
**“NGHỆ REGION” IN THE GEOPOLITICAL TRANSFORMATION OF VIETNAM
FROM THE LATE EIGHTEENTH TO THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY****TS. Vũ Đức Liêm^{a*}, Nguyễn Văn Huy^a, Trần Đức Anh^b***(Received: 19/08/2026; revised: 05/09/2026; accepted: 14/09/2026)*

Abstract: This article examines the position of *Xứ Nghệ - Nghệ Region* within the political space of Vietnam in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Moving beyond the conventional narrative of Nghệ An as a commandery, a province, or an administrative unit, the article situates the region within the broader and dynamic historical processes through which the S-shaped territory of Vietnam was constructed and unified. In this geopolitical transformation, Nghệ An occupied an important position across several major historical theatres, from the Trịnh-Nguyễn War, the Tây Sơn-Trịnh conflict, and the Tây Sơn-Qing confrontation to the Tây Sơn-Nguyễn struggle. From its reputation as a land of outstanding people and sacred geography to its roles in taxation, corvée labour, military recruitment, logistics, battlefields, civil service examinations, and administrative governance, Nghệ An became deeply involved in the formation of the emerging political structure of modern Vietnam.

Keywords: Hà Tĩnh, Nghệ An, Nghệ region, Quang Trung, Vietnamese political history, Vĩnh Kinh/Trung Đô.

1. INTRODUCTION

In September 1792, in the citadel of Phú Xuân, the most remarkable general and emperor of the Tây Sơn dynasty lay on his deathbed. The thirty-nine-year-old ruler summoned his trusted and talented military officer Trần Quang Diệu, then serving as Governor of Nghệ An, to receive his final instructions. Quang Trung's last words were recorded by the official chronicle of his sworn enemy, the Nguyễn lineage: “After my death, the burial should be completed within one month. The funeral rites should be simple. You must assist the crown prince and quickly move the capital to Nghệ An in order to control the realm. If this is not done, the Gia Định army will come, and you will have no place to bury yourselves..”. (*Đại Nam chính biên liệt truyện*, hereafter ĐNLT, First Collection, vol. 30, fols. 42a-42b).

His son, Quang Toản, and the Tây Sơn generals did not continue the project of relocating the capital to Nghệ An. Quang Trung, however, had been correct. A decade later, the Gia Định army arrived, just as he had predicted. In the sixth lunar month of 1802, Diệu fled by mountain routes toward Thanh Hoa, was captured, and was later executed (Nguyễn Đức Xuyên, 2015, p. 81; Phan Thúc Trục, 2010, 33-39). This marked the end of the uprising that had exerted the greatest impact on Vietnamese history. Yet the journey through which the young general Nguyễn Huệ “shook” the realm had in fact begun more than a decade earlier. On 1 July 1786, more than one thousand war vessels of various kinds sailed northward, advancing directly

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toward Thăng Long, the capital of the Lê-Trịnh government. One of the architects of this campaign was the talented military figure from Nghệ Region, Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh (1741-1788), known in his own time as “the water falcon”. He not only took part directly in the attack but also offered strategic advice to Nguyễn Huệ (Ngô gia văn phái, 1969, pp. 44, 83). After several naval engagements, the Tây Sơn forces reached the Luộc River, where Đinh Tích Nhưỡng, one of the leading commanders of Bắc Hà, had arrayed his troops across the river in the form of the character *nhất* [一]. The Lê-Trịnh forces opened fire first, but their cannonballs could not reach the Tây Sơn warships. In response, the Tây Sơn returned fire; their cannon thundered like lightning and split the tops of trees on the riverbank. The Lê-Trịnh troops fell into disorder, abandoned their positions, and fled ashore (Ngô gia văn phái, 1969, pp. 8485).

The gate to Thăng Long was left open. Within a single month, the 253-year structure of Lê-Trịnh rule collapsed. For the first time, the eastern littoral of mainland Southeast Asia long divided between Đàng Trong [Cochinchina] and Đàng Ngoài [Tongking], Nam Hà and Bắc Hà was brought, however briefly, under a single political authority: the Tây Sơn regime.

