Verse in a Time of Turmoil: Poetry as History in the Tây Sơn Period

Écrire des vers en des temps troublés : la poésie de la période Tay Son comme source historique

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It is a common lament among American and European scholars that there is a very real scarcity of indigenous sources for writing histories of 18th-century Việt Nam.¹ Pierre-Yves Manguin, the author of an important study of commercial relations between the Vietnamese Nguyễn lords and the Portuguese at Macao during this period, noted that “[a]ll historical studies of Việt-nam prior to its reunification by the Nguyễn in 1802 straightaway collide with an almost complete absence of primary sources,” and concluded that “[t]he rare original documents of the last quarter of the eighteenth century which have been preserved for us are found almost exclusively in the European or Colonial archives” (Manguin 1984: xxiv; my translation). Manguin’s is only the most explicit statement of this sentiment, which has no doubt contributed to the paucity of research work by European and American scholars on this period and has also probably contributed to the higher degree of scholarly attention paid to the 19th century, with its copious amounts of both Vietnamese and colonial records.

It is certainly true that in the 18th century, and particularly during its last thirty years, Việt Nam endured great turmoil and virtually continual warfare, both of

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which contributed to the destruction of much of whatever contemporary documentation might have existed. The middle of the century was marked by nearly continuous peasant revolts in the northern part of the country, while the last three decades of the century were defined by the Tây Sơn uprising, which encompassed the entire Vietnamese territories.² It is also true that there are relatively few surviving administrative and political documents from this latter period that might provide insights to the guiding philosophies of the various political forces of the time. On the other hand, I would argue that those who lament this shortage of “primary documents” have an overly narrow view of what constitutes a useful contemporary document.

To a large extent, this narrow view of sources has been shaped by, and has in turn shaped, scholarship that has more frequently dealt with military, political, and economic matters - the focus of many older studies on Viêt Nam. Manguin's study, for example, chiefly addressed the economic relationships between the Nguyễn and the Portuguese at Macao, so naturally he was looking at and for a very particular kind of document. If, however, one is willing take a more liberal approach to the notion of historical sources and look beyond administrative documents and court chronicles, there is a relatively rich base of materials for the period before 1802. Among these types of sources, one finds personal letters, diplomatic correspondence, historical fiction, essays, and poetry. Each of these is a valid and valuable source of information on this period, and each is worthy of much closer examination. These materials are particularly important, moreover, precisely because they allow us to move away from the histories of battles and bureaucrats and to explore the realm of ideas and mentalités. It is in these types of documents that the views of individuals emerge, allowing us to look more closely at the manner in which people of this era attempted to comprehend the events of the world around them.

Within this broad range of valuable primary sources poetry stands out as particularly useful for helping us to explore this world of ideas and to overcome the lack of more “conventional” sources. In the course of several years of research on the Tây Sơn period (1771-1802), I came to recognize that the relative paucity of traditional sources meant that materials like poetry might constitute a very useful means by which to explore further the events and personalities of that era. There are literally thousands of surviving poems from the Tây Sơn years, making them the type of written material most readily available from this period. Moreover, these poems can be used to study both the abstract world of ideas and the much more concrete realm of everyday affairs, from construction projects to agricultural concerns.

Despite the great potential that poetry clearly holds, it is still too rarely taken seriously as a historical source or exploited as fully as it might be. One reason why poetry is frequently overlooked as a source is that it has too often been dismissed as belonging to some discipline other than history – literary criticism, for example, or literary studies more generally. We need to rethink this arbitrary separation, as Keith Taylor has pointed out in the preface to a special edition of the journal Crossroads devoted to Vietnamese poetry and history:
“Conventional disciplinary approaches encourage us to look for the historical significance of literature or the literary significance of history; we are advised to maintain a clear boundary between history and literature, and to regard them as ‘vessels’ designed to carry what are thought to be essentially different kinds of knowledge. I am convinced that this distinction needs to be surmounted.

“The problems encountered by the study of history and literature are similar, and they require similar skills; even the craft of verifying evidence cannot be claimed solely by historians. History and literature are both constructed by the use of language, and both are shaped by forms of poetic expression. Literature is not alien to history; it needs no passport to authenticate its significance for our visions of the past. The idea that literature can gain entry to history only with proper explanation is a fetish of disciplinistic academic training” (Taylor 1992a: 1).

Like Taylor, I believe that literature generally, and poetry more particularly, should not be so readily marked off as a separate realm of inquiry.

It is true, of course, that poetry can be studied for its form and place in the evolution of verse writing, and indeed, there have been several studies of Vietnamese poetry that do precisely this. Among such works are a number of valuable anthologies of Vietnamese verse in English translation that emphasize the relationship between Vietnamese and Chinese poetry and the manner in which Vietnamese poetry has defined itself within its local context (e.g., Huỳnh Sanh Thông 1979, 1996). On the other hand, if we can begin to think about historical texts as literary works, then it makes sense to turn around to look at so-called literary works for what they can tell us as historical texts. Thus, although poetry can and should be studied from the perspective of literature in terms of its aesthetic qualities, poetry can also be examined for its content, and it is this approach that I propose to explore here.

For their part, Vietnamese historians have long been aware of the ways in which the categories of “literature” and “history” overlap. This is an awareness driven in part by necessity, because so many sources for writing Vietnamese history have been destroyed over the centuries by invasions (most notably the 15th-century Ming invasion) and warfare (the battles of the 18th century and those of the 20th certainly stand out). Circumstances have thus frequently forced Vietnamese scholars to look more creatively at possible sources for producing histories and historical commentaries. They have often turned to oral tradition and popular lore to fill in the historical record’s many gaps. These same scholars have similarly turned to poetry and other “literary” sources to help fill some of these blank spaces.

Although they have led the way in this work, Vietnamese scholars are not alone in considering poetry as an important source when researching the earlier history of their country. A small number of American historians of pre-modern and early modern Việt Nam have already made important use of poetry as a means of examining aspects of Vietnamese society, political systems and belief structures. Notable among these was Oliver Wolters, whose articles (1986, 1988) sought to employ poetry as a means by which to explore aspects of 13th- and 15th-century
Vietnamese social and political forces. More recently, John K. Whitmore has written on poetry in the pre-modern Vietnamese context. In this article on the Tao-Dàn Group, he described the role of poetry as a nexus between ruler and Confucianized officials in the late 15th century (Whitmore 1992). At the same time, Keith Taylor’s study, “The Poems of Đoan Văn Khâm,” also employed poetry as a method for attempting to understand belief systems in pre-modern Vietnamese society (Taylor 1992b).

Bearing in mind such existing studies of Vietnamese poetry in the periods from the 11th through the 15th centuries, I propose to move forward in time to the largely overlooked 18th century. As indeed with Western historical scholarship on Việt Nam more generally, so too in the realm of poetry it has been later periods, and particularly the 19th century, that have received the most attention, particularly in extant translations. With the exception of Keith Taylor’s brief examination of the poetry of the 18th-century scholar and political figure, Mạc Thiền Tích (Taylor 1998: 967-969), and John Balaban’s new volume of translations of and commentary on the verse of the poetess Hồ Xuân Hương (Balaban 2000), there is virtually no English-language scholarship on poetry of this period.3

Thus, the poems I will discuss below are not widely available (if at all) in English or French versions. Existing anthologies of Vietnamese poetry in English translation, most notably those by Huỳnh Sanh Thông (1979, 1996) and Nguyễn Ngọc Bích (1975), devote little space to the poetry of the Tây Sơn period, skipping ahead to the better-known and more widely studied 19th century.4 Consider, for example, Huỳnh Sanh Thông’s marvelous 1996 anthology: Of the 322 poems contained in this volume, only five are from the 18th century, while more than fifty are from the 19th.5 I would argue that such existing anthologies do not reflect the quality or quantity of the output of these respective centuries, but a privileging of the poetry of confrontation that emerged in the face of French colonialism and its impact.

It is perhaps not surprising that such moments of confrontation between scholars choosing to either collaborate with or resist the French would be highlighted in numerous studies of the 19th century (Jamieson 1995: 44-51, Marr 1971: 66-68). What is puzzling, however, is that so little attention has been given to the 18th century, and particularly the Tây Sơn era, which was another such historical moment of confrontation in which scholars chose sides and then proceeded to taunt one another on the literary battlefield. Indeed, in periods of political and social turmoil such as that dominated by the Tây Sơn, poetry often takes on a special kind of significance, serving as a means of expressing personal reactions to various events, and as a means by which to appeal to people in a very public setting.

