heresies," grunted Loc.

Kien smiled. "The first flaw is his complete failure to recognize Minh-ton's greatness. Lien could say no more than that Minh-ton owed everything to his father Anh-ton's strict training after he had come to doubt his son's courage. Clearly, Lien was unable to understand this complex character. Minh-ton's contemporaries had similar difficulties, but from what I have been able to gather from unofficial sources hidden in

the History Office, this emperor made a profound impression on those who served him. He effectively controlled his officials and was credited with an ability to read their minds, he could see all sides of a problem, he educated his sons, and he was brave. He was certainly inscrutable, but this did not diminish his officials' respect for him."

Loc made no comment, and Kien continued. "Lien's other flaw is that he failed to recognize the merits of Minh-ton's officials. He disregarded those who acquitted themselves well. Phan Phu Tien, when compiling the Tran Annals, listed the names of especially good officials,<sup>140</sup> and he organized his narrative to enable readers to see the basis of good government as exemplified in Tran times, which was the ruler's appointment of able officials who then performed their duties admirably.<sup>141</sup> Yet Lien could say no more than that Minh-ton was generous to his relatives."

Loc regarded this attack on the distinguished historian as intolerable. "You are grossly unfair," he shouted. "Lien had every reason to blame Minh-ton for mishandling the appointment of an heir in 1328 and even murdering his uncle, in whom his father had confidence. The emperor was probably jealous of Quoc Chan's close relation with his father and gladly listened to the words of that villain, Tran Khac Chung. Indeed, botched successions were a feature of Tran government. Du-ton made a foolish choice in 1369, and Lien rightly laid the blame on Thai-ton's example in 1237.

"And as for your remarks in defence of the Tran officials, Lien did not hesitate to condemn them for a variety of reasons such as only seeking merit, personal profit, boastfulness, saving their skin, or sheer wickedness. Which of them were only concerned with serving the ruler? Lien could find only one, Chu Van An. Could anything better be expected in a Court which lacked the disciplinary influence of rites and ceremonies and

where censors became drunk, marriage and funeral rites were ignored, and unsuitable titles were conferred on imperial ancestors."

Kien angrily interrupted Loc. "We all know that Lien fulminated against what he chose to see as unseemly relationships at Court. But why had he nothing to say about the more serious and fundamental breakdown of social discipline in the villages, which is familiar to all readers of the Tran Annals and which was deplored in the inscriptions of Truong Han Sieu and Le Quat? Why did Lien turn a blind eye to this aspect of Minh-ton's reign? The reason must be that he did not want to call attention to defects in Tran rule that had not been eliminated by Le Thanh-ton in his own time, and he did this in order to ingratiate himself with the dynasty. Had not Thanh-ton ordered the recitation of the Confucian social duties at village festivals?"

This outburst silenced the unhappy Loc, and Kien continued: "You referred to the merit-earning tendency of the Tran officials, yet you have probably never noted passages in the Tran Annals which show that Minh-ton himself also disapproved of this behavior. And as for Court discipline, did not Phan Phu Tien note that Anh-ton executed gamblers?"<sup>142</sup>

Loc was able to break in by observing that Sieu was right to be concerned with what was happening in the villages. "Lien was doing his duty when he condemned the Tran disregard for the sacred principles of human conduct as they were laid down by the Northern sages and reaffirmed by Han Yu and his successors."

"Minh-ton had no time for the Northern teachers," admitted Kien. "And I cannot believe that any of his officials did either."

"If that was so, then what vision of the country's welfare could he have had?"

asked Loc tauntingly.

"You cannot be expected to know, let alone accept, what his poems tell us," replied Kien, who was now beginning to weary of the conversation. "You would have to understand something that his Buddhist training taught him, which was the need to discount the significance to differences. This meant that, when he contemplated the country he ruled, the notion of a 'oneness' was uppermost in his mind. But the 'oneness' in question was neither political nor social and not even cultural but something that transcended all those things."

Kien paused. "I know that you will contrast the Buddhist concept of 'oneness' with the Northerners' concept of the Supreme Ultimate, which consists of all the Principles in the universe, brought together into a single whole."

"Indeed I do, and I can go further," said Loc. "You forget an essential feature of the Northerners' concept of unity, which is that moral values are also an embodiment of this unity and can be protected by the discipline of the rites that you seem to spurn."

"The Northerners," retorted Kien, "also have a general propensity for interfering in the lives of others, whereas Buddhist teaching tends to leave people alone as much as possible, as Phan Phu Tien actually writes in his obituary notice on Minh-ton."

By now Kien and Loc realized that no useful purpose was served by further conversation. Kien had come to realize how much he seemed to have in common with those whose notes and memories were enshrined in the *da van*. Even though in Le Thanh-ton's time it seemed that the revolution in ideas provided a permanent foundation for stable government, today, with another sordid crisis looming at Court, perhaps one's earlier expectations for the future would be disappointed. Were people more hopeful in

Tran times? He remembered reading the brief note by Khung, written at a time when people could still congratulate one another on the victories in the wars, which indicated that he wondered whether such a happy situation would last. Today, Kien reflected, the situation was already deteriorating even though the Le family had ruled for about the same period of time as the Tran family had ruled when Khung and his colleagues had pondered their form of government.

The storm had now cleared, and Kien took the opportunity of leaving the temple. He mumbled farewell and hurried away. As for Loc, he began to wonder whether his hero Lien had been writing against a particular background of high hopes. What would he have thought of the present crisis? Perhaps he would have admitted to himself that the warnings he wrote into his comments on the Annals were intended to obviate a situation that he feared might come to pass, a situation that had now arrived.

#### Tragedy in Hai-duong (1516)

Early in the fourth month of 1516, during Tuong-Duc's reign (1510-1517), Kien, now retired, managed to escape from the capital where he had been visiting his former colleagues and make his way to his retirement home in Nam-dinh, south of the river. In the previous year, there had been a rumor that an army officer named Tran Cao was planning to rebel in Lang-son on the northern border and that two local officials had joined him, but there was such disorder in the capital that the rumor was disregarded. Instead, everyone was disturbed by the ruler's prodigious building projects, especially his nine-storied palace, with a lake in front having a shore of many curves and being suitable for light craft. This project was regarded as extremely wasteful and caused great

suffering. It seemed that every day the ruler would change his building plans as though he had nothing else to do. The situation was even more discouraging because Tuong-Duc's reign had begun hopefully. He had murdered his shameful and much despised cousin, Uy-Muc, and had shown signs of wanting to reform the government. He was also regarded as well educated; his numerous poems presented to the Ming envoys in 1513 had made an impression at the time. But he needed a great deal of time to reform the government, and the almost annual revolts suggested that the challenge required a ruler of extraordinary ability. Few thought that Tuong-Duc was such a ruler.

Kien fled because he heard that Tran Cao, leading a mob of shaven men, had arrived from the east, occupied the countryside northeast of the capital, and had reached the Bo-de ford on the left bank of the Red River across from the capital. Tran Cao subsequently entered the capital itself. Kien remained in Nam-dinh until he heard late in the fifth month that loyal generals had forced Cao out of the capital. Cao retreated to Lang-nguyen in the northeast.

When Kien returned to the capital at the end of the fifth month to see his friends, he realized how serious the breakdown in government had been. The unguarded city had been looted and heaps of precious goods lay scattered on the streets. Offices and stores were ransacked. When Cao had entered the capital, at least one senior official had surrendered, and Cao had requested that he establish a new government. That this official, Le Quang Do, should have done so, meant that he believed the time was ripe for a successful change of dynasty.

A much more serious event had occurred during Kien's absence. Trinh Duy San, a senior official whom the ruler had previously flogged, murdered the king, Tuong-Duc.

The murder was under cover of the confusion on the eve of Cao's assault on the capital. An eight-year-old nephew of the murdered ruler was proclaimed king, but within days struggles among rival factions resulted in him being cast aside and replaced by another nephew, this one fourteen years old.

If Kien had any lingering doubts that the threat from Tran Cao was no longer serious, they were removed by the frantic efforts of senior officials, usually at loggerheads with each other, to destroy Cao and his followers. They did this by offering generous rewards for the capture of him and his chief assistants and also by the appointment of "pacifiers" to suppress further disobedience in the territory that Cao had recently occupied, including not only the provinces northeast of the capital but also Hai-duong. Villagers killed one "pacifier," an event that reflected popular support for Cao.

Kien had recently retired from public service on the Board of War. He had become weary of the endless revolts and the difficulty in maintaining a supply of conscripts, and he was glad to return to his small estate in Nam-dinh. Court affairs had now deteriorated into a series of plots and counter plots among powerful officials and the spectacle of the degenerate and profligate activities of Uy-Muc and Tuong-Duc. Tran Cao's revolt north of the Red River made Kien anxious about his friends in Hai-duong, and, in the tenth month, he decided to pay them a visit. Peace had now, it seemed to him, been restored. In the eighth month, when orders had been given to "pacify" Hai-duong, Cao's lieutenant, Pham At, had been captured in Dong-trieu, just east of Hai-duong, and the prospects for peace were not too depressing.

His friends on the farm greeted him warmly. They had not met for a long while and much had happened in the meantime. Vi, the head of the family and in his sixties,

assured Kien that the family had managed to avoid being involved in the revolt, though partisans had temporarily occupied the neighborhood.

"How did you first hear of the rising?" asked Kien.

Vi replied, "The partisans spread news of the origins of their leader and sooner or later the news circulated everywhere. Tran Cao is surely an extraordinary person and destined to succeed."

"In the capital, we gathered that he headed a mob of fanatics," commented Kien.

"Yet, Cao claims an illustrious ancestor, no less than the emperor Tran Thai-ton, while he is also descended from Le Thanh-ton's mother's family," said Vi. "His alleged Tran origins brought him a great deal of support in these parts which are so rich in Tran associations. It is hardly by chance that he announced his rising at Quynh-lam Temple in Dong-trieu, a temple built by a famous Tran monk, Phap-loa."

Kien, on account of his friendship with Vi and his family, had become interested in Tran times, and he remembered that years ago he had defended the Tran record against the dreary scholar Loc. Plenty of reflections flashed through his mind when he listened to Vi. He remembered the passage in the Tran Annals that mentioned a rising in the same region by someone who claimed to be descended from the Hung-dao Prince and the popular response from discontented villagers. The Tran family seemed to have an enduring appeal, as did its Buddhism. "Was it by chance," he mused, "that rumor had it that Tran Cao was an incarnation of Indra, the protector of Buddhism?" He suddenly remembered Truong Han Sieu's inscription that condemned Phap-loa for pandering to the request of superstitious villagers that a miracle should be recorded, and he wondered what were the real associations of the Quynh-lam Temple and why Cao had chosen to

declare his resolve there. Had not Tran Thai-ton visited an earlier temple at this site?<sup>143</sup> He also remembered reading recently that Le Tung criticized Minh-ton for his interest in this temple. And had not a Tran poet written a poem about the Quynh-lam Temple?<sup>144</sup> "We were told that these rebels shaved their heads as though they were monks and that Cao was dressed in the black robes of a monk. I am beginning to realize that this was no ordinary rebellion. It is as though some form of divine vengeance is being wreaked on the degenerate Le family. Did not Cao announce the name of his reign period as 'Heaven Responds' as if Heaven were responding to the sufferings of the people?"