These were two of the most important developments in eighteenth-century Vietnamese history, at a time when the shape of a modern territory was being configured. Although the historical record shows that the situation of the Tây Sơn movement changed rapidly after 1786, the expedition that erased the Gianh-River boundary in that year constituted an important precondition for the unification of 1802. The sudden death of Emperor Quang Trung transformed the political and military situation across the entire Vietnamese territory, especially among the three regimes of Quang Toản, Nguyễn Nhạc, and Nguyễn Phúc Ánh. The tragic defeat of the Tây Sơn and the complete rewriting of history by the victors, the Nguyễn dynasty, produced distorted images of the movement. One aspect that has not been properly assessed is the importance of the uprising in the formation of the territorial structure and political order of modern Vietnam. As Alexander Woodside observed, “the Tây Sơn rebellion has not received the attention it deserves, as one of the basic developments in eighteenth-century Southeast Asian and East Asian history. Yet it can be argued that this rebellion opened the history of modern Vietnam” (Woodside, 1988, p. 3).

Amid the dynamic historical developments from 1770 to 1840, which gave birth to the S-shaped outline of Vietnam, the past was monopolized by royal courts and political centers. Dynastic history was therefore a history sketched from Thăng Long, Phú Xuân, Quy Nhơn, and Gia Định. The consequence of this process of “centralizing”, “capitalizing”, “orthodoxizing”, and “imperializing” history was that historical discourses lost sight of local dynamism and diminished the contribution of the “world beyond the capital” to larger historical processes shared across geographical regions, communities, and the nation.

Existing studies and sources on Nghệ Region have been shaped largely by the tradition of local gazetteers and administrative geography. Works such as *Hoan Châu ký*, *Nghệ An ký*, *An Hối thôn chí*, *Đại Nam nhất thống chí*, and *Đồng Khánh địa dư chí* provide indispensable materials on the region’s mountains and rivers, products, customs, temples, shrines, eminent

persons, examination graduates, administrative units, and changes in territorial organization (Bùi Dương Lịch, 2004; *Đại Nam nhất thống chí*, 2006; Ngô Đức Thọ et al., 2003). These works are especially valuable because they preserve a form of địa chí [gazetteer] knowledge that links geography, people, institutions, ritual sites, local products, and historical memory into a single descriptive framework. Alongside these gazetteer-style sources, studies such as Ninh Viêt Giao’s *Tục thờ thần và thần tích ở Nghệ An* [The Cult of Deities and Deity Legends in Nghệ An] and Hà Nguyễn’s *Tiểu vùng văn hóa xứ Nghệ* [The Cultural Subregions of Nghệ Region] further enrich our understanding of Nghệ An as a cultural region, especially through local cults, village deities, sacred sites, folk memory, ritual practices, and subregional cultural identities (Ninh Viêt Giao, 2000; Hà Nguyễn, 2013). In this tradition, Nghệ An appears as a culturally rich and strategically important land, often associated with scholarly achievement, loyal officials, military men, sacred landscapes, and local lineages [Hippolyte Le Breton, 1936].

At the same time, this body of writing tends to be more descriptive than analytical. Local gazetteers usually catalogue what a region possesses its thổ sản [local products], nhân vật [prominent figures], đền miếu [temples], schools, rivers, mountains, districts, prefectures, and tax or military obligations rather than asking how the region participated in broader historical transformations. Even when they record administrative evolution from different administrative units and their organization, they rarely analyze these changes as part of a larger process of shifting power and territorial reconfiguration. Recent scholarship has begun to reposition Nghệ An within wider political and military histories, particularly the TrịnhNguyễn conflict, the Tây Sơn wars, and the emergence of a unified Vietnamese territorial order (Woodside, 1988; Vũ Đức Liêm, 2017, 2018). Building on these materials, this article moves beyond a conventional địa phương chí [local gazetteer] approach. It treats Nghệ Region not simply as an administrative unit or a repository of local knowledge, but as a dynamic geopolitical space whose resources, people, routes, military functions, and symbolic position shaped the transformation from Đại Việt to Vietnam in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This direction is consistent with the article’s stated aim of moving beyond the narrative of Nghệ An as a commandery or province to examine its role in larger territorial and political processes.