While some literati were wielders of both sword and pen, most left their mark for posterity in their writings and not in their deeds on the field of battle. Indeed, it is important to bear in mind that, while the bloody fighting of the Tây Sơn period dominated the consciousness of most Vietnamese people in this period, there was also a sometimes subtle propaganda war taking place in the more rarefied literary
environment of scholar-officials. This is hardly unique to the Tây Sơn period – we are perhaps most familiar with this notion in the phrase drawn from more recent Vietnamese history: “Winning hearts and minds.” In this regard, I am not arguing anything profoundly new for the Tây Sơn period, but merely suggesting another way in which to view the events of this period.

On the other hand, the second half of the 18th century does stand out as a new era in Vietnamese literature generally, and poetry specifically. It was not only during the Tây Sơn years, but indeed throughout the second half of the 18th century that we see in Việt Nam a dramatic flowering of all kinds of literary forms. These included both poetry and prose, the latter frequently in the form of tales (truyện), mostly written in nôm and constituting a genre that in some ways culminated in Nguyễn Du’s epic, *The Tale of Kiều* (see Nguyễn Du 1996). There had been a blossoming of literary culture in the late 15th century, at the height of the Lê, but thereafter, with a few minor exceptions, there is not a great deal in the way of noteworthy or even surviving literature. The 18th century can in this regard, then, be seen as a period in which literature flourished once again, and as a time in which some of the great scholars in Vietnamese history were active, and in which there was considerable fodder for poetry. There was also more generally an increased interest in preserving poetry, and the survival to this day of much of the earlier Vietnamese poetry must be credited to the work of anthologists active in the second half of the 18th century. Even as poetry flourished anew in this era, the poems being produced continued to serve a variety of long-established functions for Vietnamese literati, a brief discussion of which I turn to next.

**POETRY AND ITS FUNCTIONS IN TRADITIONAL VIỆT NAM**

Poetry has long been a central element of the Vietnamese cultural landscape, a fundamentally important means of expressing and transmitting cultural ideas. In particular, poetry was a way for the literate elite to communicate with one another in a respected medium. More generally, poetry in Việt Nam has served both as a means of private, personal expression and as a public literary device. As a form of private expression, it served a range of functions from correspondence to expressing political sentiments to recording events in one’s life. As a form of public expression, it played political and commemorative roles, and occasionally even strategic ones. Moreover, its importance was underscored by the state, which stipulated that it was necessary to compose suitable poems to pass the civil service examinations. Since these examinations constituted the primary avenue for personal advancement in Việt Nam until the late 19th century, being able to write verse demonstrated personal refinement in the abstract, but also served a very concrete political and vocational purpose.

The multiple roles that private poetry played for classically educated Vietnamese scholars of the 18th century were neatly summarized by two scholars of this era, Phan Huy Ích (see Photo 1) and his brother-in-law, Ngô Thị Nhâm. In an introduction to a collection of his own poetry, Ích (1751-1822) noted:

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"Poems are used to speak of one’s ambition in life. Scholars and refined men use them in times of leisure to express their feelings, to describe their actions while traveling, to describe their journeys to serve people who come after them; [and finally] they are used as a journal [lit., year-by-year accounting] to be recorded for the future. This is truly a precious storehouse in one’s home, serving to disseminate one’s thoughts in a literary manner” (Phan Huy Ích 1978a: 37; my translation from the Chinese).

Nhâm (1747-1803), one of the preeminent scholars of his generation, also offered a succinct overview of the role played by poetry as viewed from the vantage point of the scholar:

“From the time of Lê Trương Hựng onwards, a large number of noted poets became recognized through their collections of poetry written while on diplomatic missions.
Such poems were written while going to visit quiet places, visiting places with ancient relics, or encountering scenes that evoked certain emotions. Far from their country and missing their homes, these men expressed their ideas, and the echoes of these can be absorbed by people of later times” (Ngô Thị Nhâm 1978: 228-9; my translation from the Chinese).

In other words, poetry was a supremely important arena of discourse among Vietnamese intellectuals, no less so in the 18th century than before or since.

In a general sense, one of poetry’s chief functions during this period was to transmit one’s sentiments and experiences to future generations. In this regard, it must also be understood as a kind of “history” – not unlike the prose histories that many of these same scholars were producing for the courts of this period, or in a private capacity. However, given the strictures of historiographical convention, such texts were generally ill-suited to expressing personal sentiments (however much they may have conveyed the flavor of the scholar’s political convictions), and so poetry served as this type of an outlet.

The most obvious way in which these poems served as a kind of historical record was their use as a journal for recording events. There is, for example, a very large body of poetry written by various Vietnamese emissaries on their journeys, typically to China, but also domestically. Thus, their poems constitute a kind of travel diary, reflecting an account of these travels, their objectives, and personal thoughts. As one scholar from this period, Vũ Huy Tân, noted, “[My poetry] is a record of events from that year, and thus I dare not discard these pieces even though they are few and coarse” (Kelley 2001: 229). Some of these scholars would also use poems to describe other events in their lives, including their service to the state and their reactions to events around them.

Whatever its multiple and occasionally mundane functions, poetry was particularly significant as a mark of refinement. It was skill in poetry, perhaps more than anything else, that served to distinguish the best scholars. The ability to compose elegant verse was especially crucial in the face of Chinese scorn for the “southern Barbarians.” In this sense, poetry had long been used as a weapon by the Vietnamese – a defense against the dreaded accusation of “barbarism.” In other words, to be able to write sophisticated poetry was to be able to fend off accusations that one lay outside of the realm of (Chinese) civilization. Vietnamese interactions with the Chinese, particularly on regular embassies to the Chinese capital, often (if not always) involved the writing of poetry to show the Chinese that they should be regarded as ambassadors from a civilized (and not a barbarous) country. When the Vietnamese scholar-poet, Trần Danh Án (1759-1794), fled into Chinese exile as an envoy of the Lê emperor in 1788, he was greeted by a local Chinese official who, while chiding the Vietnamese for their delay in seeking Chinese assistance, praised Án’s poetry, noting that “[t]he southern country has people worthy of notice” (Khai Sinh 1953: 26).

Regardless of the role that it was playing, whether as an avenue of personal expression, a form of historical record-keeping, or a mark of refinement, poetry

*Moussons* 6, 2002, 37-68
was widely circulated throughout the 18th century within the tight-knit group of northern scholars, their friends and family. We know that these scholars regularly met over rice wine to chant their poems to one another. Vietnamese literati also exchanged written poems, composed verses for each other to commemorate life events – e.g., a friend’s passing the civil service examination – and sometimes produced collaborative collections. We also know that poems were extensively circulated because these scholars frequently wrote introductions to one another’s poetry volumes. Some volumes even have multiple introductions by different scholars, a further indication of the extent to which poetry was being disseminated at this time.

An incident in Phan Huy Ích’s life gives some indication of how such poems were being dispersed. In 1802, as the Tây Sơn were about to be defeated by the Nguyễn, Ích’s house burned to the ground, and with it all of his collected writings. In the face of this disaster, he set about to reconstitute his literary legacy, sending his sons around to collect what they could of his work. By asking people to recite poems that they recalled or that they had once chanted together with Ích, or by recopying poems that had been copied and circulated among family, friends, and neighbors, Ích’s sons were able to gather more than 600 poems. Moreover, Ích treated this (re)collecting of his poems as a useful kind of sieve that would help to separate the wheat from the chaff, so to speak: “I think to myself: the amount of poetry I have written is very large. Among all of those poems are some that are worthy of being circulated, and these will still be on the tongues of the people; those poems that are not worthy of being circulated have fortunately already been forgotten” (Phan Huy Ích 1978a: 40; my translation from the Chinese).

As this incident from Ích’s life makes clear, poetry was a key component of elite interaction and a fundamental form of expression for Vietnamese literati of the 18th century. It was not, however, a univocal form of expression, for verse in this period was composed in two different languages – Vietnamese and Classical Chinese. The late 18th century saw a considerable literary output in the Vietnamese vernacular, written in the demotic script known as chữ nôm. Among the best known nôm writers of this period were Phan Huy Ích, Hoàng Quang, Lê Huy Dao, Nguyễn Huy Lương, and Phạm Thái. Some of their writings, including some that I will take up below, rank among the best known writings in the Vietnamese literary tradition. Alongside this relatively new vernacular poetic style existed a much older and still formidable tradition that produced poetry in Classical Chinese. Some scholars wrote in both idioms, while others tended to write more in either the vernacular or the traditional Chinese. One of the best known writers and scholars of this period, Ngô Thì Nhậm, for example, left a wide-ranging body of both poetry and prose all in Chinese, even as many of his peers were writing largely in nôm.