Vi and his family were fond of Kien, who was different from any educated official they knew. There was nothing formal about his manners, and he was not frightened to speak scathingly about persons in high places. Moreover, he had shown a sympathetic interest in their family traditions and, well read as he was, could tell them something of the general background of Tran history and literature. Kien, for his part, felt that he could relax among the rolling hills and enjoy the simple company of this family. His wife had died long ago and his two sons could be trusted to manage his household. Never before was he so grateful to his Cham ancestors for bequeathing him an unconventional frame of mind that helped him to keep his distance during troubling times.

An awareness of his Cham ancestry, or what he was pleased to regard as such, had been revived when Vi told him that Pham At, Cao's assistant, was a Cham. Some years ago Uy-Muc had brutally ordered the slaughter of all the Cham captives working on the farms of wealthy landowners merely because an attempt had been made to take the bones of a captured Cham chief back to his own land. Whenever Kien saw these

captives, he could not restrain feeling sorrowful and ashamed. Perhaps Pham At was an escaped captive.

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One day Vi remarked that the peaceful years in the late fifteenth century had come to an end rather suddenly, and he likened what happened with what family tradition related about the fortunes of the family not long after their ancestor Quang returned with Nghe-ton from the Black River. And this was not the only similar experience. "You described the anarchy in the capital just before Cao occupied it. Memories of our ancestor Vong make much of similar disasters affecting the capital, such as its sack by the Chams in 1377, and especially when a monk and his rebels occupied the capital in 1389, or when a Tran pretender did so in 1390. Why do monks and those who invoke the Tran name come to the fore in times of popular unrest?" asked Vi. "Perhaps one reason is that Buddhist teachings offer the promise of supernatural help and, more likely, because monks live close to ordinary people and are trusted by them. Another reason may be that the haughty pretensions of most officials and the rules and regulations they are required to execute have made villagers conclude that it would be a waste of their time to appeal to secular authority and better to take matters into their own hands. Above all, I suspect that the heroism of the Tran emperors during the Mongol wars has meant that their family has come to stand for invincible power. Did not village guardian spirits rally to their help?"

His friendship with Kien had made Vi much more conscious of his family's renown in the fourteenth century and therefore more critical of present-day conditions. He lived in the country and in a neighborhood that had produced not a few heroes in Tran

times, some of whom had been rewarded with local shrines. "One thing is certain," he sighed. "In this part of the land, the burdens laid on the peasants are sufficient to make them want to follow any leader who promises to help them."

This was the first time that Vi disclosed the depth of his discontent. He was embarrassed that he should seem to be bordering on treason, but Kien nodded his approval and said, "After all, who today is our emperor? At least Nghe-ton remained on the throne in spite of every kind of disaster. Furthermore, he succeeded the wretched Du-ton and the usurper Nhat-Le. We today have had to endure two successive bad rulers, and all this is in spite of Le Thanh-ton's long and glorious reign. One may ask whether the many so-called reforms of that reign and the new brand of philosophically committed officials provide any better guarantee of continued stability than the 'enlightened' emperors whom your ancestors served. Tuong-Duc mouthed the principles of government followed by his ancestors but set no example,<sup>145</sup> and what chance was there that these principles would be practiced when the chief officials were vying among themselves for status and rewards? And who could claim that the Court was disciplined in spite of the importance given to rites and ceremonies?"

"The men in our family," confided Vi, "sometimes ask themselves whether they should have studied for the public examinations and emulated our famous ancestors, Khung and Quang."

"At least," said Kien, "they are not faced with cruel questions about where their duty lies in times such as these, questions for which your family paid a price as a result of your ancestor Ke's decision to serve the Ho family. Ke's bones are buried in the North, and you are a farmer."

Kien realized that he had spoken unfeelingly and hastened to add that Vi's family was not condemned to perpetual obscurity. "Take comfort from the example of Mac Dang Dung, a rising star at Court whose ancestor, Mac Dinh Chi, lived not very far from here and was famous for his spirited mission to the Mongol Court. But his descendants were quick to serve the Ming and therefore subsequently had to hide in a remote region near the delta, where they became fishermen. Dung, however, is a man of ambition and has risen from the ranks of the army. In 1511 Tuong-duc gave him a high title, and I have no doubt that he is today awaiting his chance to further his position by attaching himself to one of the major families at Court."

A chilly wind blew up the river and the two friends returned to the farmhouse.

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Night had fallen, and the family and their guest had finished their evening meal. A log fire was blazing, and the setting was suitable for further confidences. Kien and Vi had come to agree that the Le dynasty was near its end. Only Kien, however, was informed about the leading personalities at Court and able to hazard a guess whether a Nguyen or a Trinh or even a relative outsider such as Mac Dang Dung would seize the opportunity of establishing an influence over the young ruler and perhaps usurping the throne. "What would you say if this were to happen?" Kien naughtily asked Vi.

Vi unexpectedly retorted, "I would hope that young and rising officials were prudent before they decided to throw in their lot with a usurper, otherwise they might find themselves in the unhappy situation of my ancestor Ke."

Kien smiled. "You have forgotten one fact. Today the Ming do not wait for an opportunity to occupy our country by meddling in our dynastic affairs. The fate of the

Ho family need not provide a precedent."

Vi agreed and pleaded his ignorance of history. The turn in the conversation had, however, made both of them think about the last years of the Tran and the short reign of the Ho family. The family manuscript was silent on the subject, and Vi had to fall back on oral traditions. "We gather that Vong, Ke's father, was not very pleased that Ke should choose to serve the Ho but grudgingly realized that his son would be able to protect the family property. Vong himself was not a distinguished ancestor but probably did much to collect and preserve the materials that found their way into the 'unofficial history.' He seems to have lived in the past and may have embellished the 'history' to glorify our ancestors.

"As far as Ke is concerned, nothing is known for certain except that he was captured. There is a story, however, that a Northern official met him in a prison camp in Nanking. The official was escorting Le Canh Tuan to solitary confinement in Ke's prison and met Ke. This official was also on his way to join the Ming administration in our country and asked to see the captives. He was accompanied by several treacherous Vietnamese who had studied in the North in preparation for joining the enemy's ranks, and they all offered the prisoners the opportunity of freedom if they agreed to serve the Ming. By now, Ke was too weak to travel, and he refused the offer. Those who defected and returned mentioned his name and illness, and news about him eventually reached us. We do not know whether the story is true or false, but we in the family are of the opinion that Ke died a hero's death, and we have erected a small memorial to him in our family shrine."

The story moved Kien, and he murmured something about Ke's being worthy of

his ancestors. Kien had little difficulty in taking a detached point of view and was able to sympathize with Ke's decision to serve the Ho and with those who lived in Tran times. He even believed that a fresh start should be made in his day by breaking with the past. Such had been Ke's hope. "But in what direction should we move today?" he asked. Nguyen Trai's poems assumed that Le Loi's victories ensured the resumption of the way of life when the Tran family was at its peak.<sup>146</sup> But, since then, Le Thanh-ton devised a new style of government, much more tightly controlled than the government that Minh-ton extolled. So now are we awaiting a new beginning? What should be our expectations?"

In fact, neither Kien nor Vi was very interested in the future. Vi, however, knew that Kien had access to the official history of the Tran dynasty, and he felt the time had now come to enquire what the historians had made of the years when Ke was in public life. Would they understand the reasons for Ke's willingness to serve the Ho family and recognize the bravery of those who refused to serve the Ming? Vi begged Kien to talk about these matters.

"You cannot imagine the size of the gap between Ke's view of life and that of Tien and Lien, the official historians of the Tran and Ho period. Their judgments would never have occurred to Ke any more than the words they sometimes used to express their judgments. My former colleague, Le Tung, wrote approvingly about the Vietnamese Annals that Lien edited and summed up Lien's approach to history. Would what he wrote have made any sense to Ke? Tung described the books on Northern antiquity which Confucius edited as essential guides for good government and therefore necessary reading for rulers and their subordinates. In the *Spring and Autumn Annals* one was

taught how to evaluate and punish conduct in public life. Tung concluded by insisting that rulers must be educated to understand the Principle that is embodied in the past and present. History provides the mirror for rulers to know what actually happened in the past. It follows that the historian's job is to assign praise or blame rather than to try to understand what really happened.<sup>147</sup>

"I am sure that nothing I have just said makes sense to you, but I hope that you will now know that you need not take to heart Tien's and Lien's opinion of what happened in Ke's lifetime. They were not interested in the issues of that time. They wanted to criticize Ke's generation in order to teach what they presumed were the lessons of history."

Vi realized that he was about to hear disagreeable things and was glad that his friend had warned him in advance. "Tell me everything you think I should know about my unfortunate ancestor," he urged.

"You should first know that, in official circles today, the Tran period is universally condemned on account of the high esteem given by the rulers and the people to Buddhism. This helps to explain the fear Tran Cao and his followers have caused. There could be no more deadly combination of appeals in a discontented countryside than the names of Tran and the Buddha. Phan Phu Tien, compiling the Tran Annals, preferred to ignore most of the evidence of the Tran rulers' participation in *dhyana* ceremonies and associated Buddhism with pernicious influences, while Ngo Si Lien commented on this aspect of Tran history hardly at all. Le Tung, whom I have just mentioned, was well aware of this side of the story and blamed the Tran rulers for squandering the country's wealth on statues of the Buddha, temple bells, and writing materials for Buddhist texts.

The emperors were even regarded as bodhisattvas. Is not Tran Cao regarded as an incarnation of Indra?

"But Le Tung was also quick to point out that their religious zeal did not save them from destruction by the Ho family. 'What help did their worship of the Buddha bring them?' he asked unkindly."

Kien stopped for a moment, and Vi commented that Tung could have had no knowledge of these rulers' meditational activities and knew even less about them than Khung and Quang claimed to know of Minh-ton.

"You will now realise that too much credence should not be given to what these historians wrote about Ke's generation," said Kien. "Let me go on. They could find nothing in public life that was praiseworthy and much to blame. They were aware of only one real issue, and this was Le Quy Ly's ability to usurp the throne. Everything else they reduced to the level of critical character sketches. If you were to follow Tien and Lien, you would suppose that Ke lived in such evil times that he was bound to be corrupted."

Vi winced, and Kien hastened to remind him that Ke was not mentioned in the Annals.

"The chief villain, of course," continued Kien, "was the cunning usurper, Le Quy Ly. Lien had a particular grievance against him, which helps us to understand the great distance separating these historians from Ke. Ho Quy Ly dared to tamper with the Confucian texts and even fabricated his own, and he did these heretical things to further his own interests. Ke must have known this. Lien was outraged that in 1396 Ho Quy Ly demoted Chu Hsi in the Confucianists' roll of honor.

"Such was Lien's loathing for Ho Quy Ly," exclaimed Kien, "that he even defended his execution by the Ming on the grounds that, when no fellow countrymen were available to do the job because they were 'treacherous servants,' then foreigners or even barbarians might rightfully kill him."

"The historians were able to say nothing in Ly's favour except for one comment by Tien. You must realize that Ke and Tien were almost contemporaries. Tien was a graduate of 1396 and probably met Ke, though there is no evidence that he ever served the Ho family or was prominent during the Ming occupation. Yet he lived through the times we are discussing, and this may explain why in a comment he approved of Ly's appointment of special units to deal with the numerous robbers in the countryside.<sup>148</sup> Tien would have been very aware of the scale of the disorders worsening over the decades. But Lien could make no concession on behalf of the Ho family, and he ignored Ly's policy of settling landless farmers on land near the Cham border, the policy to which I owe my existence! He knew that Ly was concerned to improve the educational facilities in the southern provinces but chose to explain it as a ploy to prepare the way for his forthcoming usurpation.<sup>149</sup> These facilities would enable southerners to take the official examinations."