This article adds a local perspective to a national historical story. It examines the fate of the traditional geographical space known as “Nghệ Region” amid the NorthSouth gambits of power that accompanied the formation of the geopolitical and territorial space of modern Vietnam. By placing Nghệ Region within the geopolitical world of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Vietnam, this study seeks an alternative understanding that goes beyond the story of a single commandery, province, or administrative unit. Instead, it situates Nghệ An within the broad and diverse spaces of Vietnamese history from the late LêTrịnh period to the early Nguyễn dynasty. The powers that controlled the Lam River region turned this area into an essential component of numerous political and military projects, including the TrịnhNguyễn, Tây SơnTrịnh, Tây SơnQuing, and Nguyễn Tây Sơn conflicts. On this stage, Nghệ An was not

merely a gateway between Đàng Trong [Cochinchina]¹ and Đàng Ngoài [Tongking]², or between Bắc Hà [Northern River]³ and Nam Hà [Southern River]⁴. It was also a strategic and dynamic center of regional power. Quang Trung's project of a Central Capital [Trung Đô], sought to transform Nghệ An into the political headquarters of a unified dynasty stretching from Quảng Nam to Lạng Sơn. Subsequent military conflict and the ruler's sudden death caused this plan to collapse. Nevertheless, amid geopolitical upheavals and regional shifts, Nghệ An with its identity, geographical position, resources, and human talent, played an important role in shaping the history of the S-shaped land.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Nghệ Region comprised present-day Nghệ An and Hà Tĩnh.⁵ From the seventeenth to the eighteenth century, this region was described as a great commandery (cự trấn 巨鎮) of Bắc Hà, supplying soldiers and officials as a foundation for the LêTrịnh government (Bùi Dương Lịch, 2004, vol. 1, fol. 46a). Nghệ An participated in the historical processes of this period and contributed to shifts in the political structure across geographical space, changes in the balance among regions, lineages, dynasties, and separatist powers, and the political and military projects that laid the basis for the emergence of the geographical space called "Vietnam" in 1802. This geographical space was the product of at least seven decades of war and political projects (1770-1840). It not only ended the division along the Gianh River and the regional governments of Đàng Trong and Đàng Ngoài, but also involved the confrontation between the Nguyễn lineage in Nam Hà and the Tây Sơn courts, including the Quang Trung and Cảnh Thịnh regimes in Bắc Hà. This territorial form was only firmly consolidated under Minh Mệnh (1820-1841), with the completion of the Vĩnh Tế Canal, the establishment of the provincial system, and the inspection missions of imperial commissioners who compiled land and population registers throughout the country (*Đại Nam Thực Lục*, hereafter DNTL, Second Reign, vol. 171, fol. 25b).

This study therefore seeks local pieces within the larger processes of dynastic, national, regional, and epochal transformation. It offers an example of local dynamism outside traditional centers of power and royal capitals such as Cổ Loa, Hoa Lư, Thăng Long, Phú Xuân, Gia Định, and Quy Nhơn. Places such as Cao Bằng, Dương Kinh, Nam Định, Tây Đô [Western capital Thanh Hoa], Nghệ An [Central capital Trung Đô], Châu Đốc, and Hà Tiên each played important driving roles at moments of transition in Vietnamese history. One key to understanding this national history is to recognize the process through which the entity known as Vietnam was gestated, especially during the final three decades of the eighteenth century. War, dynastic change, and the movement of political regions created the transition from the

¹ The Nguyễn lordship existed from the sixteenth through the eighteenth century.

² The LêTrịnh realm existed from the sixteenth through the eighteenth century.

³ The term was used primarily in the eighteenth century to designate the northern deltaic region, encompassing the Red, Mã, and Cả River deltas.

⁴ The term was used primarily in the eighteenth century to designate the southern deltaic region, including ThuậnQuảng and the lower Mekong region.

⁵ In 1831, Minh Mệnh abolished the Bắc Thành administrative unit and replaced it with eleven provinces. The Nghệ An Commandery was divided into the two provinces of Nghệ An and Hà Tĩnh, administered by a single governor-general.

space of “Đại Việt” to the space of “Vietnam”. The pages that follow examine the fate of Nghệ An within that transformation.