There remains an ongoing debate among Vietnamese scholars as to how to classify writings based on their language of production. Some argue that writings in Classical Chinese should not be considered “Vietnamese” poetry, and that only writings actually in Vietnamese (chữ nôm or quốc ngữ) should be so categorized.
On the other hand, while many pre-20th-century writings by Vietnamese authors were written in Chinese, their form and content clearly mark them as distinctly Vietnamese. These poems deal with themes and subjects that are not typically, if ever, found in Chinese poetry being written in China. Moreover, Vietnamese poets have in many cases abandoned the Chinese verse forms or adapted them in ways that might be considered unacceptable by well-trained Chinese scholars. Thus, to dismiss poems as not “Vietnamese” simply because they are written in Chinese characters rather than Vietnamese script overlooks some important elements of the nature of poetry and its production. The selected Tày Sơn-era poems that I examine below were composed in both idioms.

**POETRY OF THE TÀY SƠN PERIOD**

Let me now look more directly at the poetry of this period to see what it can tell us both about the events of this period, and about the sentiments of the literate segment of Vietnamese society of this period. In doing so, I intend to use a small number of selected examples to highlight four functions that poetry served in this period. First, poetry was used to express personal sentiments: hostility toward a new regime or personal anguish in the face of political turmoil; secondly, it functioned as a kind of journal or historical record, serving to record various aspects of one’s life, work, and travels; thirdly, it played a commemorative role, best exemplified in the emergence of a relatively new genre: lament poetry; finally, it played a particular and dramatic role as a site of confrontation, that is, it engaged others in very concrete ways, and was designed to challenge in private or public forums. Poetry, of course, performed many other tasks in this period, and in any case these categories are neither exhaustive or as clearly distinguishable as I make them here.

**Expressing Personal and Political Sentiment**

Expressing emotions and often political views was a very important function of poetry during this period, as it had been in earlier periods and was to be again, particularly in the 19th century. Indeed, this is the broadest and most fundamental category of poetry, and in a sense one that subsumes all others. As Maurice Durand, one of the preeminent Western scholars of Vietnamese literature, has noted, “[i]n these troubled times [the late 18th-century] writers’ personalities and emotions came increasingly to the fore. Poetry became more personal, more closely linked both to the writer’s inner feelings and to contemporary events” (Durand 1985: 77). Or, to quote a poet of the time, Nguyễn Án (1770-1815), writing in 1796:

“What is the origin of poetry? Truly its origins lie in human feelings. As for people, everyone has emotions. But because all of those emotions are different from one another, so too the poetry differs. People who live in circumstances of poverty and misfortune become aware of their vicissitudes and uncontrollability, and because of this uncontrollability there are things about which they must worry and feelings of great melancholy. And as for people who live happy and satisfied lives, they produce a type of poetry of glory and honor, it is like looking
at florid verse on brocade and satin, and there is nothing that is not beautiful to behold”

Án’s sentiments were echoed by Ngô Thị Nhậm four years later, in an introduction that he wrote to a collection of Phan Huy Ích’s poetry:

“As for authors who have produced literature that assists their generation, their works are not only of a single type. There are poems, and phú, songs, essays, records, annals, prefaces, postfaces, explanations, couplets, and prose [of other types]. These are matters contained in the heart, a setting forth of beautiful words, which like brocade and satin have a beautiful surface, like cotton and silk evoke feelings of pleasure, and those who produce these can generally be called authors. Among all these types of works, as for the type that can fill the heart with enthusiasm, and bring forth emotion and feeling among the people, there is none greater than poetry” (Ngô Thị Nhậm 1978: 228; my translation from the Chinese).

As Nhậm and Án’s comments suggest, poetry was viewed as a vehicle for expressing and evoking emotion. Consequently, it is not surprising to find that the poems of this period reflect both very personal feelings in a time of difficulty, and sometimes ill-disguised political sentiments, as authors took sides during the political divisions of the Tây Sơn years. As such, these poems go a long way to helping historians map the intellectual and emotional contours of political elite thought in the late 18th century. These political conflicts are reflected in the poetry of northern scholars writing during this period, many of them Lê loyalists lamenting the fate of their emperor, forced to flee into exile in 1788 and again in 1789. There is a smaller number of surviving poems by Tây Sơn loyalists, expressing their feelings toward this new regime and the potential that it promised. In a time of turmoil such as these men were experiencing, so much of the poetry reveals this in terms of a kind of mournful reflection, or occasionally a defiant affirmation of one’s personal convictions.

Many scholars of this period suffered during this time in which Confucian orthodoxy was in crisis. This had been building for some time already by the Tây Sơn era, sparked by an uncertainty about the political capabilities of existing rulers, and repeated challenges to orthodox rule. The Tây Sơn period merely marked a moment in which these doubts could be more openly expressed. Over time, as the Tây Sơn grew in strength and then moved into the north, northern literati were forced to choose sides among multiple political contenders. Some chose to abandon their loyalty to the crippled Lê regime and look to the Tây Sơn for a better future, while others clung to a Confucian ethos that demanded unwavering loyalty to the emperor.

In what follows, I offer a sampling of poems that reveal their authors’ sentiments concerning both political matters and larger social problems. Poems by Ngô Thị Nhậm and Bùi Dương Lịch (1758-1827) suggest ways in which political opinions were articulated, while brief poems by Phạm Quy Thích and Phạm Nguyên Đu illustrate the role of poetry in commenting on socio-economic difficulties as veiled criticism of the new regime. It is clear that, to some degree, these poems fit into standard genres of political poetry, which are in some ways formulaic.
readings of these poems, however, I suggest that they are still indicative of particular personal sentiments and suggestive of the political tendencies of their respective authors.

Among those scholar-officials who elected to shift their allegiance to the Tây Sơn was Ngô Thi Nhậm, one of the most important intellectual figures of the 18th century. Nhậm was the scion of a long line of poets, historians, and court officials, and he became one of the first Tây Sơn emperor’s most trusted lieutenants. His admiration for the heroic figure of Quang Trung (r. 1788-1792), the first and most powerful Tây Sơn emperor, is revealed in a poem that Nhậm composed shortly after the emperor’s unexpected death at the age of forty:

Following the Royal Carriage, Bowing at the Tảo Dan Mausoleum and Respectfully Recording (this)

In five years he has completed a great undertaking;
China knew this earlier, that the Master star would fall.⁸
[He has] stepped down from the regions of life,
leaving behind rules and regulations for the country,
On high he can be compared with the virtue of heaven,
and he is of a resounding authority.

[He was] truly humane and of great righteousness in the matter of preserving the ancestral temples of the Lê house,
[He was] truly of a generous and profound virtue in the matter of acting tolerantly toward the Chinese enemy.
Long has the precious throne survived, relying on the contributions of the people.
The mountains of the mausoleum will be stable for a myriad ages [in the place of the capital] (Nguyễn Lộc 1986: 186-187; my translation from a quốc ngữ transliteration of the Chinese original).

This poem constitutes a brief survey of the ruler’s accomplishments and abilities. It is also an expression of hope for the future despite Quang Trung’s demise. On the other hand, Nhậm had particular and personal ties to Quang Trung, and his loyalties may have been more to the individual than to the regime that he represented. That Nhậm felt a certain ambivalence about his participation in the Tây Sơn project is suggested in another poem that he wrote during this period:

The Phú Poem on Acting or Going [excerpt]

When I am here, I do not know what to do.
When I go out, I do not know where to go.
I do things that I should not do, and then my heart is doubtful,
I go to places that I should not go, and then my feet are sluggish.
If my heart is doubtful then I do not do it.
If my feet are sluggish then I do not go.
If it is like this, then what should I do?
I polish my essays and I chant my poems;
I obey the words spoken by the king and I produce honest words.
If it is like this then where shall I go?
In the morning I enter the court, in the evening I return; I labor industriously and I do not hesitate to go downstream.
Can people really not see that?

This poem neatly reveals the self-doubt that many scholars confronted in this time of moral and political ambiguity. They wrestled with political decisions that they were being forced to make. They also had to reflect on how their actions would be viewed by their peers and so they attempt to find ways to explain or justify their decisions.

While Nhâm may have expressed his personal misgivings in somewhat oblique language, other scholars voiced their doubts much more plainly. One such figure was Bùi Dương Lích, a Nghệ An scholar who had passed the imperial examinations only shortly before the final collapse of the Lê court and who was summoned to the Tây Sơn capital at Phú Xuân in the early 1790s. This was a summons that he felt he could not refuse, and as he traveled he composed the following (untitled) reflection on his impending fate:

Soon I will know the thoughts and the work of acting in a contradictory fashion,
Then I would rather that in the past I had not gone on with my studies.
The word filial I no longer know, the word loyal is already dead.
When I act as an official, when I rest from my labors, how shall I behave?
I think of officials serving in their posts, the clouds and mountains far away.
The southern region is frosty and cold, the mother leans against the doorway awaiting her child;
The hearts of those who travel this road are choked with flowing tears,
The ocean waves carry the misty rains as they scream and roar.
(Bùi Dương Lích 1987: 97; my translation from a Quốc ngữ translation of the Chinese).