Vi was interested in what Kien told him about Tien, who may even have met his ancestor. "I wonder what more Tien had to say about those years," he enquired.

"Very little," replied Kien. "Tien felt that the information he put into his text was sufficient to tell the sad story. He did, however, comment on Ho Quy Ly's removal of the capital to Thanh-hoa, which he associated with the murder of Nghe-ton's son and other members of the Tran family. He wrote: 'Though every generation has its

treacherous subjects and wicked children, it is only the ruler's firmness that can stop them, understand the situation clearly, and prevent disaster later on.'

"Needless to say, Lien had nothing but contempt for the weak Nghe-ton, who was unable to stand up to his relative by marriage or even to foresee the consequences of his neglect. He could not keep secrets.<sup>150</sup> Nor would Lien take pity on the Tran loyalists who botched their attempts to kill Le Quy Ly. They faltered or were cowardly."<sup>151</sup>

Vi waited with increasing impatience for the historians' judgment on those who served the Ho and resisted the Ming invaders. Here his family's honor was most at stake. Kien was not looking forward to this part of their conversation. He did not want to offend his friend by revealing that the years when Ke was in office had earned a shabby reputation with the official historians, and he decided that the best approach was to continue to denigrate those historians, an approach that corresponded exactly with his own inclination. "You must understand that what Lien was always looking for was what he regarded as important examples to be emulated in the future. With this in mind, he examined what happened at the end of the Tran and in the Ho years for evidence of what he considered to be instances of persons who did their 'duty' on behalf of the country. That he should have found so few who had met his standards is no more than a comment on Lien's lack of sympathy for those who had the misfortune to be born in a troubled time. He admired the two generals who were defeated by overwhelming force at the battle of Sai-gia in 1413. They did their duty, and their glory would survive."<sup>152</sup> He also admired a widow who drowned herself when she heard that her husband had died in battle.<sup>153</sup> Lien commented that the Trung-quang emperor also did his duty by drowning himself rather than enduring the disgrace of captivity. In the same comment he noted

two other heroes in 1413 but also two others who betrayed their country.<sup>154</sup> In general, he believed that the enemy was too strong. The only proper possibility was exemplary death."

Vi was disappointed with this information. Kien went on to say that Lien could give only grudging approval to Le Canh Tuan's example. "We now know that Tuan, a patriotic poet, died in the North, yet Lien, while admiring his appeal to Bui Ba Ky, thought that he had done wrong by accepting a teaching post from the Ming. 'Did he not get caught when trying to hide?' was Lien's tart comment."

Kien had thoroughly discounted Lien's prejudices. "Can you please tell me something about Tien's judgment, the judgment of my ancestor's contemporary?" begged Vi.

Kien decided not to shirk the question. "I'll tell you, though you must believe me that I do not associate myself with Tien's opinions. Tien mentioned several persons who, by dying bravely when the Ho fell, might be judged as dying on behalf of their country. But they had previously been disloyal to the Tran family and therefore did not set an example in dutiful conduct. Others who died had served the Ho for their emoluments or were officials and not worth talking about. According to Tien, none of these set an example in doing their duty."<sup>155</sup>

Vi stared into the fire. Kien feared that he had dealt a blow to his friend's pride from which he would not easily recover. Both remained silent for some minutes, each of them not knowing what to say.

Kien nervously broke the silence. "You wanted me to tell you what was in the History, and I have done so. I made it clear to you that I had little in common with these

historians. They were writing and commenting on troubled times in the past, and we are today living in troubled times. They should have paid more attention to the sources of the troubles rather than judging the conduct of individuals, most of whom could have done nothing to change the course of events. Today how many of my former colleagues could have done better? In Ke's favour it can be said that he chose to serve someone who showed promise of strengthening the government and restoring law and order in the countryside. I wish that there was such a person today."

Vi, not completely happy, asked his friend whether he thought that Ke really worked alongside so many wicked or ineffective persons. "They would have been no better or worse than my own colleagues," replied Kien. "As for loyalty, they behaved better than we do today. How many of us stood by the Tuong-Duc emperor in his hour of need? Many were prepared to risk their lives on behalf of the Tran, and many more hung on to the Ho family when they could have saved their lives in hiding, as Tien apparently did. I am sure that Ke need not have been captured. Not all defected to the Ming. For me, this is the crucial evidence that there were momentous decisions being made. Even Nguyen Dan's son hesitated before rallying behind the Trung-quang emperor, and he paid for it with his life; perhaps he had also served the Ming. Lien had no sense of the agonizing decisions that had to be made, while Tien, who knew from personal experience, chose to forget."

Kien paused and then added that he was beginning to wonder whether, in the fifteenth century, human sensibilities had been blunted and, if so, why. Involuntarily, he thought of Loc and Loc's textbook conception of society and human conduct as though all contingencies were to be met by recourse to the wisdom of Northern scholars.

Vi, warming to the defence of his ancestor and with recent evidence of the risk local farmers had taken on behalf of Tran Cao, said with some force that the historians no doubt had nothing to say on behalf of the ordinary people who rose to arms against the Ming. His melancholy somewhat dispelled, Vi exclaimed, "If the odds against the Ho family had not been so heavy, who knows what the outcome would have been? Ke's choice might have been applauded and the family document continued until today. Who knows how many graduates would have honored our family!"

Kien, seeing Vi's equanimity restored, was encouraged to reflect further on the historians: "We must not forget," he explained, "that, in spite of their scholarly pretensions, they were officials, and they behaved no differently from generations of officials before them. They were always eager to pass judgment on their peers, with whom they endlessly competed for fame and promotion. It is no coincidence that Tien often noted in the Tran Annals that an official had a reputation in his day. Reputations depended no so much on solid achievement as on what others thought of one. This was the world that Tien and Lien knew best, and they brought it to their historical writing.

"Minh-ton is presented in the Annals as deploring his officials' quest for merit. I wonder what Tien made of this feature of Tran history. He would have resented the influence of the *dhyana*, with its total rejection of the notion of a 'self' and its strenuous training to achieve detachment. I wonder whether such ideas played a part in Tran Cao's movement, which began at the Quynh-lam Temple." Kien found that he was from time to time returning to the subject of Tran Cao, as did Vi.

Kien continued: "Passing judgment on others came more easily to Tien and Lien than anything else, and this is why their comments are full of criticism of Tran period

figures. Their scholarly knowledge served merely as a means of giving particular force to their criticisms and, indeed, as a prod to their fault-finding. I never told you how they attacked Tran Thai-ton for his disregard of the social relationships laid down in the Northern classics. Le Tung, to his credit, judged this ruler to be a suitable founder of a dynasty. Lien was especially irritating, for he was always parading his knowledge of the Song philosophers. Tien, at least, recorded Minh-ton's contempt for Northern ways. Lien tried to cut Minh-ton down to size by attributing his qualities to his father Anh-ton's teaching. For some reason or other, Lien professed an extraordinary admiration for Anh-ton."

"Our family history reveals that Khung and Quang both admired Minh-ton even though they found him incomprehensible," said Vi.

"Tien may have wanted to protect Minh-ton's reputation," continued Kien. "After all, Tien would have known some who had been under that ruler's spell or had known those who were. It is interesting that Le Tung, though he had no time for Minh-ton's Buddhist sympathies, was able to praise his system of government. In fact, Minh-ton was the only Tran ruler whom Le Tung associated with good government as distinct from admirable personal qualities.

"Why not judge that your ancestor Ke himself served a ruler who deserved loyalty," Kien exclaimed. "Ho Quy Ly and his son, in the short time available to them, tried to reform the administration as well as keep the Ming at bay. After all, they followed the diplomatic procedures that protected earlier rulers."

Vi was now more comfortable about Ke's place in his family's record. He happened to be the last graduate in the family and he died in honorable circumstances.

"My family always did what it could and need feel no shame," he said. "But where does our duty lie today? Neither you nor I have any influence, and who cares about the examples we may set?"

They again became silent. Suddenly Kien asked Vi whether he felt sorry that Tran Cao had failed. "Only the other day, you revealed that you thought that the local farmers had every reason to support leaders who promised them relief from their burdens."

"I still do," replied Vi, "and if another leader appeared who could reduce the size of the landed estates and the taxes and other obligations required of the farmers, there is no knowing what I might do."

The two friends parted for the night after Vi begged Kien to stay longer. Kien agreed. He felt that the times were such when friends should stand together.

\* \* \*

Early in the eleventh month of the same year, Kien was still on the farm when news arrived that Tran Cao had left his hiding place close to the northern border and had regrouped his followers at the Sung-nghiem Temple in Chi-linh district, not far from the Hai-duong farm. Both Vi and Kien were excited by the news. Their feelings towards Cao's movement had grown quite warm since their recent conversations, and the assembly point at this temple, a favourite site for Tran Nhan-ton, suggested that an awareness of a divine dispensation, almost of a Buddhist mission, was still alive among Cao's soldiers.

They eagerly awaited further news, always marvelling that Cao had survived his earlier defeat, and even dared to hope that the Le forces would be unable to resist this

popular rising. They were pleased to learn a few days later that Trinh Duy San's troops had failed to win a victory in Chi-linh and that the angry San, who had killed Tuong-Duc, was captured and taken to nearby Van-kiep and executed. Vi and Kien knew that Van-kiep had been the estate of the great Hung-dao Prince, and they wondered whether the choice of this site had a symbolic meaning connected with announcing the restoration of the Tran dynasty with all its military glory. Vi no longer feared that Ke's service to the Ho family would be held against his family, which had never actively supported the Le family.

Their hopes were, however, short-lived. Cao, emboldened by his success, again moved on Bo-de to threaten the capital, but he was defeated, and his followers scattered. Vi's farm lay in the territory through which the fleeing rebels passed. Vi and Kien wondered what to do, but a decision was taken out of their hands when remnants of Cao's followers appeared making their way northeastwards across Vi's farm. Vi gave them provisions and pointed out routes over the hills in the north to Lang-nguyen, where Cao was expected to hide. Fate was not on the side of the two friends, however, and troops under the command of Pham Kiem Binh, the Hai-duong "pacifier," found them in the company of the fugitives, arrested them, and brought them to Binh.

This was a disaster for Kien. As long ago as 1506 Binh had been demoted for a legal offence and posted to Hai-duong. He had again been sent there in 1511 in a subordinate capacity. Kien had unwisely mocked Binh and called him "the Hai-duong official," and Binh had retaliated by referring to Kien as "that Cham." Kien had forgotten that Binh had recently been sent to Hai-duong as a "pacifier" in charge of military affairs, and now he expected a stormy meeting when Vi and he faced Binh.

He managed to tell Vi what their prospects were when they met the vindictive Binh. Vi did not flinch. "Perhaps one day my adventure will be remembered with honor alongside Quang's flight to the Black River region and Ke's exile in Nanking."

What neither of them expected was the reception they received in Binh's camp. "At last we have found the Cham. For long you have been suspected of disaffection, and no one was surprised when you retired before your time. You have no one at Court who is prepared to say a good word for you, and you never explained your unconcealed interest in the Tran period. We had noted that from time to time you visited Hai-duong, and now we know why. You and the descendants of a Ho official were in touch with the rebel Cao's supporters and were captured when helping them to escape from my soldiers."

Kien, who knew his country's records, could think of no better retort than to spit at Binh and ask whether he hoped to gain promotion and fame for punishing innocent people. Vi admired his friend's courage and awaited his fate calmly.