2. NGHỆ REGION AMID THE BOUNDARIES OF VIETNAMESE POWERS

The shifting geopolitical, geocultural, and geomilitary role of Nghệ Region from the thirteenth century to the early nineteenth century was remarkable. It reveals how a “frontier” region within the space of “Đại Việt” gradually moved toward the “center” and came to play a major role on the stage of Vietnamese southward expansion. This administrative and political “evolution” was gradually marked by the transformation of territorial units from *châu trại* 州寨, *trại* 寨, *phủ* 府, *thừa tuyên* 承宣, *xứ* 處, *dinh* 營, *trấn* 鎮, *đô* 都, to *tỉnh* 省. Along with these names came changes in political identity and in the region’s participation in the continuously shifting structures of Vietnamese power.

From the Trần period onward, this region served as a strategic rear base for Đại Việt in wars against northern invasions, while also helping to block the incursions of Champa and other neighboring polities. By the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Nghệ An had become an increasingly important stage for turning points in Vietnamese history. This began with military activity against the Ming during the Hồ and Later Trần periods. Two decades later, Nghệ An became the springboard for the Lam Sơn uprising. The dynasty that emerged from that movement later combined Nghệ An and Diễn Châu into Nghệ An Thừa Tuyên before converting it into a unit known as *xứ* [region] (*Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, Basic Annals, vol. 12, fol. 25a). The return of the Lê from 1533 brought Thanh Region and Nghệ Region back onto the political stage in the struggle for power with the Mạc in the Red River Delta. The Lê lineage, the Nguyễn lineage of Nguyễn Kim, and the Trịnh lineage of Trịnh Kiểm all came from the southern rim of the delta. Their establishment across the entire space of Đại Việt in 1593 generated a new flow northward into the delta, not only of soldiers but also of generals and scholars. Dương Trí Trạch (1586-1662) and Hồ Sĩ Dương (1621-1681), for example, were among the most effective figures in bringing an end to the fate of the Mạc in Cao Bằng in the late seventeenth century (*Đại Việt sử ký tục biên*, 2011, 16-17; Bùi Dương Lịch, 2004, vol. 2, fols. 44a-50b).

One consequence was the rise of official lineages from Nghệ Region and their increasingly close connection with northern power structures. This elevated the importance of political and military links between Nghệ An and Thăng Long. The Nguyễn Tiên Điền lineage was one of the most powerful forces in eighteenth-century Bắc Hà. Quận Huy Hoàng Đình Bảo, the adopted son of Hoàng Ngũ Phúc, married Trịnh Sâm’s younger sister and began building his influence from his position as Governor of Nghệ An. From there, he attracted numerous clients and followers, including Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh (Bùi Dương Lịch, 2004, vol. 2, fol. 123a). In 1780, Trịnh Sâm himself privately summoned examination candidates from the two regions of Thanh and Nghệ into the lord’s residence to ask them about affairs of state (Bùi Dương Lịch, 2004, vol. 2, fol. 124a). Later, the Tây Sơn dynasty exploited this region thoroughly for its own

movement, including military recruitment stops in 1787, 1788, and 1790. Nguyễn Phúc Ánh would also conscript soldiers and collect taxes in Nghệ An in 1801 (ĐNTL, First Reign, vol. 15, fol. 16a). Even in the modern period, one can still observe the role of Military Region IV and the strength of the rear base during the anti-French resistance war (1946-1954).

Nghệ An's military capacity and strategic position were repeatedly tested in history. Nguyễn Chích's plan to shift the operational base into Nghệ Region not only saved the Lam Sơn insurgents from Ming suppression but also opened the way for the powerful development and eventual victory of the uprising. In the seventeenth century, Lam Thành and the Bến Thủy rampart blocked the Nguyễn advance during the Nghệ An campaign of 1655-1661, when forces from Đàng Trong occupied seven districts south of the Lam River. The Bắc Hà army under Trịnh Toàn had to rely on the defensive system on the northern bank to prevent the Nguyễn from taking the rest of Nghệ An. It took four years for the Trịnh forces to push the Nguyễn back across the Gianh River. From that point onward, securing this region became more important to Bắc Hà than ever before. The Tây Sơn later renamed Nghệ Region as Nghĩa An Commandery and made Vĩnh Dinh [Vinh] the Central Capital [Trung Đô] (Ngô Đức Thọ et al., 2003, p. 1229). In 1802, Gia Long restored the old name, Nghệ An Commandery. In 1832, Minh Mệnh divided the Commandery, separating the Đức Thọ prefecture and Hà Hoa to form Hà Tĩnh province, while the northern part became Nghệ An province (ĐNTL, Second Reign, vol. 76, fols. 15b-24b).