Scholars of this period, like Nhâm and Lích, thus used verse to comment on their personal feelings or political decisions, but they also frequently composed poems expressing reactions to events around them. Indeed, there is a large body of poetry from this period that discusses the great hardships facing the populations in this time of unrest. Thus, I would argue that we can see these poems as reflecting not only the poet’s personal feelings, but also his view of the larger situation of his society. One such example comes again from Bùi Dương Lích, who saw the Tây Sơn period as one of destructive warfare and chaos, affecting no region more so than his native province of Nghệ An. In this Phú poem, “The Kỳ Giang River Bridge,” apparently written in 1789, several years after the Tây Sơn had first arrived in the northern part of the country, he eloquently described the hardships of the people in that area as victims of drought, warfare, and taxation:

The Kỳ Giang River Bridge (excerpt)
Doors are closed and tasks are abandoned, homes are deserted.
The masses have suffered misery everywhere.
And everywhere heaven produces hardship.
There are people who once were youthful, but now are plagued by age.
There are people who once were healthy, but now are sick and shriveled.
There are people who once were at their ease, but now suffer miserably.
There are people who once were wealthy, but now are hungry and poor.
As for the years and months, there have already been so many,
But the hills and waters have become deserted places.

... War has risen up, chaos will follow afterward.

... People who go out will endure great suffering on the battlefield.
People who remain at home will die in turn from taxes and labor service.

... (Nguyễn Lộc 1993: 245-248; my translation from a quốc ngữ transliteration of the Chinese).

Lịch’s poem reflects his sense that the wars of this period marked a time of great hardship, not a move toward an improved political order. To some degree we may view this depiction as representative of a genre of political protest poetry, but there is little doubt about the particular sufferings experienced by Lịch’s home region of Nghệ An, which lay between the Tày Sơn headquarters, to the south, and the old imperial capital of Thăng Long, to the north. This region was regularly traversed by armies of the Tày Sơn in the 1780s, and was then briefly contemplated as the new center of Quang Trung’s new regime. Although that Tày Sơn ruler died before he could complete his vision of a new capital in central Nghệ An, the hardships associated with that plan – corvée labor demands and contributions of building material – had already left their mark on the long-suffering populations of this region.

Other scholar-officials of the time also addressed the issue of suffering among the population during the Tày Sơn years. Another example of poetic commentary in this vein is by the 18th-century Lê official, Phạm Quý Thích (1760-1825), who spent the Tày Sơn years in hiding to avoid serving the new regime. His poem describes the hardships that the Vietnamese endured as a result of poor weather and related crop losses:

**Summer Drought**
Last summer floods washed away the harvest.
This summer there is tremendous drought.
Low fields and high have all arrayed their water scoops.
At meals, both morning and night, every family eats potatoes instead of rice.
For farmers clouds and rainbows raise false hopes.
Grasses and trees die from the cold in the sixth-moon frost.
A small crowd gathers in the village hall, lamenting this state of affairs.
Suddenly, there is the tax collector and off they run.

(Hợp Tuyển 1963: 331; my translation from a quốc ngữ transliteration of the Chinese).
Once again, of course, Thích’s decision to focus on hardships reflects his political sentiments, but it also reveals the documented realities of rural life in this era.

A final example of this genre, written at roughly the same time, is Phạm Nguyên Du’s “Mourning the Victims of Famine.” Du (1739-1787) was a Lê loyalist who wrote this poem in the face of the Tây Sơn advance to the north in the summer of 1786. This was an advance that took place in the face of a massive famine that had just devastated parts of the north, killing perhaps tens of thousands of villagers:

Mourning the Victims of Famine
Who are these expiring faces along the road?
Originally peoples of the outlying regions, they are my old village mates.
In small canals outside the city gates lie buried the country’s dead
The towers of court have not yet shown the Emperor’s compassion
Their spirits are forsaken while flatterers accept the hated usurper
The bones of the dead are not collected, they hate the cause of their misfortune
Those killed have borne a sorrowful fate, but now the war is over
A warming sunshine will soon relieve the cold miseries of this place.

(Hồ Tuyên 1963: 95; my translation from a quốc ngữ transliteration of the Chinese).

This poem makes clear not only the author’s attitudes toward the Tây Sơn, but also his sense of the general plight of the population. It is a direct and vivid commentary on one of the worst famines to strike northern Việt Nam during the 18th century. And yet, for its misery, the poem ends in optimism, voicing the hope that the Lê would rise again to throw off the Tây Sơn and restore political and social order.

Although I have presented here only a small sampling of poems reflecting on the political and social turmoil of the Tây Sơn era, they are representative of a considerable body of such verse. Poetry of this type serves to suggest both the sentiments of scholars producing it, but also, more generally, the sufferings of Vietnamese populations at this time. As such, these writings are extremely valuable for historians attempting to paint a picture of life during the Tây Sơn period.

Poetry as Journal

Even as it served to express emotion and political sentiment, poetry in this era, as in many others, also served as a kind of journal, in which scholars could record events, and particularly those in which they were personally involved. While the poems I have cited so far sometimes did contain concrete information, it was usually incidental to the poet’s attempt to convey his feelings. There are other poems from this period, however, which are much more explicit in the information that they provide about the events or living conditions of the Tây Sơn years. Such poems are extremely valuable in helping to provide particular details not available elsewhere, thus allowing the historian to inject some specificity into accounts of a period that must often remain rather abstract. There are unfortunately not as many examples of this type of poem as one might like, but the following two examples give some indication of the ways in which such poetry can provide
valuable information. The first is by Phan Huy Ích, whose poetry frequently contains useful historical data. The second is by Cao Huy Diêu, another northern scholar, and contains important economic and meteorological data, which help sketch out the weather and harvest patterns of the Tây Sơn period in the north.

Phan Huy Ích was, along with Ngô Thời Nhậm, one of the most important officials of the Tây Sơn regime. He wrote a relatively large number of poems that explicitly detailed certain events of the Tây Sơn years. His poems are particularly useful because not only are they virtually all dated, allowing the historian precisely to correlate poems with events, but many also have prose introductions that are valuable as a source of information in themselves. In the following poem, composed in 1795, Ích details his oversight of a dike reconstruction project, part of the massive infrastructure rebuilding effort carried out under the Tây Sơn during the 1790s, in the aftermath of years of turmoil in the northern part of the country:

**Recording the work of the spring, obeying the order to supervise the work of constructing dikes in the Trân of Sơn Nam**

With regard to the policy of the state concerning agriculture, the most important thing is the matter of guarding against flooding.

To Sơn Nam I traveled to supervise this project
More than twenty sections of dikes were in need of repair;
More than 50,000 quan of cash was gathered from local fields.
We shared the proceeds among the people who bore this hardship to urge greater speed.
Sturdy dikes will long benefit the local fields.
Often did I travel ’round describing the benefits of this great undertaking.
We were determined to work hard and do it well in order that all the places would sing the Cam Đường poem.10

The poem clearly describes the impetus for this project – an effort by the Tây Sơn regime to restore its crucial agricultural base. It also describes the area in which the dike reconstruction project was taking place. It tells us how much money was being spent on the project and how extensive it was. It further outlines the benefits of the project. While the prose translation that I have offered does not convey any sense of the poetic qualities of this work, it must be stressed that this was indeed a poem written using the Tang-style verse format of eight seven-syllable lines.

The other example I want to offer of a poem used to record events is Cao Huy Diêu’s “A Mid-Autumn’s Nighttime Rain.” This was apparently written in the year 1796, after years of weather-induced hardships. The poem serves as a detailed record of meteorological conditions in the northern part of Việt Nam during the Tây Sơn years, describing floods and famines and the desperation of the populace:

**A Mid-Autumn’s Nighttime Rain [excerpt]**

...In Nhật Nam,11 as for all that under heaven and on earth, from the [Bính] Ngo year [1786] until present, how many years have there been like this Bình Thin [1796] year?

*Moussons 6*, 2002, 37-68
In the year Bính Ngọ [1786] there was chaos and disorder, and in the year Mậu Thân [1788] there was a drought. In the year Tấn Hội [1791] and in the year Nhậm Tý [1792] there were fierce infestations of grasshoppers. In the year Giáp Dần [1794] there was a great flood worse than that of the year Quý Tỵ [1773]. In the year Ất Mão [1795] there was a great drought and the rice fields were all dried up. And this year is the year Bính Thìn [1796] and there are still more hardships. Throughout the spring there were no rains, and the paddy fields all dried up. At the end of the spring there were persistent rains, and the paddy rice was all destroyed. In the middle of the summer there was scorching sun and the potatoes and beans were singed. In the 6th month, the high fields and the low fields were all cracking. In the 7th month the fields were plowed, and in the 8th month the paddy blossomed. In the 7th and 8th months the rains were very fierce. In the flood plains near and far the shrimp and fish floated by happily. As for paddy rice, one bowl cost 60 tiền. The taxes and the labor services were burdensome, and the state continuously urged us on.