Binh gave the order for them to be beheaded.

\* \* \*

The local fame of Vi and his friend lived on together with other legends arising out of Cao's rebellion. Even Mac Dang Dung's forthcoming rise to power did not overshadow the sacrifice made by these two heroes on behalf of Cao's soldiers. No one knew what happened to Cao. He was said to have transmitted his throne to his son Cung, shaved his head, and become a monk. Several villages in the north have shrines to commemorate where he died. Five years later the government, in which Mac Dang Dung was now playing an increasingly prominent role, made a massive effort to capture Cung.

They captured his wife and daughter and killed them but never Cung.

No conversation comes to an end even if different topics and different people in different times keep it going. The conversations recorded in this volume depend to a large extent on contributions by the Hai-duong family, once very successful, then falling into hard times, and finally losing its leader amidst disorders familiar to every generation of the family since the middle of the fourteenth century. We can be sure that Vi's descendants, custodians of family traditions now enriched by the memory of Vi himself, were still discussing public affairs in 1730, when, in a strange turn of events, the Trinh rulers in the north undertook extensive repairs to the Quynh-lam and Sung-nghiem Temples.

## Chapter Seven

### Authorial Critique

Vi, the Hai-duong farmer executed in 1516, was the latest descendant of a family which I introduced in the person of Khung, a successful official in the early fourteenth century. The family's identity and varying fortunes evolved over two centuries as a result of a series of authorial improvisations. When I began to compose the first conversation in chapter four and needed to assemble some characters, it occurred to me to provide Khung with a son, and I called him Quang. Khung had become useful to me because his detachment and common sense readily distinguished him from the other characters in chapter three, and it was reasonable, I thought, to attribute his son with similar traits. This paved the way for the later generations of Vong and Ke, and eventually of Vi. These improvisations had an unforeseen consequence: I came to regard Khung's descendants, similarly endowed but running into difficult circumstances, as a device for supplying my narrative with a means of elaborating changes occurring over the years. It was also comforting that an increasingly familiar family was at hand when differently sketched characters began to appear in ever changing situations. Perhaps I have unnecessarily crippled my imaginative faculty by relying too heavily on a constant narrational feature.

For reasons explained in chapter one, I wanted to create a narrative account of Tran history under cover of ongoing conversations among fictional characters, each of whose speech would often but not invariably echo materials stemming from Tran period sources. I have written primarily for historians and have hoped to pick up other readers

by the way. I owe my fellow historians an explanation and, I hope, a justification for what I have written. My own role has been, to use Bahktin's term, to "orchestrate" the conversations in a manner that enabled different points of view to be expressed and, if I am successful, to generate fresh thinking as a result of a dialogic ventilation of the issues of those times.<sup>156</sup> Everything has depended on the efficacy of my invented characters as a means of probing underlying issues to stimulate a discussion of the past after interrogating the records. They are devices for opening up the past. Without the characters, I would not have been able to confront this period in Vietnamese history with my present scale of inquiry. The characters are meditating on the past on my behalf in ways that had not occurred to me hitherto. On the other hand, I am well aware that they need to become much more developed personalities. I am, of course, responsible for creating narrational situations that provide for an intensity of dialogic exchange. I began to have confidence in this approach when, in chapter three, I realized that I could people the stage with characters who voiced a diversity of views on two important matters: how did Vietnam survive the Mongol invasions and what were reasonable expectations of the rulers' leadership?

Thus, I found myself, in chapter three, steering an often animated debate among the following characters: a crotchety veteran of the Mongol wars who retained vivid memories of certain episodes, a historian with an excessive opinion of the importance of his calling, a practitioner of the *dhyana*, an official with pretensions as a poet and as a confidant of the ruler, two of the war veteran's "familiar," and Khung, a young but successful official who quietly monitors and evaluates the developing conversation. Khung's hold over me grew as the chapter got under way.

Khung did not, however, dominate the conversation. There were six others in the scene, and they helped me because they served as Khung's sparring partners, as it were, who defined each other more sharply and gradually became distinct figures.<sup>157</sup>

I can now propose one obvious but useful result of my novelistic approach, which is to remind us that, no matter what we pretend, the past is no more than what was brought to pass by those with different points of view. No document can give a complete and final account. My characters therefore perform a service by demonstrating this fact when they constantly and often heatedly invoke contradictory materials familiar to them and preserved in sources available to me. No single source is authoritative and therefore infallible. One can picture a contemporary classroom continuing the conversations recorded in this and other chapters.

My characters were, to an important extent, inspired by materials, often fragments, in the sources, which they voiced and with which they would confront each other. For example, a Buddhist poet could explain the victory over the Mongols in terms of geographical advantages, a point of view that did not go down well with the war veteran. There were quite a few impressions of what constituted a good ruler, a circumstance that troubled Khung.

The process of contriving confrontation, the essence of the dialogue, is difficult to describe convincingly. I expect to be accused of bricolage. Yet fragments in the sources frequently came to mind on the spur of the moment and under pressure of improvising conversational responses. Thus, an idea would emerge from a source, a character would think aloud about it, and I would jot something down. Then something in another source would suddenly associate itself with what had just been jotted down. I found that I was

constantly reshuffling items of recalled information and, without deliberately planning to do so, stumbling on new connexions which pointed to further passages in the sources and created further conversational responses. This is why Bakhtin's notion that conversation is open-ended is helpful.<sup>158</sup>

What I would write in front of the screen would inevitably be influenced by what I claimed to know of the sources, but I would not necessarily transfer whole passages to my text or even provide a precis. As I got under way, I would insinuate into the narrative what I supposed could have been said. In the later conversations, sheer invention took over, and this, I imagine, was a result of a blending of knowledge of the sources and the increasing influence the characters had come to exert on me as independent beings.

There is no room for flagging conversation when issues are urgent, and so I would quickly adapt the fragments in order to attribute them to a particular character according to the way he was evolving. I was continually juxtaposing items of source material in order to create new relationships among them. The relationships would be presented as if they were created by the characters.

I would scribble a few pages on paper but no more because I could never know what the sequel would be, and additional possibilities for conversational exchanges would present themselves only when I began to transfer the scribble to the computer screen. Typing seemed to have the effect of enabling me to listen to what I was writing and almost to see the characters. Indeed, according to Bakhtin, the author can be caught unawares by his characters' responses.<sup>159</sup>

In these ways, I kept the dialogue moving. A scribbled page could grow rapidly and unexpectedly when it got on to the screen. Characters came to life when I was

discovering them on the screen, and I became more confident in handling them. To use David Lodge's expression, when I typed, I "circulated" among the participants in the dialogue.<sup>160</sup>

It should be clear by now that only a minimum of planning went into my narrative. I never laid out in advance the chapter headings and contents. The next heading would suggest itself only when I was far advanced in writing the chapter that preceded it.

I have said that I became encouraged when I realized that the situations in chapter three justified groups of distinct characters even though the occasions for the two conversations were scarcely dramatic. I considered myself fortunate to be able to use the Mongol envoys' praise of Minh-ton's "ethereal appearance" in 1314 and Minh-ton's discreet handling in 1317 of the scandal of the greedy princess as pretexts for launching a spirited discussion of reasons why Vietnam survived the Mongol wars. This also enabled me to draw attention to Buddhist behavior in the Tran Court and to raise the question of how the youthful Minh-ton would shape up as a ruler.

The plurality of voices in chapter three made me more confident that I could manage dialogue. The conversations seemed to generate a momentum or direction of their own. In the first of the three conversations in chapter four, a chapter that spans the second half of the fourteenth century and the beginning of the fifteenth, I found that I needed fewer characters. Quang, Khung's son, is one of only four characters. Khung's circle comprised seven. The second conversation on the farm needed three characters. The prison scene in 1412 also needed only three. How should I explain this shrinkage of voices?

I do not think that I was losing my nerve in managing dialogue. A more likely reason is a narrowing of my attention in response, I hope, to the more sharply focussed concerns in the second half of the fourteenth century as a result of deteriorating conditions in the countryside. Minh-ton's (1314-1357) responsibility for this situation is argued by the four characters in the 1369 dialogue when a usurper is controlling the capital and they are taking refuge up the Black River. At the same time, my awareness of Minh-ton's inscrutability in the eyes of his contemporaries grew when I faced the computer screen and found myself agreeing with my characters Quang (a trustworthy if independent-minded official), Hoa (a loyal troubleshooter in the provinces), and Loat (a pampered courtier) that Minh-ton's personality was too complex to be understood by even his closest followers, though this did not mean that they did not admire him.

The second and third conversations in chapter four needed few characters. Here I was dealing with agonising personal issues as a result of the collapse of the Tran family and of the kingdom as well. The question that emerged quite starkly was where one's duty lay. Quang's son, Vong, knew that Le Quy Ly was planning to overthrow the Tran family and decided to lie low, while his son, Ke, persuaded himself to serve the usurping family, a decision which was to lead to his imprisonment and death in Nanking. The hounded Coi's dramatic appearance on Vong's farm created panic for Vong and Ke and brought home to me how cruel life in Vietnam must have been at that time. My experiment in dialogic narrative has made me much more sensitive to the seamy side of life in the years for which we tend to take records of cruel behaviour for granted.

In the interest of "constructed realism,"<sup>161</sup> I like to think of bringing in an additional character to provide a peasant's voice as well as an occasion for more action.

Perhaps a peasant was lurking near the Black River hideout during the first conversation in chapter four, was apprehended by Hoa and interrogated, and the result would be that he would protest and pour out the problems in the countryside when he described his own sufferings. Here would be a welcome and maybe dramatic diversion from the often self-pitying preoccupations of the elite. The peasant would be a fashionable "subaltern." In order to craft him, I would adapt images from Nguyen Phi Khanh's poems of the later fourteenth century and perhaps snatches from Nguyen Du's *Vaste Recueil* of the sixteenth century<sup>162</sup> and some passages in the Annals that describe episodes involving peasants. An advantage of not being tied down by an inflexible plot is that one can innovate whenever one wishes to do so.

At this stage of the project my problem was how to end it, though, as a result of Bakhtin's influence, I take the view that there can be no end to a conversation.<sup>163</sup> I had originally expected, and without great enthusiasm, that I would end with a monologic treatment of Tien and Lien, the fifteenth century compiler and editor of the Tran Annals respectively. I had written about them in other publications, and I preferred to postpone thinking how best to rehash my ideas. All I needed was a device for some final comments on the Tran period. But, by the time that Ke was tragically imprisoned in Nanking in 1412, a different possibility occurred to me, and this was to enlarge the monologic and final chapter by presenting Nguyen Trai's "victory" poems (1428-1432).<sup>164</sup> The situation had improved fairly quickly, though too late for poor Ke.

I now made some quick decisions. I realized that it would be clumsy of me if I were suddenly to revert to three monologues after two substantial chapters of dialogue, and I gladly abandoned the proposal to treat Tien and Lien in a monologic fashion.

Instead, I decided to let them become the topic of another conversation among two more invented characters. Tien and Lien would be depicted as trendy neo-Confucianist scholars, whose lofty status as textbook authorities of Tran history would dissolve during the altercation I had in mind. I planned to lift sententious passages from Confucius and Mencius and assign them to one of these new characters, Loc, an official whom I intended to represent Tien and Lien. Loc slavishly admired Tien and Lien and was a supine product of the neo-Confucian revolution under the auspices of the emperor Le Thanh-ton (1460-1497). Loc might flourish passages from the Confucian Classics just as today the terms *jouissance* or "metanarrative" can be artlessly uttered.