During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Nghệ Region, together with Thăng Long, Phú Xuân, Quy Nhơn, and Gia Định, participated in the search for a new territorial structure and political space that would shape Vietnamese national identity. Figures such as Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh, Nguyễn Thiếp, Bùi Dương Lịch, Nguyễn Du, and Nguyễn Công Trứ were part of a geopolitical and dynastic transformation that eventually produced a new geographical frame of reference on the Nguyễn's increasingly unified territory. By the end of 1786, at least two political projects operated across the space from Quảng Nam to Lạng Sơn: that of Nguyễn Huệ and that of Lê Chiêu Thống-Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh. In both projects, Nghệ Region can be regarded as a crucial contested space of power. For Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh, controlling Nghệ An was the key to the survival of his own political fate and that of the Red River Delta. This was precisely why he proposed sending Trần Công Xán to "demand back" this region from the Tây Sơn court (Ngô gia văn phái, 1969, p. 116). For Nguyễn Huệ, Nghệ An was the essential ground for defending both the interior and the exterior of his realm, if he wished to avoid losing control of Bắc Hà, as the Trịnh had done in 1786 (Hoàng Xuân Hãn, 1952, p. 121). Therefore, when he withdrew to Phú Xuân, Huệ constructed a tight military defense system between Quảng Bình and Nghệ An (Ngô gia văn phái, 1969, p. 189).

As we shall see, losing control of Nghệ Region would affect the ability of various forces to maintain power in Bắc Hà. Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh's mistaken policy toward Nghệ An cost him both his political career and his life. He underestimated Vũ Văn Nhậm, trusted too much in his own abilities, and misread Huệ's capacity in the conflict with Nguyễn Nhạc. Believing that the Tây

Son no longer had the energy to pay attention to this region,⁶ Chinh sent Trần Công Xán’s embassy into Phú Xuân to demand the return of Nghệ An (Ngô gia văn phái, 1969, pp. 193194). This act brought an end to the days of cooperation between Nguyễn Huệ and Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh, and also to Chinh’s political ambitions. Through this example, we can see clearly how the loss of control over Nghệ An deeply affected the developments that shaped the fate of Bắc Hà.

3. NGHỆ REGION: AN INTERSECTION OF VIETNAMESE SPACE(S)



Figure 1. Complete Map of Nghệ An and Hà Tĩnh, in *Đại Nam toàn đồ*, Paris: EFEO Microfilm, A.2959: 17a-b. [The route running along the coastline is the relay-post road]

From palace guards to village teachers, from examination graduates to generals and officials, Nghệ Region produced a dynamic social network with a high capacity for connection to the rest of the Vietnamese space over many centuries. The participation of people from this region on the political, scholarly, and military stages turned Nghệ Region into an intersection of Vietnamese identity. In this connective position, Nghệ Region not only stood between regional and dynastic boundaries of power, but also linked them, serving as a space of transit and a site for testing political ideas and ambitions. This region lay on a strategic “military corridor” from the period of TrịnhNguyễn division to the campaigns of Trịnh Sâm, the Tây Sơn, and Nguyễn Ánh (ĐNTL, Preliminary Compilation, vol. 2, fol. 10b, vol. 4, fols. 4a6b; Bùi Dương Lịch, 2004, vol. 1, fol. 47b; *Khâm định Việt sử thông giám cương mục*, hereafter KĐVSTGCM, vol. 44, fols. 22a-b).

The late eighteenth-century official Bùi Huy Bích, while serving as governor [*Đốc đồng*] of Nghệ An in 1777, emphasized the intermediary position of Nghệ Region as a battlefield of the “two River deltas” Bắc Hà [Northern river] and Nam Hà [Southern river]: “By sea, it controls three estuaries;⁷ / Caps and parasols travel along the road from east to west; / Rivers flow through villages near and far; / The two Hà [Nam Hà and Bắc Hà] cease their warfare; / Each

⁶ When Trần Công Xán’s embassy went to Phú Xuân, Chinh declared: “The Tây Sơn situation is as clear to me as if it were in my own eyes. They are now pleased that, as long as we do not cause any trouble, they can devote themselves to managing their own affairs. At present, their internal crisis is urgent; how could they have time to think about external matters?... As for Vũ Văn Nhậm, he is isolated in Nghệ An. Looking back inward, he cannot receive any reinforcements. What can he possibly do?” (Ngô gia văn phái, 1969, pp. 207208).