... (Nguyễn Lộc 1986: 389-400; my translation from a quốc ngữ transliteration of the Chinese). 12

While this was written as a poem in seven-word lines and four-line stanzas, to dismiss this as merely a poem would be to deprive the historian of a very important source of data. This poem provides concrete information on the weather patterns marking this part of the country – probably the region around Thăng Long, Cao Huy Diệu’s native area. It also comments on the types of efforts that the state was demanding from the population, and even on the price of rice! While the degree of detail found in the two preceding poems is unusual, it suggests that poetry from this period, if carefully examined, may contain large amounts of concrete information about events and conditions of life during the Tây Sơn period.

Poetry of Lament: The Vân Tế and Khúc

It is perhaps hardly surprising, given the almost continual warfare of the Tây Sơn years, that the lament form of poetry would find a new significance and relevance for many poets of the period. It was a time in which the văn tế, a term that might be translated as “literary sacrificial offering,” came to take on new prominence as a literary form. The văn tế was not the first form of lament poetry to appear in Việt Nam. There was an older, established tradition of the khúc (lament) style, of which perhaps the most famous example is Nguyễn Gia Thiều’s (1740-1798) Cung Oán Ngâm Khúc (Lament of a Woman of the Harem). Another noted work in this style, and from roughly the same period, is the Chinh Phủ Ngâm Khúc (Lament of the Soldier’s Wife), initially written in Classical Chinese in the 1740s, and later rendered into the vernacular by Phan Huy Ích. These important poems paved the way for the latter half of the 18th century, which saw an explosion of...
commemorative verse, particularly during the Tây Sơn period. Although the lament as a general category had thus been used in earlier times, it reached new heights in the Tây Sơn era, and also now found expression increasingly in the vernacular, chữ nôm.

The commemorative and lament poems produced in this period consisted essentially of three different types, which might be categorized as national laments, commemorative military laments, and finally personal laments. In the first category, we find only one very well-known example, the Hoài Nam Khúc (*Lament for the South*). There are considerably more examples of the military lament form, including several by Phan Huy Ích, mourning the Tây Sơn battle dead, and a number written by Nguyễn officials, lamenting their own casualties from the same conflicts. Finally, in the broadest category of more personal laments, we find a wide range of poems, including two among the most well-known – Ai Tự Vấn (*Tears and Regrets*) and Văn Tế Vua Quang Trung (*A Lament for the King Quang Trung*) – both written by the Lê Princess, Ngọc Hân, to lament the premature death of her imperial spouse, the Tây Sơn emperor, in 1792. Another notable example of this personal lament genre is Nguyễn Hừu Chính’s expression of grief at the death of his sister, Văn Tế Chi (*Lament for an Elder Sister*). Although the personal laments constitute an important subset of the lament category, I will set them aside and focus on the first two subgroups, the national and military laments, which are particularly useful for revealing aspects of the Tây Sơn period.

First, in the category of “national laments,” we find a single epic poem written in the vernacular, the Hoài Nam Ca Cúc, or sometimes Hoài Nam Khúc (*Lament for the South*). It was written in 1777 by Hoàng Quang (?–1802), a southern scholar and Nguyễn supporter, as the Nguyễn were attempting unsuccessfully to resist the growing strength of the Tây Sơn. The Hoài Nam Ca Cúc is a poem of 670 lines that surveys the long history of the Nguyễn clan, describing its slow rise to political and geographical domination of the southern part of the country. It is also a highly critical commentary on the rise of the Tây Sơn and the impact that the rebels had on the country.

This poem might have remained a highly elaborated private lament, had it not been for circumstances that brought it to public prominence. It caught the eye of one of the Nguyễn leader’s sisters, who in turn brought it to her brother’s attention. Nguyễn Ánh read and was touched by the work’s sentiments, and so ordered that it be publicly read to his followers. It was then copied and widely distributed to raise the morale and strengthen the determination of the southern populations and of the Nguyễn leader’s troops (*Đại Nam Thực Lục* 2001, vol. 1: 282). That Hoàng Quang’s poem would have been selected for this purpose is hardly surprising, for it depicts the Golden Age of the Nguyễn as an idyllic time, and its use by the Nguyễn leader serves as an implicit promise of the restoration of that time. Moreover, the poem conveniently fits with the Nguyễn’s explanation for the collapse of their lineage, placing the blame for this squarely on the court official, Trường Phúc Loan, who had served as regent for the young prince who came to replace the long-ruling Lord Võ Vương in 1767. Thus, we see poetry
entering the public discourse in a highly visible manner, and apparently having an
important psychological impact on the Nguyễn supporters.

The poem opens as a paean to the period of harmony and prosperity that the author
saw as having emerged under the last of the great Nguyễn Chúa, who died in 1767:

**Hoài Nam Ca Cúc [excerpt]**

As one eats rice one suddenly thinks of former things,
And reflects on the patrimony of the Nguyễn Chúa with increasing fondness.
One’s feelings are moved thinking of the virtue of the late king,\(^\text{13}\)
Who labored to open the roads to come down to this place.
Dividing the frontier from the place of the Thày ramparts,
The North and South shared a mutual boundary [simply] changing the flag,
Being wary not to have even the smallest crack or crevice.
The warming pond is already warm and able again to heat the gold.
On high there are the Đạo Đương [Nguyễn] Lords
Below their subjects still have the heroes Cao and Quý,\(^\text{14}\)
The ladders in the mountains and the boats at the docks have all gone back,
There are people whom heaven and earth continues to protect.
The position of prince has already been transmitted through seven generations,
And we still continue to wear the heaven of Thang and Văn.\(^\text{15}\)
The eighth transmission [i.e., of leadership] had lately gone to the late king,\(^\text{16}\)
The sash and turban had recently been altered and the shirts and trousers were also changed.\(^\text{17}\)
One school of ritual music constituted a happy reunion.
People competed to cover the world in embroidered silk and to erect palace walls.
 Everywhere there was peace and there was no conflict,
The gates of power were a purple red and the huts a beautiful satin.
Mouths had rice and people patted their stomachs and all sang.
Looking at the South of Việt, one might mistakenly think it was Đương Nghệ.\(^\text{18}\)

After having depicted what he saw as a Golden Age of harmony and prosperity
under the guidance of a succession of Nguyễn rulers, Hoàng Quang shifted his
emphasis to attack those who had contributed to undoing this idyllic time,
specifically the rebellious Tây Sơn:

Entering the year Quý Ty [1774], nine years had quickly passed.
The rebellious people rose up in the region of Chiém [Champa].
The Tây Sơn Biên Nhạc thought to take for himself [the position of]
Thang and Văn [the Nguyễn lords]
“Aid the bright, destroy the dark,” was their echoing cry.
Recklessly they gathered iron, hammer, sword, gold and gun.
[From] inside the mountains warfare burned black.
For banners they hung out tunics, and as for soldiers they pulled them from the trees.
They urged each other on, like packs of rats, and bands of foxes,
With claws and fangs these interlopers labored side by side
with the clique of merchants.
The poem’s imagery is evocative as it compares the Tây Sơn with animals, suggesting a high degree of disdain for these rural upstarts with origins near and among the upland peoples. It is also, however, extremely informative: mentioning one of the movement’s rallying cries, describing its banners, and speaking of the involvement of merchants. It is thus of considerable interest to historians as well as to literary scholars, for it tells much about 18th-century Vietnamese society during the early years of the Tây Sơn movement. It also provides some sense of the sentiments of those elites who chose to side with the Nguyễn, with their nostalgia for the former Nguyễn rulers and a time of remembered peace.

Hoang Quàng’s “national lament” is, however, an unusual example of the lament genre. More common, particularly in these turbulent years of military confrontation and their staggering numbers of battle casualties, were laments in the form of commemorations of those who had died on the field of battle. Both the Nguyễn and the Tây Sơn camps had scholars who wrote such verses, especially in the final years of the conflict, as casualties mounted and the need to reinforce one’s political legitimacy became ever more urgent. These military laments are useful for their evocation of the miseries of the battlefield and for revealing the ways in which both sides asserted the righteousness of their own cause and suggested the illegitimacy of their enemies. In this way, they are significant for being, like the Hoài Nam Khúc, very public documents that served particular political purposes.