I invented Kien to spar with Loc. Kien, an official who may have had Cham ancestors, was certainly able to distance himself from most of his trendy and uncongenial peers. Above all, he had access to, and absorbed the saliency of, a family "unofficial history" in the possession of his friend Vi, the third new character, a descendant of Khung, Quang, Vong, and Ke. This "history" is a fictitious specimen of a genuine *genre* of Vietnamese writing. Vong, a colorless character, had suspected that the days of his family's fame were over and had decided to bring together such records as he could before it was too late.

I had furnished myself with three characters who lived early in the sixteenth century, one of whom was party to fourteenth century experiences through the medium of Vi's family record. During the altercation with Loc, I tested Kien's role as a spokesman for Tran traditions and was satisfied that he had come to life on the computer screen. To pull off this episode, however, I should have to familiarise myself with fifteenth century sources and historiography, something I had so far avoided.

In chapter six, I was then able to organise two conversations that took place when the Le family, succeeding the Tran, was showing signs of crumbling. I confronted the historians Tien and Lien, represented by Loc, with echoes of the conversations in chapters three and four, represented by Kien's knowledge of Vi's family history, and brought the novel to a tragic close without preempting the possibility of continued conversation in the future.

But I still wished to present Trai's "victory" poems. I had already studied poems he wrote during the Ming occupation of his country and was curious about the contrast. More important, I wished to discover whether his later poems, studied intertextually, could be read as a "monologic" resumption of fourteenth century themes. I soon found that this was so and was then able to propose some linguistic continuities over the decades. Matters anxiously discussed by my characters in chapter four could become part of much happier conversations in the years after the Ming occupation. I hoped that chapter five, devoted to Nguyen Trai, would not cause an uncomfortable break in my narrative.

I am, however, aware of a crafting problem. In chapter six Kien and Vi would know that the promise heralded in Trai's poems did not last forever. A century later, things were as bad as ever. I may, however, be relying too much on the reader's imagination. Should I have contrived in chapter six to refer to Trai's poems? [I am now thinking of publishing Trai's poems elsewhere. I could then refer to Trai's later poems during the "altercation" or in the final Hai-duong scene. In both situations, Kien would express the disappointing sequel.]<sup>165</sup>

It remained for me to conclude the project, and I decided that Tran Cao's

"Buddhist" rebellion in 1516 would suit my purpose. The revolt, led by one who claimed to be descended from Tran Thai-ton of the thirteenth century, was a resurgence of discontents in the countryside that had plagued later Tran times. I arranged for Kien to retire not long before the revolt began and to be on Vi's farm when the government's brutal soldiers were mopping up rebels in the neighborhood of the farm. Kien and Vi were captured and slain when they were seen to be succouring the stragglers.

The volume was written on more or less these lines, and a remark by Hans Hofmann, the twentieth century artist in New York, finds favor in my eyes: "How I write has been neither accidental nor planned."<sup>166</sup>

Now, a few general comments on my recent experience. When I came to the end of chapter six, I had the sensation of having lived for a long time since I first came to know Khung, Long, and the others by the shores of the West Lake in 1314 and since I tried to keep up with their meditations on the Mongol wars and also had my first encounter with Minh-ton as more than a subject for historical research. During my conventional activities as a historian, I cannot remember a similar sensation of lingering when accompanying the object of my research through time and even aging with it, no matter how hard I tried to internalise the experiences the research involved. The question arises how I can better communicate my sense of a long passage of time. Would Vong or Ke reject Khung's career as being in a distant past? Would Ke on his deathbed be inclined to ruminate about Khung's successful career not long after the Mongol wars more than a century before?

I have lived through two centuries and quite slowly. Gradually, and as a growing impression rather than by careful analysis, it dawned on me that I was dealing with a

country at a time when underlying elements in the political and social situation barely changed in spite of personal changes in Khung's family's fortunes and a series of apparent fresh starts. These apparent fresh starts had led to new expectations and disappointments for each generation of Khung's family and no doubt for many others. One imagines an alertness at all levels of society to detect signs of the shape of things to come, and a successful novel would convey realistic instances such as omens, floods, droughts, princely excesses, and disquieting activities on the other side of the northern border.<sup>167</sup>

There were only two high points, euphoria after the Mongol wars and apparent stability during the second half of the fifteenth century and especially in Le Thanh-ton's reign. Yet both periods were followed by grave domestic troubles. One does not have to write a novel to become aware of this concertina quality, but writing one brought it home to me more dramatically than ever before.

I realize that my understanding of the unchanging nature of Vietnamese history in the period covered by the novel may discourage those readers who are anxious for unexpected developments.<sup>168</sup> On the other hand, novel-writing seems to bring me closer to my subject, and I may therefore be able to impart the immediacy of my characters' experiences. The only other way I have previously felt close to those I studied was through reading their poetry and sensing an intimacy that the processing of texts can entail. Curiously, I was not aware of such an intimacy when I read Nguyen Trai's "victory" poems in preparation for chapter five, though I had done so in full measure when I studied the poems he wrote during the Ming occupation.<sup>169</sup> Perhaps I was now too concerned with making a case for his participation in Tran period linguistic usage.

This would be a "historical" inquiry rather than a "literary" inquiry.

I felt much more comfortable when, in chapter four, I studied Le Canh Tuan's poems written on his journey towards a Ming prison. I began studying them with no idea what they had to say or if I would want to introduce them into the dialogue and, if so, how. In the event, fumbling for a device to bring these poems into the prison narrative became a minor matter in comparison with what turned out to be a distressing conversation among the conscience-stricken Ke and his fellow captives Phiem and Nhan. The three of them managed to read Tuan's poems structure-wise as closely as I believe educated Vietnamese were capable of doing. They did so by taking various poetic features into account and especially the recurrence of certain sentiments such as the misery of the journey north and a sense of sheer helplessness. Phiem was unable to sleep one night as a result of reading these poems and was haunted by a particular feature: the poet's rendering of the bitterness of his lengthy travel into prison even more unbearable by associating it with the unending movement of time, as though the passing of time relentlessly intensified the awful knowledge that he was on a journey of no return.

Bringing Le Canh Tuan's poems into my narrative has made me wonder whether one should try to recover the sensitivities of those whom a poet expected to read his or her poems with the most empathy. Be that as it may, I believe that I got most from Tuan's poems because I read them in the company of the unhappy prisoners.<sup>170</sup>

I have tried to record some experiences when working on this novel. I came to realize that I was dealing with a largely immobile period of time, and, belatedly, I began to ask myself what should be the authorial mood that pervaded the novel. This question, a fatuous one, would not have arisen if I had consulted Bakhtin on the subject of tropes.

He discards tropes as a feature of novelistic writing. Tropes belong to poetry, where "the poet can speak alone."<sup>171</sup> The novelist's language is different because it is "double-voiced." Characters in genuine novels, by Bakhtin's standards, cannot help incorporating others' discourse for their own purpose, and dominant tropes are therefore out of the question. Trai, for example, is bound to incorporate fourteenth century discourse.<sup>172</sup>

### What next?

I am well aware that I have written only the first draft of a book that will need at least two further drafts. I also know that the "dialogue" chapters 3, 4, and 6 will need extensive revision. Will this mean that I shall have to sacrifice whatever spontaneity the first draft has, no matter its shortcomings?

Bakhtin is again helpful. When I revise the conversations, I shall be supplying additional instances of what Bakhtin calls the "real present of the creative process."<sup>173</sup> According to him, when reading a polyphonic work, as mine aspires to be, one senses dialogue as it actually unfolds, with outcomes unknown.<sup>174</sup> "Creativity" from the author's point of view is always a response to problems [in writing] posed in particular circumstances at a particular time.<sup>175</sup> He is referring to what, in my humdrum language, I call "improvisations," occurring at particular moments in the narrative but without upsetting what I have so far written, for the reason that I do not have a neatly organized plot. Again, according to Bakhtin, "the author cannot decide in advance what will happen to his characters."<sup>176</sup>

Thus, nothing more can happen when I revise dialogue than additional and always inconclusive conversation<sup>177</sup> and possibly an enhanced element of surprise.<sup>178</sup> Moreover,

it is unlikely that my characters will change their personalities when I revise. As Bakhtin puts it,<sup>179</sup> and as my present experience confirms, the characters, under stress of dialogue, have already exhibited their obsessions; they are bound to return again and again and with more determination and perhaps acrimony to their entrenched ideas, at least when major issues are being thrashed out. And even if I wish radically to revise passages in the conversations, I need not run into difficulties. In Bakhtin's words, "The polyphonic novel is not made up of elements united in a system but of voices full of event potential."<sup>180</sup> By "event potential" (*sobytiina*), as the authors of *Prosaics* explain, he "has in mind a conception of truth that allows every moment of existence to be rich in potential."<sup>181</sup> The present is open at each moment, and this permits me to do what I like with my earlier draft because the only moment that matters is the one when, for some reason or other, my sense of dialogue requires further improvisation. Nothing needs to be finalized.<sup>182</sup>

I believe that revising the dialogue will not pose much difficulty, though this does not mean that the quality of the conversations does not need to be improved. All kinds of criticisms can be made concerning the characters. Do they reflect the idiom of their time? Are their points of view credible? Are they plausible types in Tran and early Le times? Is their conversation consistent with the unwritten assumptions of their time? This is by no means the limit of potential revision that I foresee. Other aspects also require revision. I have already mentioned several, for example the need to hear peasant voices. In two respects, much work lies ahead. I need to enliven the narrative with more action and with more local colour. At the moment, a reader could be forgiven for thinking that he or she was attending seminars on hot summer afternoons. These

improvements are all the more necessary in order to compensate for the novel's lack of contemporary relevance as well for as its somewhat static quality.<sup>183</sup> More action and more local color require the introduction of women. At present they are astonishingly absent. They need to be seen and heard. They are unlikely to play a role in public life unless in the affairs of the ruling family;<sup>184</sup> and the novel provides three instances of such women. But it should be possible to bring them into the farm scenes as grandmothers, wives, or daughters even if I shall have to fill gaps in my sources. Vong and Vi are housebound characters, and women would share their company. Contriving their conversation will be a challenge.

One possibility is that I can attribute to Khung and Quang credible and lively experiences that they are prompted to relate. I do not, however, want to provide them with biographical sketches. Their personalities must be reflected in their dialogue. Vong may mention to his son, Ke, a distressing episode during a Cham invasion. Other possibilities may occur to me.

I can think of no ready means of introducing more action. The conversations in chapters four and six take place in tense situations and are animated and even tragic. Danger is never far away. I have also exploited the Tran period propensity for acrimonious peer judgments. Nevertheless, narrative depending on limited points of view, as this novel does, tends to be uneventful. A "limited point of view" approach encourages rhetorical questions, and characters tend to meditate. Normally, action in this novel happens in the memory, and this means that I have had to provide substantial digressions as a device for reliving adventures. Dialogue stimulates memory, but perhaps I should unburden the conversations by assigning memories more often to passages of

indirect speech. This could enliven the dialogue and give me more opportunities for contriving action, perhaps even inventing it.<sup>185</sup>

I need to undertake a great deal of trouble in providing local color. Many facets of Vietnamese material life in this period must be registered in my narrative: e.g. climate, scenery, buildings, transport, clothing, diet, etc. The norms of inter-personal comportment or behavior must be observed. Status and age distinctions are important. All these details are needed to make the book authentic and interesting. After all, it professes to be about a distant land at a distant time. Nothing tests one's knowledge of another culture and another time more than one's ability to provide local color. A useful term paper could be in the form of a short story set in the culture one is studying. This would be an exacting test of one's knowledge.