⁷ Cửa Hội [Hội estuary], Cửa Cương Gián [Cương Gián estuary], and Cửa Sốt [Sốt estuary].

day the woodcutter gathers firewood until dusk” (Bùi Dương Lịch, 2004, vol. 1, fol. 43b). Under Gia Long, Nghệ An had nine prefectures [phủ], twenty-five districts [huyện], and two sub-prefecture [châu]. Yet only four prefectures were under “orthodox teaching” (*thánh giáo*), while five were *kimi* territories (Bùi Dương Lịch, 2004, vol. 1, fols. 6a-b). In the long course of history, therefore, Nghệ Region was a place of interaction among multiple groups of people and administrative spaces. When the Tây Sơn gained control of Nghệ An, they also faced considerable pressure from Lao groups in the upper Lam River region, who were allies of Siam and the Nguyễn lords (Nguyễn Phương, 1968). In 1790, Trần Quang Diệu had to organize forces to pacify Vạn Tượng [Lanchang]. The uplands of Nghệ An were also the starting point of the upper route running along the foot of the Trường Sơn range, connecting as far as Quy Nhơn and the Central Highlands, a long-standing corridor of trade and military movement (ĐNTL, First Reign, vol. 6, fols. 2b3a).

The “Nghệ Region network” also played a special role in expanding and connecting the space of “Đại Việt” over a long historical process. By the eighteenth century, several important groups can be identified. One example is Nguyễn Công Tuấn (1716-1800), the father of Nguyễn Công Trứ, who maintained close connections with two intellectual circles: Quỳnh Côi in Thái Bình and Nghi Xuân in Hà Tĩnh. He had served as district magistrate of Quỳnh Côi and prefect of Tiên Hưng (Lê Xuân Giáo, 1973). It was perhaps through these connections that, three decades later, Nguyễn Công Trứ would be sent by Emperor Minh Mệnh back to the delta for new political and military missions (Vũ Đức Liêm, 2019).

Another Nghi Xuân family was the Nguyễn Tiên Điền lineage. Nguyễn Nghiễm, Nguyễn Khản, Nguyễn Điều, and other members of this family were among the most powerful figures in Thăng Long, Sơn Tây, and Nghệ An at the end of the Lê-Trịnh period. Nguyễn Du was born in the citadel of Thăng Long. His wife came from a distinguished Quỳnh Côi family; She was the daughter of Đoàn Nguyễn Thục (1718-1775), a metropolitan laureate under the Lê dynasty, and the younger sister of Đoàn Nguyễn Tuấn (Taylor, 2016, pp. 257-258). Nguyễn Du’s elder sister married another talented northern scholar, Vũ Trinh (1752-1827), who came from an eminent family in Lương Tài, Bắc Ninh (Vũ Trinh, 2019, p. 14). Vũ Trinh later became the teacher of Nguyễn Văn Thuyên, the son of the powerful governor-general Nguyễn Văn Thành. These scholarly, literary, and political networks were certainly not accidental. Another man from Nghệ Region, Phan Huy Ích (1751-1822), established links with the Red River Delta through marriage into one of the region’s major scholarly lineages, by marrying a daughter of Ngô Thì Sĩ (1726-1780). One of his sons, Phan Huy Chú, was born and raised in Quốc Oai and married the daughter of Nguyễn Thế Lịch (1748-1817), a Lê-dynasty *tiến sĩ* (metropolitan laureate) from Từ Liêm (*Phan Gia Công phả*, 2006).