Among poems in this genre, those that most stand out were composed in the very last years of the Tây Sơn-Nguyễn conflict. In 1801, for example, Đặng Đức Siêu (1750-1810) composed a lament for two Nguyễn generals who committed suicide in the face of a Tây Sơn siege of their position near Qui Nhơn. This was the beginning of a series of such commemorative laments commissioned by each side, and read at public ceremonies honoring the dead. Early in the following year, Phan Huy Ích, a prolific writer in many styles and for many occasions, penned his most skilled work in the military văn tế style, Funeral Ode to the Officers among Battlefield Dead. This poem, written for a ceremony remembering the heroic soldiers on the Tây Sơn side only a few months before that regime’s defeat, gives us some sense of this genre, as well as of the difficult battle conditions confronting soldiers of this era:

**Funeral Ode to the Officers among Battlefield Dead [February 17, 1802]**

I offer this lament:

The wind blows the flying dust across the battle ramparts, but the bravery of the warriors is truly limitless.

They dress before the morning light, and eat only as the day draws to an end and the hearts of the supreme sages are in deep mourning.

The enemy country has not yet been eliminated,

The souls of the dead find it difficult to achieve tranquility.
This day the flowered flag advances, determined to restore the old capital.
The officers and troops of land and sea are of one heart in detesting the enemy.
The military ranks control their ration, and worry about their duties.
The myriad perils are not yet past, the frail bodies look very slight
Some rushed in to mix with arrows and bullets, sending their anger out onto the battlefield,
While others rose and fell like waves, embracing the feelings of resentment at the seaports;
Yet others were fated to meet misfortune, and plunged headlong into the bowels of the tiger.
The difficulties of all of these warriors are to be grieved.

\[\text{\textit{Hơp Tuyễn} 1978: 287-288; my translation from a \textit{quôc ngữ} transliteration of the \textit{nôm}).}\]

Not long after Ích wrote these lines, the Nguyển camp produced two more commemorative laments. Nguyễn Bá Xuyên, a Nguyễn official, wrote the \textit{Tể Chư Trận Vong Quàn Sĩ (Lament for Troops and Officers Lost on the Field of Battle)}, a commemoration of his camp’s battle dead recited at a ceremony in Phú Xuân later in the spring of 1802, after the Nguyễn had captured that city from the Tay Sơn. Xuyên’s was soon followed by a final Nguyễn military lament, \textit{Vân Tể Trưởng Sĩ Trận Vong (Funeral Oration for Soldiers Fallen on the Battlefield)}, written by Nguyễn Văn Thành (?-1817) and delivered in the summer of 1802 at ceremonies organized in Thăng Long after the final Nguyễn victory over the Tay Sơn:

**Funeral Oration for Soldiers Fallen on the Battlefield [Excerpt]**

\[\ldots\]

\[\text{\textit{Alas!}}\]

\text{From the Eastern Town [Saigon] we have traveled to the northern realms, how many hardships we had to bear to reach this day!}

\text{As the Lô River waters flow into the Lương, we think of those ill-fated soldiers from former times.}

\text{To be born is to be sent out, while to die is to return.}

\text{We know that this fate is fleeting, while honor will endure.}

\text{Such grief!}

\text{We were together under the same gates and banners,}

\text{Our fate was in like uniforms,}

\text{Three thousand gathered children of the land of Bái,\textsuperscript{19} bows and arrows at the ready, we stood prepared as men in arms.}

\[\text{\textit{Hơp Tuyễn} 1963: 404; my translation from a \textit{quôc ngữ} transliteration of the Chinese).}\]

This oration, written in the summer of 1802, would appear to have been the final word in Tay Sơn-era commemorative verse. But in fact, the supreme achievement of this genre, and the final summation of the death and destruction of the Tay Sơn period, was written by Nguyễn Du, best known as the author of the \textit{Tale of Kiều}.

While slightly outside the Tay Sơn time-frame, Du’s \textit{Vân Tể Thập Loại Chứng Sinh (Funeral Oration to the Ten Types of Wandering Souls)} is a powerful reflection on this time of turmoil. This oration, commemorating the day of lost souls in which those who died unmourned or under tragic circumstances are remembered, does not glorify sacrifice on the battlefield or the Nguyễn victory. Instead, it describes
the heartbreak of conflict and reflects on the misery of war. It is far less critical of the Tây Sơn than the poetry composed by Nguyễn loyalists, and also less generous in its assessment of the ways in which the Nguyễn troops and officials behaved toward the defeated Tây Sơn troops.

Funeral Oration to the Ten Types of Wandering Souls [Excerpt]

They were men of spirit who went down the path of pride
carrying weapons to war, their burden borne over mountain and river.
Why speak of the time when they battled to victory?
Think of their downfall and grieve.
A sudden storm brought roof tiles crashing down:
could they bring themselves to trade places with the debased?
Pride and wealth give birth to rancor and resentment –
blood there is to overflowing, dried bones are scattered all about.
They are all lost, leaving their children with no one to care for them –
headless ghosts, they moan and cry through rainy nights.
Victory or defeat, both are up to heaven,
but will these souls ever know when their end is to be reached?”

. . .

Through great difficulties they sought to find the best route,
Over there some enemy troops pushed into battle
Bringing themselves in to loot and steal.
Fighting like violent wind and rain, thunder and lightning,
The exposed corpses of the hundred surnames died for a single person.
When they have lost their positions, arrows fly and bullets drop.
On the fields of battle are left torn flesh and spilled blood.
As for the abandoned fallen bones, who knows where they will find their peace?

. . .

(Họp Tuyên 1963: 295-300; my translation from a quốc ngữ transliteration of the nôm).

So, it was this master poet who had the final say in Tây Sơn-era funeral orations. Despite his service to the Nguyễn and his having avoided serving the Tây Sơn, Nguyễn Du makes clear that to him the Nguyễn are no heroes, nor the Tây Sơn the terrible enemy of the nation portrayed in the official court poetry. Rather, it is the misery of those who have fought and died, of those who were reduced to rags by years of turmoil, and of those who suffered desolation along the roads and streams of the country, which attracted his eye and his compassion. Again, this poem, through Nguyễn Du’s powerful imagery and word choice, allows us to picture the triumph and the tragedy of the Tây Sơn era, perhaps in ways that later prose works cannot.

Poetry as a Site of Confrontation

Finally, in addition to serving as a vehicle for personal expression, a form of historical record, and a commemorative device, poetry functioned in a more direct sense as a kind of verbal weapon. Clearly, some of the poetry of this era was implicitly involved in contending visions of society and the implications of the Tây
Son movement and regime for the course of Vietnamese history. In some instances, as we have seen, poetry was used to describe the scenes of battlefields in the Tay Son period. At other times, however, poetry itself became the battlefield as poets of differing political allegiances challenged each other through verse. The wounds inflicted in such conflicts could be just as severe for a Confucian scholar as those received by foot soldiers from the thrust of a lance or the arc of a sword on the battlefield.

Although there are numerous examples of these literary jousts, I will address only three instances here. The first was a confrontation between two northern scholars, Ngô Thị Nhậm and Trần Danh Án, during the late 1780s, while Nhậm was attempting to recruit Án on behalf of the Tay Son. The second was a contest that again matched scholars on opposite sides of the political divide of the period, as Nguyễn Huy Lương wrote an epic in praise of life under the Tay Son during the final years of that regime, which was promptly challenged by a Lê loyalist, Phạm Thái. The last episode involved an impromptu public challenge that once again featured Nhậm as he faced a public flogging in Thăng Long for his service to the Tay Son and his unwillingness to offer allegiance to the new Nguyễn regime.

Nhậm was not only a loyal supporter of the Tay Son, but was also one of their chief recruiters among his fellow northern intellectuals. While he was able to attract some of them — perhaps, most notably, Phan Huy Ích — many spurned his entreaties. Best known among those who resisted was the scholar Trần Danh Án (1759-1794), who repeatedly refused summons to the Tay Son court, and maintained a strong loyalty to the Lê regime. Nhậm and Án exchanged a series of letters and poems in which the former attempted, unsuccessfully, to entice the latter into serving the Tay Son.

When Nhậm sent an initial letter suggesting that Án might merely join him and Phan Huy Ích in poetry discussions (during which perhaps Án might be further persuaded), the staunch Lê loyalist acidly replied: “At this period of my life, is it really the time for me to talk poetry with the two gentlemen?” (Khải Sinh 1953: 37). He also included an untitled poem to elaborate his feelings:

To meet you sir in this life would be far easier,
Than looking dimly at dreams that are often nearby;
Who, in this country, can finally be left in peace?
As for depending on shelter, in this life I know only myself.
Though I be hidden in the north, I still recall the Tân.20
I would prefer death in the Eastern Sea to following the Tân.21
[All this so] that people who come later and pass near my grave will raise a hand and point: [There lies] a laureate of the former Lê, by the surname of Trần.