Lukacs describes the scale of the challenge as follows:

The historical novel therefore has to demonstrate by artistic means that historical circumstances and characters existed in precisely such and such a way. What in Scott has been called very superficially "authenticity of local color" is in actual fact this artistic demonstration of historical reality. It is the portrayal of the broad living basis of historical events in their intricacy and complexity, in their manifold interaction with acting individuals.<sup>186</sup>

Perhaps I have made some progress in providing local color by highlighting obstinate traits such as seeking merit. I have not concealed the ambiguous relationship between Vietnam and China that Vietnamese knew all too well. They emulated as well as feared China. But I doubt whether I have so far successfully handled the tension caused by an outlook that, at one and the same time, was shaped by an inherited

conviction that experience showed things always turning out well in the end and by a suspicion, growing in the decades I have studied, that this was no longer so. The tension was aggravated by the Vietnamese reluctance to look far back in time to sustain their confidence in past experience or forward in time to cope with their problems by far-sighted planning.

Another regret is that so far I have thrown no light on the troubling question why apparently well-meaning officials in the fourteenth century such as Quang and Hoa did not attribute the deteriorating situation in the countryside to any more serious factor than the subversive influence of Buddhist monks. They were indifferent to the expansion of the Tran estates and the estates of the senior officials such as Khung and Quang. Such was the extent of their loyalty to the Tran family. Maybe Ke, who has been an unimpressive figure, should assume more heroic dimensions. After all, he defied his father and chose to serve the “usurping” and reforming Ho family.

And why does Ke not conform to the skeptical outlook of his ancestor? Perhaps he did not feel so securely a part of public life? In fact, he may have been even more skeptically minded than Khung and Quang, who could afford to be critical of the times without having to make grave personal decisions. Vong, on the other hand, was not emotionally equipped to adjust himself to the rapid decline in public life from 1370 onward. For Vi, of course, public life was a distant phenomenon.

Plenty of other matters need to be attended to before the novel becomes presentable. I shall mention one of them, which is the question of the function of chapter two. This chapter is in no sense “novelistic.” I explained in chapter one that chapter two would consist of three monologues, each of which should, as Bakhtin suggests, be studied

as a structure and searched for a plot. Chapter five, Nguyen Trai's poems, constitutes another monologue, but I have justified its contribution to the whole on the ground that the poems can be read as reflecting the preoccupations evident in the "conversational" chapters. But what can be said on behalf of chapter two?

One possibility, I suggested in chapter one, was that the three solitary voices in chapter two, two Chinese and one Vietnamese, provided the subsequent novelistic chapters with a detailed and vivid background sketch of Tran times. They would serve as the novel's Prologue. When Khung appeared on the scene in chapter three, I therefore decided that he should utter casual commonsensical remarks that echoed aspects of the background mentioned in chapter two. Quang could do likewise. Their remarks would be in keeping with their matter-of-fact and detached personalities. A further possibility now occurs to me. The Chinese voices in chapter two, opinionated and often harsh, would prevent the reader from forgetting that there was always an irritable and sometimes threatening presence off stage. The Chinese voices would also introduce the reader to the Vietnamese elite's familiarity with Chinese writing.

I hope that this explanation will justify inclusion of the cantankerous Mongol envoy, Ch'en Fu, and the smug contents of the *An-nan chih-yuan*. The role of the third monologue in chapter two, a Vietnamese compilation of so-called "folk tales," is less easy to justify beyond saying that they are so consistently structured and didactic in intent that I am convinced that their publication early in the fourteenth century was not fortuitous. The honors paid by the Tran rulers to the tutelary spirits for their services in the Mongol wars was an obvious reason for compilation.

Yet the supernatural world of the "folk tales" did not impinge on the

conversations or the sources that helped inspire the conversations. I ask myself whether the tales reflect a style of public life that owed much to earlier experiences and tradition. Do they help account for some prominent features in my fourteenth century dialogue such as the equating of good government with strong government, the tested and personal relationships between rulers and subordinates, the importance of earning merit, and an abundance of riverine communications.

At least I hope that chapter two will illustrate how there are different ways of looking at Vietnam and prepare the ground for the notion, developed in the subsequent chapters, that a suitable discussion of Vietnamese history should be polyphonic. I see no compelling reason why this chapter should not be read as the Prologue.

Chapter seven, in a very provisional way, reflects on what I am trying to accomplish. Perhaps I may be slowly learning how to write a novel under the influence of Bakhtin and be prepared to believe that characters can come to life and speak in unforeseen ways when they confront each other. But, I now, at last, have to ask myself: have I sufficiently inquired whether Bakhtin is a suitable guide when one writes a historical novel or, indeed, whether mine is such a novel?

Other well-qualified guides are available. Herbert Butterfield was still at the beginning of his Cambridge career when he was awarded a University Prize for an elegant plea on behalf of the historical novel.<sup>187</sup> In addition to raising the novelist's sights by appealing to "the surge of historical movement, the pulse of life underneath all lives"<sup>188</sup> and proclaiming the challenge of "capturing the fleeting moment,"<sup>189</sup> he gives matter-of fact advice:

The novel does not replace the history-book. It is a way of dealing with the past

that brings home to readers the fact there is such a thing as a world of the past to tell tales about ..... The power of the novel is that it can give to people the feeling for history, the consciousness that this world is an old place that can tell many stories of lost years, the sense that the present age is the last of a trail of centuries. It makes history a kind of extension of our personal experience, and not merely an addition to the sum of our knowledge.<sup>190</sup>

My novel is surely a tale about those who lived in a distant land at a distant time and argued passionately about the troubles of their times and about false hopes that always seemed to peter out. Perhaps their uncertainties about the future, the judgments they made on those who controlled their destinies, and, above all, the hard personal decisions that they had to make are all matters that ring bells in our own experiences.

Georg Lukacs is another and greatly respected guide, who promoted Sir Walter Scott to the head of the line of historical novelists for his ability to let "his important figures grow out of the age" and because he "never explains the age from the position of its great representatives ...."<sup>191</sup> Lukacs goes on to say that "the being of the age can only appear as a broad and many-sided picture if the everyday life of the people, the joys and sorrows, crises and confusions of average human beings are portrayed."<sup>192</sup> The heroic persons in my novel, the Hung-dao Prince of the Mongol wars and the inscrutable Minhton, are usually discussed by others rather than speak for themselves. I believe that my portrait of the age is reasonably "many-sided" and has more than its share of sorrows, crises, and confusions.

Lukacs gives further advice particularly pertinent for my purpose:

The inclusion of the dramatic element in the novel, the concentration of events,

the greater significance of dialogue, i.e. the direct coming-to-grips of colliding opposites in conversation, these are intimately linked with the attempt to portray historical reality as it actually was, so that it could be both humanly possible and yet be re-liveable by the reader of a later age. It is a question of the concentration of characterization. Only bunglers have maintained (and continue to do so) that the historical characterization of people and events means the accumulation of single, historically characteristic traits.<sup>193</sup>

Here is vigorous defence of dialogue.

In chapter one I invoked the words of Umberto Eco, and it is enough to repeat something I quoted: "Everything the fictitious characters say .... ought to have been said in that period."<sup>194</sup> I recall these words because they may help to bridge Bakhtinian prosaics and the historical novel.<sup>195</sup> According to my understanding of Bakhtin, the past is polyphonic; it abounds in different points of view as does society at all times.

Therefore nothing my characters say is likely to have been totally improbable within the framework of a discourse shaped by the sources. Perhaps the criticism should be that I have kept too cautiously within that framework. I should be more, not less, inventive.

Finally, I have to ask myself why I wish to write a historical novel. Am I merely using a historical background to tell a "modern" story? Or am I hoping to throw additional light on a particular history by trying to bring it back to life? I prefer to think that, by means of these conversations, I can make a case for thinking about Tran times from different points of view that are influenced by but not explicitly expressed in the sources. Furthermore, I believe that Bahktin's criteria for successful novel writing provides an opportunity for writing about the past from different points of view and not

necessarily, I hope, only mine. My particular hope is that in fiction more attention can be given to some of the less obvious riddles of the past, such as Minh-ton's image and effectiveness, the insensitivity of educated officials to the problems of the peasants, and the flaws in Le Thanh-ton's policies. Bakhtin's criteria happens to appeal to one who believes that history is open-ended and that the final word cannot be spoken whether at the time in question or now.

I realize that my novel is at present threadbare. A habitual novel-reader, and especially one who is not a Dostoevsky buff and has never heard of Bakhtin, will be quick to point out why his or her expectations are disappointed.

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<sup>1</sup> The poems are available in Tho Van Ly Tran, vols. 2 & 3 (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi, 1978 [vol. 3] & 1988 (vol. 2]).

<sup>2</sup> I have listed some salient textual features occurring to me in O. W. Wolters, Two Essays on Dai Viet in the Fourteenth Century, The Lac-Viet Series, No. 9 (New Haven: Yale University Council on Southeast Asia Studies, 1988), p. viii.

<sup>3</sup> O. W. Wolters, "A stranger in his own land: Nguyen Trai's Sino-Vietnamese poems, written during the Ming occupation," The Vietnam Forum 8 (1986):60-90. See Appendix 10.

<sup>4</sup> Dai Viet Su Ky Toan Thu, collated by Ch'en Ching-ho, in 3 vols. (Tokyo: Daigaku Toyo Bunka Kenkyujo, 1984-86), vol. 1. Phan Phu tien and Ngo Si Lien are the compiler and editor respectively of the Tran Annals. On Phan Phu Tien's work, see O. W. Wolters, "Possibilities for a Reading of the 1293-1357 Period in the Vietnamese Annals," in David G. Marr & A. C. Milner (eds.), Southeast Asia in the 9<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> centuries (Singapore: Institute of southeast Asian Studies, 1986), pp. 369-410; reprinted in The Vietnam Forum 11 (1988):92-149. See Appendix 12.

<sup>5</sup> Jurgen Habermas has drawn attention to the way in which research constitutes its object, its experimentation, and its discourse. These procedures, according to him, centre on the argumentation or concern of the researcher and not on a pretended "objectivity" in the positivist sense, which is illusory; Jurgen Habermas, "Connaissance et Interet," Collection TEL (Paris: Gallimard, 1976 [1968, postface 1973]):105-123 & 245-359. I am grateful to Nicole Biros for bringing this matter to my notice.

<sup>6</sup> For enthusiastic recognition of what can be achieved by narrative history, see heather Sutherland's review of Barbara Watson Andaya's "To Live as Brothers: Southeast Sumatra in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," Indonesia 58 (1994):103-108.

<sup>7</sup> O. W. Wolters, "Narrating the Fall of the Ly and the Rise of the Tran Dynasties," Asian Studies Association of Australia Review 10, 2 (November 1986):24-25. See Appendix 7.

<sup>8</sup> Lorraine M. Gesick, In the Land of Lady White Blood: Southern Thailand and the Meaning of History (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 1995), pp. 49-51.

<sup>9</sup> Historical novels written by historians, for example Demos, Spence, and Price.

<sup>10</sup> For example, Umberto Eco.

<sup>11</sup> M. H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms, sixth edition (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 1993), p. 167. Obviously, I have been influenced by Mikhail Bakhtin's understanding of a literary work as "a site for the dialogic interaction of multiple voices; see Abrams, Glossary, p. 231. For Bakhtin's extended definition of the novel, see M. M. Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays,

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edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 10<sup>th</sup> printing, 1996), pp. 262-263 in “Discourse in the the Novel”.