The fate of these individuals and lineages shows how persons, families, power networks, localities, and communities participated in regional and dynastic transformations during one of the most turbulent moments in Vietnamese history. Many figures from Nghệ Region took part in the final drama of dynastic and territorial unification. Their journeys, like the land itself, stood between

and were caught among different spaces of identity, currents of the age, networks of power, and geopolitical configurations. Nowhere reflected this connective character in a more diverse, vivid, and dramatic way than Nghệ region in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Both descendants of the Lê meritorious official Nguyễn Xí of Chân Lộc district, Nguyễn Như Thái followed Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh and Emperor Chiêu Thống in 1786, was assigned to govern Nghệ An, and received the Duke title [*quận công*] (Bùi Dương Lịch, 2004, vol. 2, fols. 129a-129b). In the following year, 1787, another descendant, Nguyễn Đình Đắc, took the opposite path: he crossed the sea to seek an audience with Nguyễn Phúc Ánh, fought for two decades, became governor of Sơn Nam Thượng, and was worshipped in the temple of meritorious officials of the restoration (ĐNTL, First Reign, vol. 18, fols. 5ab). The fate of Nguyễn Nghiễm’s family offers another example. The participation of its members in the Lê-Trịnh, Tây Sơn, and Nguyễn regimes reveals the dynamism of Nghệ An and Vietnamese history, as well as the scale of geopolitical transitions and transformations in the geography of power during this period. Below are several examples of the shifting “political identities” of people from Nghệ region, whose careers themselves reflected the region’s character as an “intersection” of history.

Table 1. Selected Prominent Figures from Nghệ Region in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries

Figure	Lê-Trịnh Regime	Tây Sơn Regime	Nguyễn Dynasty
Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh	Military officer	Advisor	
Phan Huy Ích	Đốc đồng of Thanh Hoa	Lễ bộ Thượng thư	Quốc tử giám phó đốc học
Nguyễn Cảnh Thước	Trấn thủ of Kinh Bắc	Joined the Tây Sơn in 1787	
Nguyễn Thiếp	Tri huyện	Head of the Institute of Sùng Chính	
Bùi Dương Lịch	Nội Hàn viện cung phụng sứ ngoại lang	Hàn Lâm viện, Viện Sùng chính	Trấn thủ Nghệ An
Nguyễn Đề	Officer	Officer	Officer
Nguyễn Du	Officer		Tham tri
Vũ Nguyên Lượng (from Công Thành district)	Câu kê (a seventh-rank civil official in the Trịnh lord’s administrative offices)		Chiêu thảo sứ (1794) (ĐNLT, First Reign, vol. 18, fols. 9b-10a)

The journeys of many historical figures from Nghệ Region also partly reflected the region’s character as an “intersection” of geopolitical identity in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh (1741-1788) was one of the most influential men from Nghệ An in the late eighteenth century. Yet from many perspectives, he has often been regarded as a figure who produced historical disorder. In fact, he may also be understood as a victim of dynastic transition and of the extremely rapid transformation of geopolitical structures in the late eighteenth century. Born in Nghệ Region, he served the Lê-Trịnh regime and entered the

service of two of the most brilliant military figures of Đàng Ngoài, Hoàng Ngũ Phúc and Hoàng Đình Bảo. Yet it was precisely his Nghệ An origin that created a crisis of “geopolitical identity” for him. By the time he joined the Tây Sơn, he was regarded as a man of “Bắc Hà”. For that reason, his plan to conquer the Red River Delta in 1786 was viewed by many people in Bắc Hà as an act of “betrayal” (Ngô gia văn phái, 1969, p. 189).

Bùi Dương Lịch (1757/1828) represents another “tragedy” of this age of geopolitical transition. His father, Bùi Quốc Toại, from Yên Hội hamlet, Yên Đồng commune, Việt Yên canton, La Sơn district, Đức Thọ prefecture, passed the *huong cống* examination under the Lê and served as Prefect of Thiệu Thiên in Thanh Hoa. Bùi Dương Lịch himself passed the *huong cống* examination in 1774 and the *hoàng giáp* examination in 1787. He was appointed Instructor of Lý Nhân prefecture in 1776,⁸ and later served as *Nội Hàn viện cung phụng sứ ngoại lang*, an adviser to Emperor Lê Chiêu Thống, in 1786. After failing in his effort to support the Lê, he followed Nguyễn Thiếp in translating books at the Institute of Sùng Chính for the Quang Trung court. He later served the Nguyễn dynasty as Director of Education of Nghệ An in 1805 and Deputy Director of the Quốc Tử Giám in 1812. Such a career naturally provoked controversy, as reflected in a satirical poem: “Under the Lê, he attained the title of metropolitan laureate; / Under the Tây Sơn rebels, he served as a Hanlin official 翰林院; / Under our dynasty [the Nguyễn], he became Director of Education; / His fame is known throughout the four seas” (Bùi Dương Lịch, 2004, vol. 2, fol. 13).