Subsequent appeals by Nhậm were also turned aside in verse, which included poems criticizing Nhậm for betraying the Lê.
Tunics and hats change before the eyes of the people of the South and the people of the North.
The flowers and grasses remain fresh from the past to the present.
In my dreams the heavens are not yet bright.
On my ponds the white hibiscus has already become submerged.
Now I find myself deep in the mouth of the tiger,
And although I may die, I refuse to act like the heart of a dog-pig.
I only regret that I have no means by which to save those who live in these times.
My many worries I now only place into lonely rhyming poems.


Trần Danh Án was eventually permitted to decline service in the Tây Sơn administration, having repeatedly resisted the efforts of Nhậm and others to recruit him. His poetry served him as a weapon, as it serves to give us some indications of the types of sentiments that some Vietnamese literati of this period held.

The exchange between Nhậm and Án, while emblematic of the types of scholarly literary exchanges that were seen during the Tây Sơn period, is not the most dramatic example of these sorts of conflicts. A more prominent confrontation, during the final years of the Tây Sơn period, featured two northern literati, Nguyễn Huy Lương (1740s-?) and Phạm Thái (1777-1814). The former was a Tây Sơn supporter who served in the Tây Sơn government, while the latter was a Lê loyalist who, along with his father, had made several attempts to topple the Tây Sơn regime.

In 1801, Lương was apparently commissioned to write a lengthy poem to coincide with public ceremonies organized by the Tây Sơn emperor, Quang Tôn. The occasion was a change in the official reign name from Cạnh Thịnh to Bảo Hụng, a move designed to turn around the fast-fading fortunes of the Tây Sơn regime (Phạm Văn D.tap 1973: 46).

The poem that Lương produced, the Tùng Tây Hồ Phú (Phù Poem in Praise of West Lake), is a paean to the prosperity and tranquility that was thought to have marked Tây Sơn rule in the north. Although Lương was not the first poet to comment on the beauty of West Lake, a popular theme for Vietnamese literati, his work is one of the most detailed depictions of that site.

Written in the vernacular apparently favored by Tây Sơn rulers, the Tùng Tây Hồ Phú describes the serene and beautiful setting of West Lake and its environs, while also touching on the many lake-side industries, suggesting the economic well-being of the Tây Sơn years. It is composed of 86 couplets, which can roughly be divided into eight sections describing the history of the region around the lake, its natural setting, the various pagodas and temples on its shores, its history in the late Lê period, its history under the Tây Sơn and, finally, general praise for the undertakings of the Tây Sơn regime.

Not surprisingly, given its public debut, this poem achieved a wide circulation in the capital region, and word of it reached the die-hard Lê loyalist, Phạm Thái. He recorded his reaction on first hearing this poem as follows:
“In the summer of the year Cành Thịnh [1800], I went for pleasure with a friend to Tràng-An and there I heard him chanting the Tỳng Tây Hồ Phú. I asked him who had written such a skilled work? My friend replied: It was written by the Chuồng Linh Hạ Hữu Hồ Lưuông. I replied: Alas, Hữu Hồ Lưuông! Formerly he served the Lê dynasty, and now he has gone to work as a false official who is able still to laud West Lake without blushing! How I despise that lowly flatterer! I recalled that in the past there were poems ‘attacking the ancient,’ chiến cò. So now, as this scornful individual has crafted a poem of praise, so I will also construct a poem, Attacking Praise, in order to contribute a bit to ridiculing this age” (Phạm Văn Dâng 1973: 150; my translation from a quộc ngữ translation of the Chinese).

And Phạm Thái then proceeded to write such a poem, the Chiến Tỳng Tây Hồ Phú (Attacking the Phú in Praise of West Lake).

In this poem, Thái used the same subject and poetic form (retaining the internal rhyme scheme of Lưuông’s poem and its 86 stanzas) to criticize and ridicule the nature of the Tày Soạn government (Nguyễn Khắc Viên & Hữu Ngọc n.d.: 310-313, Dương Quang Hàm 1998: 97-101). It is worth noting that this poem was not merely a simple political rejoinder, but also a display of Phạm Thái’s poetic skill – and in particular his ability to offer a reply that mimicked the form of its predecessor. It is not entirely a mirror image of the earlier poem – it does not answer it line for line, but rather it seeks in a broader sense to challenge the idea that the Tày Soạn were a positive form of government. Where Lưuông’s poem is replete with praise and admiration for the Tày Soạn and their accomplishments, Thái’s work is full of gloomy images and scorn for those who collaborate with the new regime. It is not surprising that the imagery found in the Chiến Tỳng Tây Hồ Phú is formed with references to fogs, hazes, and shadows, and to the arrival of the dark days of fall.

While Lưuông’s poem is held in high regard by Vietnamese historians and literary critics for its glowing depiction of life under the Tày Soạn, Phạm Thái’s rejoinder is generally dismissed by contemporary Vietnamese literary scholars, chiefly, it appears, because it challenged rather than praised the Tày Soạn. Thus, one recent critic, while conceding that Thái’s poem might perhaps have reflected some of the realities of the decline and decay of the late Tày Soạn government, still noted that “despite having some realistic aspects within it, this poem has no value independent of them, because its author was using them in order to serve his own dark and gloomy objectives. Thus this poem has no value” (Nguyễn Lộc 1997: 220). Earlier critiques were somewhat less harsh, with a 1963 anthologist noting: “Despite the degenerate thoughts concerning supporting the restoration of the Lê house and resisting the Tày Soạn, which everyone can criticize, we consider that the section describing the scenery [of the lake] has great value” (Họp Tuyển 1963: 256). Thus, while the poem is now often left out of Vietnamese anthologies of 18th-century poetry, its omission is clearly for reasons that are more political than literary.

Although I cannot give the full flavor of the contrast between the two poems, let me just quote one stanza and then the closing couplets from each to give some sense of the distinct visions being presented in the two works.
Nguyễn Huy Luông (a picture of serenity and prosperity), Line 39:

As for the throngs of plows beneath the clouds, we recollect them in the shadow of the rainbow, the Thất-nguyệt poem sighs and laments together with the young buffalo boy; travelers go fishing by the light of the moon, lazily seeking out the traces of the fish, the Three deities discuss matters with the woodsmen.

Phạm Thái (a picture of gloom and misery), Line 39:

The cuckoo calls for a long time, but the furrows have been abandoned for an even longer time; near the rainbow is heard the beat of the loud drums in the moon [light], because the southern Generals must hold a grudge against the northern officers; the frog calls continually and with growing resentment, while on the walls and ramparts one hears the whistling winds, all because the Western Court [Tây Triệu] detests the Eastern noblemen.

and then their respective concluding lines:

Nguyễn Huy Luông, Line 86:

I now submit that:
My bravery is crude and limited,
My foolish cleverness is rudimentary and coarse.
In this era of peace I am fated to be like the useless hu and lìch trees,
I am already old, beyond my fiftieth year.
Before the phoenix altar I have dared to compare the ranks of royal carriages, and looked at the lake’s setting in verse in local tongue;
In the presence of the Imperial way, I raise my head to gaze on the celestial orb, and the rising blue mountain wish a myriad eras to the precious imperial seat.

Phạm Thái, Line 86:

I submit the following:
As for amusing myself this has already taken place,
Here my poem is not coarse.
To think that I had earlier enjoyed too much well-being,
And now must experience this battle in my old age.
I am angry because that insignificant nobody had the gall to put forth In Praise of West Lake, taking the side of those false rebels and abandoning and forgetting his true Emperor;
Thus I have had to compose this poem – Attacking Praise – and I request of my ruler that he may be brought back from his Imperial exile.

Although late in the Tây Sơn period, the Luông-Thái exchange was not the final poetic confrontation of the Tây Sơn era. This distinction goes to a challenge in verse that once again involved Ngô Thị Nhậm, the man who had earlier done poetic battle with Trần Danh Án. In the summer of 1802, the Nguyễn leader, Nguyễn Ánh, entered Thăng Long, triumphant over the Tây Sơn forces. Among those whom he ordered detained were numerous Tây Sơn officials, including...
Nhậm and Phan Huy Ích. Aware of their stature in northern society as well as their not inconsiderable skills as officials and diplomats, the future emperor Gia Long (r. 1802-1820) hoped to win the services of the two men. Despite their offering some diplomatic guidance, and the Nguyễn leader’s inclination to pardon the men, some in his retinue insisted that examples be made of Nhậm and Ích, and so both were ordered to be publicly flogged for their participation in the Tây Sơn regime (*Dài Nam Thức Lục* 2001, vol. 1: 547).