<sup>12</sup> Bakhtin, Dialogic Imagination, p. 335 on “sound”.

<sup>13</sup> Lodge uses the expression “circulates”; David Lodge, After Bakhtin: Essays on Fiction and Criticism (London: Routledge 1990), p. 64.

<sup>14</sup> Lodge, After Bakhtin, p. 62; Abrams, Glossary, p. 231. As Bakhtin puts it, “The plot itself is subordinated to the task of coordinating and exposing languages to each other.” Bakhtin, Dialogic Imagination, p. 365.

<sup>15</sup> Chen Fu, Chen gang zhong shi ji (Taipei: Su-ku quan-shu-pen ba-ji, no. 159).

<sup>16</sup> Ngan-Nan Tche Yuan [An-nan zhi-yuan], edited by L. Arousseau (Hanoi: Ecole Francaise d’Extreme-Orient, 1932).

<sup>17</sup> Ly Te Xuyen, Viet dien u linh tap (Ecole Francaise d’Extreme-Orient, A.47).

<sup>18</sup> See Wolters, “Possibilities,” Appendix 12.

<sup>19</sup> See O. W. Wolters, “What else may Ngo Si Lien mean? A matter of distinctions in the fifteenth century,” in Anthony Reid, ed., Sojourners and Settlers: Histories of Southeast Asia and the Chinese, in Honour of Jennifer Cushman (Sydney: Allen & Unwin for the Asian Studies Association of Australia, 1995), pp. 94-114. See Appendix 13.

<sup>20</sup> All the material in this chapter about Chen Fu and his writings is taken from Chen Fu [Ch’en Fu] (1240-1303), Chen gang zhong shi ji [Ch’en kang-chung shih chi], of which various editions are available.

<sup>21</sup> The headings comprise social behavior, government, the countryside, flora and fauna, and miscellaneous matters such as bridges, songs and banquets, betel usage, ornaments, and dwelling-places.

<sup>22</sup> As, for example, in Liu T’ieh-yun, The Travels of Lao Ts’an, translated by Harold Shadick (Ithaca: Cornell Paperbacks, 1966).

<sup>23</sup> In the words of the Li-chi, “Therefore the early kings instituted rites and music to regulate human conduct.” See Fung Yu-lan, A History of Chinese Philosophy, translated by Derk Bodde, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), vol. I, pp. 342-343.

<sup>24</sup> The distance from the Chinese border to the southernmost province at that time is less than four hundred miles, and the breadth of the Red River plain and adjacent foothills from east to west is only about two hundred miles at its greatest extent.

<sup>25</sup> In conversation, Professor Tran Quoc Vuong tells me that “the hydraulic network is dense. Thousands of rivers and streams intertwine and form a network that reaches 41,000 kilometers, averaging one kilometer of water current over one square kilometer of territory. Along the coast of present-day Vietnam there is a river mouth every twenty kilometers on average.” For a graphic account of the vulnerability of the dykes that “keep Hanoi from becoming a huge lake every rainy season,” see The Economist, March 11, 1995, p. 36.

<sup>26</sup> On Gao Pian [Kao P’ien], see K. W. Taylor, The Birth of Vietnam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 246ff.

<sup>27</sup> One of them was probably Dinh Cung Vien, with whom Chen Fu exchanged poems when he departed. The other was Dao Tu Ky, who was sent to China with Nhan-ton’s apologies for not coming in person; he was badly treated in China.

<sup>28</sup> I translate “slave” as “dependent” to conform with current opinion among Vietnamese historians that this is the term’s correct meaning. The text supports my translation.

<sup>29</sup> According to the Ly Annals, under the year 1096, a senior official, trained by a Yunnanese magician, tried to murder the fourth Ly ruler by assuming the shape of a tiger.

<sup>30</sup> On Ma Yuan, see Taylor, Birth, pp. 39-41.

<sup>31</sup> See Edward Schafer, The Vermillion Bird (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), p. 98.

<sup>32</sup> On Si Nhiep, see Taylor, Birth, p. 70ff.

<sup>33</sup> All the material in this chapter attributed to this text is based on Ngan-Nan Tche Yuan [An-nan zhi-yuan], edited by L. Arousseau, with an introduction by E. Gaspardone (Hanoi: Ecole Francaise d’Extreme-Orient, 1932).

<sup>34</sup> Emile Gaspardone, in his introduction to Ngan-Nan Tche Yuan, p. 40.

<sup>35</sup> See O. W. Wolters, “Historians and Emperors in vietnam and China: Comments arising out of Le Van huu’s History, presented to the Tran court in 1272,” in Anthony Reid and David Marr (eds.), Perceptions of the Past in Southeast Asia (Singapore: heinemann, 1979), pp. 69-89.

- <sup>36</sup> On a discussion of the differences between the A.47 and A.751 versions of this text, see O. W. Wolters, "Preface" in Two Essays on Dai-Viet in the Fourteenth Century, The Lac-Viet Series, no. 9 (New Haven: Council on Southeast Asia Studies, 1988), pp. vii-xxxvi.
- <sup>37</sup> This is #102 in Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 1, p. 504.
- <sup>38</sup> Viet dien u linh tap (A.47):13a.
- <sup>39</sup> This poem is preserved in Chen Fu's text.
- <sup>40</sup> This poem is preserved in Le Tac, An-Nam Chi-Luoc, Chen Ching-ho's edition (Hue: Vien Dai Hoc Hue, 1961), p. 160.
- <sup>41</sup> This is poem #152 in Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 2, pp. 412-413.
- <sup>42</sup> This is poem #161 in Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 2, p. 424.
- <sup>43</sup> This is poem #159 in Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 2, pp. 421-422.
- <sup>44</sup> See Appendix 2.
- <sup>45</sup> This is poem #194 in Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 2, pp. 474-475.
- <sup>46</sup> This is poem #197 in Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 2, pp. 478-480.
- <sup>47</sup> This is poem #226 in Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 2, pp. 577-579.
- <sup>48</sup> This episode is found in Le Tac, An Nan Chi Luoc, p. 46.
- <sup>49</sup> This is poem #164 in Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 2, p. 428.
- <sup>50</sup> This is poem #239 in Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 2, p. 605.
- <sup>51</sup> This is #157 in Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 2, p. 418.
- <sup>52</sup> See the 12<sup>th</sup> month of 1304 in Dai Viet su ky toan thu.
- <sup>53</sup> This is #139 in Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 2, pp. 387-388.
- <sup>54</sup> This is #149 in Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 2, pp. 406-407.
- <sup>55</sup> This is #228-229 in Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 2, p. 581.
- <sup>56</sup> This is in #107, Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 2, p. 107.
- <sup>57</sup> This is poem #89 in Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 2, p. 253.
- <sup>58</sup> See #90 in Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 2, p. 254.
- <sup>59</sup> See #89 in Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 2, p. 253.
- <sup>60</sup> See #207 in Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 2, p. 538ff.
- <sup>61</sup> See Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 2, p. 540.
- <sup>62</sup> See Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 2, p. 541.
- <sup>63</sup> See #236 in Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 2, p. 593.
- <sup>64</sup> This is poem #346 in Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 2, p. 825.
- <sup>65</sup> This is poem #353 in Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 2, p. 835.
- <sup>66</sup> This is poem #349 in Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 2, pp. 828-829.
- <sup>67</sup> This is poem #209 in Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 2, p. 553.
- <sup>68</sup> See my "Minh-ton's Poetry . . .," p. 63. I would now correct my translation of line two to read "outstanding countenance" rather than "placid countenance."
- <sup>69</sup> This is poem #94 in Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 3, p. 139.
- <sup>70</sup> This is poem #97 in Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 3, pp. 142-143.
- <sup>71</sup> This is #164 in Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 3, pp. 236-237.
- <sup>72</sup> This is #192 in Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 3, pp. 316-317.
- <sup>73</sup> This is #193 in Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 3, pp. 320-322.
- <sup>74</sup> This is poem #137 in Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 3, p. 197.
- <sup>75</sup> See John K. Whitmore, Vietnam, Ho Quy Ly, and the Ming (1371-1421) (New Haven: Yale Council on Southeast Asia Studies, Lac-Viet Series No. 2, 1985), p. 65.
- <sup>76</sup> The poems eventually did get back to Vietnam, probably in several copies if one takes into account the number of variant readings that have survived. See Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 3, p. 520ff.
- <sup>77</sup> This is poem #317 in Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 3, p. 524.
- <sup>78</sup> This is poem #322 in Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 3, p. 531.
- <sup>79</sup> Poem #320 in Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 3, p. 528.
- <sup>80</sup> Poem #318 in Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 3, p. 525.
- <sup>81</sup> In poem #320, Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 3, p. 528.
- <sup>82</sup> In poem #316, Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 3, p. 523.
- <sup>83</sup> In poem #315, Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 3, p. 522.
- <sup>84</sup> In poem #320, Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 3, p. 528.

- <sup>85</sup> In poem #321, Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 3, p. 530.
- <sup>86</sup> In poem #322, Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 3, p. 531.
- <sup>87</sup> In poem #317, Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 3, p. 524.
- <sup>88</sup> In poem #321, Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 3, p. 530.
- <sup>89</sup> In poem #321, Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 3, p. 530.
- <sup>90</sup> In poem #318, Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 3, p. 525.
- <sup>91</sup> In poem #324, Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 3, p. 533.
- <sup>92</sup> In poem #321, Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 3, p. 530.
- <sup>93</sup> In poem #321, Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 3, p. 530.
- <sup>94</sup> Poem #315, Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 3, p. 522.
- <sup>95</sup> Poem #316, Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 3, p. 523.
- <sup>96</sup> Poem #315, Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 3, p. 522.
- <sup>97</sup> Poem #318, Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 3, p. 525.
- <sup>98</sup> Poem #320, Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 3, p. 528.
- <sup>99</sup> Poem #321, Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 3, p. 530.
- <sup>100</sup> Poem #322, Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 3, p. 531.
- <sup>101</sup> Poem #323, Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 3, p. 533.
- <sup>102</sup> See Whitmore, pp. 63-64.
- <sup>103</sup> See Whitmore, pp. 70-74.
- <sup>104</sup> This poem can be found in Uy Ban Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi Viet nam, Vien Su Hoc, Nguyen Trai Toan Tap (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi, 1976), p. 289.
- <sup>105</sup> I prefer “whale” to “shark” as a figure for the North (China) because the whale is suitably huge and not without heroic associations.
- <sup>106</sup> A reference to the Zhou-li.
- <sup>107</sup> This poem can be found in Nguyen Trai Toan Tap, p. 290.
- <sup>108</sup> This poem can be found in Nguyen Trai Toan Tap, p. 291.
- <sup>109</sup> This poem can be found in Nguyen Trai Toan Tap, p. 293.
- <sup>110</sup> Dao Duy Anh suggests that this refers to when Le Loi was in hiding.
- <sup>111</sup> A reference to the founder of the Han Dynasty.
- <sup>112</sup> This poem can be found in Nguyen Trai Toan Tap, p. 294.
- <sup>113</sup> The language in these lines is similar to that found in Le Loi’s Cho-bo inscription, written to celebrate the successful campaign. See E. Gaspardone, “Annamites et Thai au XV Siecle,” Journal Asiatique CCXXXI (Juillet-Septembre 1939):412.
- <sup>114</sup> On Nguy-bac and Yen-nhien see Nguyen Trai Toan Tap, p. 672, #23, notes 3 & 4. These are references to Han and Tang dynasty episodes of chastising frontier barbarians as poetic allusions for glorifying the deeds of Le Loi.
- <sup>115</sup> This poem can be found in Nguyen Trai Toan Tap, p. 295.
- <sup>116</sup> This poem can be found in Nguyen Trai Toan Tap, p. 297.
- <sup>117</sup> This poem can be found in Nguyen Trai Toan Tap, p. 298.
- <sup>118</sup> This poem is #275 in Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 3, p. 453.
- <sup>119</sup> Mencius, book III, part 2, chapter 9, verses 7-8 & 11; see James Legge, The Chinese Classics, II:281 & 283.
- <sup>120</sup> E. Gaspardone, cited above, pp. 405-436.
- <sup>121</sup> Ibid., p. 430.
- <sup>122</sup> Ibid., p. 426.
- <sup>123</sup> Or such is the interpretation of Gaspardone, Ibid., p. 434.
- <sup>124</sup> See Huynh Sanh Thong (translator), The Heritage of Vietnamese Poetry (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), #104, page 41, and note on page 230.
- <sup>125</sup> Gaspardone, p. 343.
- <sup>126</sup> This is poem #141 in Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 3, p. 201.
- <sup>127</sup> This is poem #147 in Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 3, p. 208.
- <sup>128</sup> This is poem #273 in Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 3, p. 449.
- <sup>129</sup> This is poem #137 in Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 3, p. 196.
- <sup>130</sup> This is poem #274 in Tho Van Ly Tran, vol. 3, p. 451.