The man assigned to supervise the flogging, Đăng Trần Thượng, had once been an acquaintance of Nhậm’s, before fleeing to the south to serve the Nguyễn cause. On seeing Nhậm on the grounds of the Temple of Literature in Thành Long, where he had been delivered for the punishment to be carried out (see Photo 2), Thượng improvised a couplet alluding to what he saw as the political complexity of the age, and mocking Nhậm’s political choices:

![Photo 2](image-url)
Ai còng hậu, ai khanh tuồng,
trong trận ai ai dễ biết ai?

Who is a duke or marquis, who is high court official?
In this world of tears, who is able easily to recognize whom?

To this Nhâm instantly replied, matching the metre and scheme of the couplet just put to him, and arguing that he had followed his conscience, and had not used the chaos of the era to justify serving the enemy.

Thế Chiến Quốc, thế Xuân thu,
gặp thời thế thế thời phải thế!

Whether one finds oneself in the time of the Warring States, or in the time of the Spring and Autumn,
on encountering the circumstances of that time, one must act in accord with them!


The story goes on to note that Thượng, bested in this verbal duel, administered a particularly harsh beating to his erstwhile colleague. The flogging that Nhâm received ultimately proved fatal, and he only managed to be returned to his home before dying from his injuries the following year. It is possible that this story is apocryphal, though the flogging was real enough and the verbal thrust and parry is in keeping with what we know of Nhâm’s character. Whether true or not, this encounter in verse is emblematic of the kinds of literary and verbal conflicts that were a prominent element of the turbulent Tây Sơn years as they were experienced by Confucian scholars of this era. Moreover, confrontations of the type outlined in the cases above foreshadowed those that took place in the second half of the 19th century, as scholars used verse to challenge the decisions of their peers in the face of French domination.

CONCLUSION
What I have hoped to suggest here is that poetry must be considered a valuable source for historians working on Vietnamese history. Poetry serves the historian in this manner precisely because it is such a versatile medium, as Vietnamese scholars have long recognized. Poetry is, as I have argued, particularly valuable for scholars examining the Tây Sơn period, precisely because so few other indigenous sources for that period have survived. Not only does it afford some very concrete descriptions of the physical events and circumstances of this period, but it also permits a better understanding of the political and emotional outlook of some of the major intellectual and literary figures of this era. This approach clearly leaves some considerable gaps for studying late 18th-century Vietnamese society, for it is focused on a very small group of elite men, most of whom were active only in the northern part of the country. On the other hand, it remains an important element of any serious examination of this period in Vietnamese history, whatever the particular objectives of the researcher.
Notes
1 I would like to offer thanks to those whose input and suggestions have helped improve this article. The anonymous readers at Moussons provided very useful critiques. I also benefited from comments by those who attended a presentation of this paper at UCLA in May 2002. I am, of course, ultimately responsible for the article’s final form.
2 For a good summary of the Tây Sơn, see Vân Tân (1957), Nguyễn Phương (1967), or Tả Chí Đại Trường (1973).
3 Hồ Xuân Hương’s poetry almost certainly dates from the 19th century in any case.
4 There is one other comprehensive collection of Vietnamese poetry and prose, that by Nguyễn Khắc Viên and Hữu Ngọc (n.d.). Published in Việt Nam and not widely available, it includes a good sampling of Tây Sơn-era poetry.
5 Nguyễn Ngọc Bích’s work is similarly skewed toward the 19th century, with only six poems from the 18th century against 35 from the 19th. In my account, I move Hồ Xuân Hương out of the 18th century, where Bích has placed her, and into the 19th.
6 For a detailed examination of this element of Vietnamese poetry, see Liam Kelley’s recent doctoral dissertation (2001).
7 We do not know if this was a coincidence, a sign of Nguyễn military actions, merely evidence of the highly flammable nature of Vietnamese houses, or Ích’s peculiarly bad luck. In 1791 one of his earlier residences had also burned in a conflagration that consumed more than one hundred houses in his village; he escaped that one by chance, having been down the street drinking and exchanging poetry with friends.
8 Reference to a Chinese prophecy that appeared to have predicted the first Tây Sơn emperor’s short reign.
9 Perhaps some of the best examples of this type of poetry are found in verses written by scholars on their long journeys as envoys to the distant Chinese capital. In these poems, scholars reflected on their trip, the experiences they had, and the scenery they passed. Although this envoy poetry is an important subgroup in the genre of poetry as journal, I set it aside to focus more on domestically produced verse and what it can tell us specifically about events and circumstances inside of Việt Nam during the Tây Sơn period.
10 Reference to a (Chinese) Zhou dynasty ruler whose policies benefited the countryside.
11 Reference to a place name used by the Chinese to describe part of the Vietnamese territories under Chinese domination in the first millennium.
12 The full Chinese-character text and transliteration can be found in Nguyễn Lộc 1993: 283a-292.
13 In this case, referring to Nguyễn Hoàng, the patriarch of the southern Nguyễn clan.
14 Names of Cao Dao and Bá Qui, two subjects of the Nguyễn lords.
15 A reference to two semi-legendary Chinese rulers.
16 The Chúa Nguyễn Phúc Khoát (r. 1738-1767).
17 A reference to Khoát’s ordering a change in dress styles, a move intended to forestall a predicted collapse of the Nguyễn house.
18 Reference to a period of great peace and prosperity under the Tang dynasty in China.
19 Reference to the founder of the Han dynasty.
20 Reference to an official of the Jin court in China, who remained loyal to that court, even after it was defeated by the Liu Sung in the 5th century.
21 Reference to an official in the Warring States period in China, who refused to extend his support to the new ruler.
22 Other sources, such as Nguyễn Cẩm Thúy and Nguyễn Phạm Hùng (1997), merely note that Lương submitted the poem (p. 123) – suggesting personal initiative, rather than a royal commission.
23 For the full text in nôm and a quốc ngữ transliteration with detailed annotations, see Nguyễn Cẩm Thúy & Nguyễn Phạm Hùng 1997: 124-147.

24 Reference to a line in the book of Mencius.

25 “Thất Nguyệt” is a reference to a poem in the Book of Odes, which talks about the difficulty that the House of Chú faced in establishing agricultural production.

26 Reference to the classics: three Gods who discuss various matters of political administration, meaning to bring up matters of state for discussion with the common people.

27 Tây Triệu = the Tây Sơn court; Đồng Phủ = Đồng Kinh (i.e., Hà Nội); and phu (as in Chinese “Fu” (noble man, phu tư). Note the juxtapositions that take place in this and the previous lines: South-North and West-East.

28 Literally, “phoenix” (loan).

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References


*Đại Nam Thực Lục* [The Veritable Records of Đại Nam], vol. 1, 2001, Hà Nội: NXB Giáo Dục.


Abstract: Poetry has long been overlooked as a source for writing about and interpreting Vietnamese history. However, it proves to be a very valuable guide for investigating the troubled world of late 18th-century Vietnam, and particularly the Tây Sơn upheavals, which are reflected in an extensive and diverse body of surviving poetry. This article demonstrates, through various types of poems from this period, the potential that verse holds as an important historical source, and offers numerous excerpts from a range of poems that served as records of events, laments for fallen soldiers, political commentaries, and as a type of weapon in personal and political confrontations. By examining poetry, historians can begin to explore the thoughtworlds of this era, and move away from studies of military and diplomatic events.

Écrire des vers en des temps troublés : la poésie de la période Tây Sơn comme source historique

Résumé : la poésie a longtemps été négligée en tant que source pour l’étude et l’interprétation de l’histoire vietnamienne. Elle constitue cependant un guide très utile pour l’exploration d’une période tourmentée de cette histoire, la fin du XVIIIe siècle et, particulièrement la révolte Tây Sơn, dont le vaste corpus de poésie variée qui nous est parvenu se fait l’écho. Cet article démontre, à travers divers types de poèmes de cette période, la grande valeur potentielle de source historique de la littérature en vers, en présentant de nombreux extraits de poèmes qui servirent de témoignages d’événements, d’oraisons funèbres pour des militaires, de commentaires politiques et d’armes de confrontation personnelle ou politique. Par l’étude de la poésie, les historiens peuvent envisager de s’intéresser aux mentalités de l’époque, en se démarquant de l’approche événementielle des guerres et de la diplomatie.

Key-words: Tây Sơn, Vietnam, poetry, poetic genres, eighteenth century, Phan Huy Ich, Ngo Thi Nham.

Mots-clés : Tây Sơn, Viêt-nam, poésie, genres poétiques, XVIIIe siècle, Phan Huy Ich, Ngo Thi Nham.