- <sup>131</sup> For example, see John K. Whitmore, "The Tao-Dan Group: Poetry, Cosmology, and the State in the Hong-duc Period (1470-1497), *Crossroads* 7, 2 (1992):55-70.
- <sup>132</sup> See John K. Whitmore, *Vietnam, Ho Quy Ly, and the Ming (1371-1421)* (New Haven: Yale Council on Southeast Asia Studies, The Lac-Viet Series, No. 2), p. 71.
- <sup>133</sup> See Ngo Si Lien's comment under the year 1234.
- <sup>134</sup> See Ngo Si Lien's comment under the year 1237.
- <sup>135</sup> See Ngo Si Lien's comment under the 1st month of 1258.
- <sup>136</sup> See Ngo Si Lien's comment under the 1st month of 1277.
- <sup>137</sup> See Ngo Si Lien's comment under the 2nd month of 1251.
- <sup>138</sup> See Ngo Si Lien's comment under the year 1261.
- <sup>139</sup> See Ngo Si Lien's comment under the 2nd month of 1258.
- <sup>140</sup> See Phan Phu Tien's comment under the year 1323.
- <sup>141</sup> See Appendix 12.
- <sup>142</sup> See Phan Phu Tien's comment under the year 1297.
- <sup>143</sup> See note 1 on page 761 of vol. 2, *Tho Van Ly Tran*.
- <sup>144</sup> See poem # 303 in *Tho Van Ly Tran*, vol. 2, p. 760.
- <sup>145</sup> See the 27<sup>th</sup> day of the 4<sup>th</sup> month under the year 1511.
- <sup>146</sup> See Appendix 11.
- <sup>147</sup> See Le Tung's "Viet Giam Thong Khao Tong Luan," which now exists as a prefatory summary of the *Dai Viet Su Ky Toan Thu*.
- <sup>148</sup> See Phan Phu Tien's comment under the year 1392.
- <sup>149</sup> See Ngo Si Lien's comment under the year 1397.
- <sup>150</sup> See Ngo Si Lien's comments under the years 1388, 1392, and 1394.
- <sup>151</sup> See Ngo Si Lien's comment under the year 1399.
- <sup>152</sup> See Ngo Si Lien's comment under the ninth month of 1413.
- <sup>153</sup> See Ngo Si Lien's comment under the 12<sup>th</sup> day of the 5<sup>th</sup> month of 1407.
- <sup>154</sup> See Ngo Si Lien's comment under the 11<sup>th</sup> month of 1413.
- <sup>155</sup> See Phan Phu Tien's comment under the year 1407.
- <sup>156</sup> As Mikhail Bakhtin puts it, "A polyphonic author engages in dialogue that can always potentially create something genuinely new." Or again, "By provoking and teasing the carrier of the idea, the author could induce that character to produce something new . . . . Readers learn what two Dostoevsky characters might have wound up saying in spite of themselves in different circumstances." Mikhail Bakhtin, *Creation of a Prosaics*, edited by Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), pp. 244 & 246.
- <sup>157</sup> Virginia Hooker notes how characters in Malay novels draw out and comment on each other's traits. Virginia Matheson Hooker, *Writing a New Society. Social Change through the Novel in Malay* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press & Allen and Unwin, 2000), pp. 204-205. I should be more adventurous in this respect.
- <sup>158</sup> I am attracted by what Stanley J. O'Connor tells me about Hans Hofmann's art: The surface of the canvas became an arena of tension, set in motion by the initial dab of paint." When I improvise conversations, I better understand what the greatest historical novelist of all, Sir Walter Scott, means when he refers to "the train of suggestions." Walter Scott, *Heart of Mid-Lothian* (London: Macmillan, 1930), p. 248. I also like the following statement: "Neither a live-and-let-live relativism nor a settle-it-once-and-for-all authoritarianism but a strenuous and open-ended dialogue should keep them talking to themselves and to one another, discovering their affinities, without resting in them, and clarifying their differences without resolving them." M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 6<sup>th</sup> edition (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1985), p. 232. Professor Abrams is discussing "dialogic criticism" and cites Don Bialostosky.
- <sup>159</sup> See Bakhtin, *Creation of a Prosaics*, pp. 257-258, on how an author can be genuinely caught unawares. The finished work should retain a sense of unexpectedness. Virginia Hooker, in a letter dated 28 June, 2000, suggests that the ease of deletion (and equally addition and amendment) provides unlimited options for the computer user. She thinks that the very possibility of being able to remove words actually emboldens one to experiment and be much more adventurous than is possible on paper. No one need witness earlier efforts and experiments and so one really feels the potential to explore. Nothing is irrevocable. "Is this true freedom?" she asks. Professor O'Connor tells me that there is something known as "old age art." An aging artist, Bernini, for example, could cast off all constraints and do what he wanted.

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<sup>160</sup> Is this connected with what Bakhtin means by “the real present of the creative process with their outcomes [the dialogues] unknown”? Bakhtin, Creation of a Prosaics, p. 250. “Creativity is always a response to problems that are posed in particular circumstances at a particular time”; *ibid.*, p. 414. “In the polyphonic work, we sense the dialogue as it actually unfolded, we sense the author addressing characters like people *actually present . . . and capable of answering him*”; *ibid.*, p. 246.

<sup>161</sup> This is Virginia Hooker’s term; Writing a New Society, p. 365. She uses it to refer to the inclusion of “real” people, places, and events. I thinking of the possibility of bringing the future emperor Nghe-ton, skulking and silent, into the episode that concerns the Black River refuge.

<sup>162</sup> Nguyen Du, Vaste recueil de legendes merveilleuses, translated by Nguyen Tran Huan (Paris: Gallimard, 1962).

<sup>163</sup> Page 249 of Professor Hooker’s book has a particular interest for me. Should I end with a “new day,” or with the final tragedy, or with some underlying continuities? *Salina* is an excellent text for would-be novelists. I owe a number of other debts to Professor Hooker. For example, the importance of networks of relationships (p. 231); the role of the characters in presenting grave issues (p. 98); the need for a Vietnamese equivalence of the Malay repertoire of proverbs and sayings (pp. 42, 46-47). The latter device would be in the form of allusions to passages in the “Confucian” classics, but not only intended to give advice but also flaunted to lend emphasis and especially tone to what Vietnamese had to say.

<sup>164</sup> Appendix 11.

<sup>165</sup> The essay on Trai’s poems is here published as Appendix 11.

<sup>166</sup> Cynthia Goodman, Hans Hofmann (New York: Abbeville Press, 1986), p. 57.

<sup>167</sup> See O. W. Wolters, History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives revised edition (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 1999), pp. 113-114, for “spotting” signs elsewhere in early Southeast Asia.

<sup>168</sup> A friend had encouraged me to suggest a resemblance between the passing of an era in early Vietnam and today, with Vietnamese and our own reflections on the future. I can no longer do this.

<sup>169</sup> See note 70 on page 224 in my History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives.

<sup>170</sup> To provide some local color, I tapped my expericnces when a prisoner in World War Two.

<sup>171</sup> Bakhtin, p. 320.

<sup>172</sup> Boubly-voiced speech is when a speaker borrows another’s discourse and uses it for his own purposes; David Lodge, After Bakhtin, Essays on Fiction and Criticism (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 59. The “voice” in my novel is very much doubly-voiced. Obviously my own voice has not been completely suppressed; there are a variety of sources each with its own voice; and the characters, as far as I am concerned, have developed their own voices.

<sup>173</sup> Bakhtin, p. 246.

<sup>174</sup> Bakhtin, pp. 247-258.

<sup>175</sup> Bakhtin, p. 414.

<sup>176</sup> Bakhtin, p. 247.

<sup>177</sup> Bakhtin, p. 250.

<sup>178</sup> On surprise, see Bakhtin, pp. 257-259.

<sup>179</sup> Bakhtin, p. 250.

<sup>180</sup> Bakhtin, p. 251.

<sup>181</sup> Bakhtin, p. 236.

<sup>182</sup> See Bakhtin, p. 237, on participants in dialogue as “voice-ideas.” The “idea” cannot be abstracted from the person voicing it. Dostoevsky “thought not in thoughts but in points of view, consciousnesses, voices.” The open-endedness of the present makes sense in a southeast Asian context if one takes the view, as I do, that the mindset there tends to live for the present moment. Bakhtin insists on how much the present holds out. The same approach also reinforces the wisdom of Professor Hooker’s remarks in her letter, cited in a previous note, about how the ease of deletion, addition, and amendment provide unlimited options.

<sup>183</sup> Gorg Lukacs gives a frightening instance of actionless writing when commenting on a book by Tieck: “The real action is formed by religious debates, bizarre forms of mystical belief, purely moral problems of behavior . . . religious conversions and so on. The fact that the rebellion is grounded in life, the problems affecting the life of the people themselves—these are as good as ignored . . .”; Goerg Lukacs, The Historical Novel (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), pp. 68-69.

<sup>184</sup> See my History, Culture, and Region, pp. 229-237.

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<sup>185</sup> Professor Hooker notes how memories inform decisions and shape attitudes towards the future; Writing a New Society, p. 341. My characters are not in the habit of thinking into the future unless in trouble, and then their instinct would be to look for scapegoats.

<sup>186</sup> Lukacs, Historical Novel, p. 43. Butterfield also gives advice: “Avoid a veneer of history and avoid the picturesque background.” Herbert Butterfield, The Historical Novel, An Essay (Cambridge university Press, 1924), p. 37.

<sup>187</sup> Herbert Butterfield, The Historical Novel.

<sup>188</sup> Butterfield, p. 83.

<sup>189</sup> Butterfield, p. 113.

<sup>190</sup> Butterfield, pp. 94-96.

<sup>191</sup> Lukacs, Historical Novel, p. 39.

<sup>192</sup> Lukacs, p. 39.

<sup>193</sup> Lukacs, p. 40.

<sup>194</sup> Umberto Eco, Reflections on the Name of the Rose, p.

<sup>195</sup> Bakhtin on chronotopes, pp. 423-424 . . . to be studied further.