This mentality must have deeply shaped the disposition and conduct of elite intellectuals from Nghệ Region who had been closely tied to the Đàng Ngoài state. Nguyễn Du was one such figure. As the son of Nguyễn Nghiễm, the younger brother of Nguyễn Khản, and the brother-in-law of Vũ Trinh, he was said to have behaved before Minh Mệnh as “a timid man who, whenever he appeared before the emperor, was fearful and could not say much”, and as someone who was “hesitant and frightened, doing no more than obeying and saying yes” (DNLT, Second Reign, vol. 4, fols. 16b17a). The imprint of the age weighed heavily on a generation of men from Nghệ Region in this way (Vũ Đức Liêm and Dương Duy Bằng, 2018, 26-36).

In this sense, the Nghệ Tĩnh region was clearly not only a geographical point of connection among political and military forces in eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Vietnam. It also established networks of knowledge, marriage, and regional power, and participated directly in the formation of a new, unified territorial structure of Vietnam.

4. NGHỆ REGION IN GEOPOLITICAL PROJECTS

The early modern history of Nghệ Region was a process of transformation from a “frontier” and a “point of connection” into one of the central stages of Vietnamese political and military power. Through such geopolitical and geomilitary structural changes, the emergence of modern Vietnam was determined not only in Thăng Long, Phú Xuân, Quy Nhơn, and Gia Định, but also in the fortifications and densely populated villages along the Lam River delta. It was here

⁸ He declined the appointment because he was in mourning for his father.

that the fortifications on the northern bank held by the Trịnh forces blocked the Nguyễn advance during the Nghệ An campaign of 1655-1661. Yet it was also because of this conflict that a group of local people was captured and taken into Đàng Trong, among whom some were later believed to have been the ancestors of the Tây Sơn house.

At that time, the Governor of Nghệ An was Trịnh Toàn, the eighth son of Trịnh Tráng. His prestige and military talent helped halt the Nguyễn advance. However, when Trịnh Tạc came to power, Toàn was recalled, imprisoned, and died mysteriously at the age of thirty-five (Breton, 2010, pp. 420-422). The fate of another Governor of Nghệ An, Hoàng Đình Bảo, was no less dramatic. He served as Governor of Nghệ An in 1777 and won considerable local support. For that reason, Trịnh Sâm feared that he might rebel and secretly ordered his trusted men Nguyễn Phương Đình and Nguyễn Khả to plot Bảo's assassination. Fortunately, Bảo's wife had the favor of Đặng Thị Huệ, whose protection allowed him to avoid the fate of Trịnh Toàn (*KĐVSTGCM*, vol. 45, fol. 13b). Hoàng Đình Bảo later became Governor of Sơn Nam, took control of the lord's residence, and dominated the political situation in Thăng Long after Trịnh Sâm's death. These examples demonstrate the importance of Nghệ Region and its influence within the geography of Vietnamese power.

It was precisely Nghệ Region's geographical position and resources that made it one of the military flashpoints of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Nguyễn Quý Lập, an examiner at the Nghệ An provincial examination in 1743, wrote of the region's candidates: “The wind blows and thunder rolls, carrying the brush forward; / In the examination hall, they seize distinction throughout east and west; / Turning back to see literary brilliance shining among the Ox and Dipper stars; / One then knows that Hoan Châu possesses a heroic scholarly spirit” (Hoàng Xuân Hãn, 1952, p. 34). In practice, the northern campaigns of Nguyễn Huệ, Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh, Vũ Văn Nhậm, and Nguyễn Phúc Ánh all had to mobilize the resources of Nghệ Region. From 1774 to 1802, armies repeatedly passed through this region, whether moving northward, southward, or westward into Laos; whether fleeing, defending, or organizing attacks.

The scale of its population and its capacity for military recruitment made Nghệ Region a constant counterweight within the Đàng Ngoài power system. Trịnh Tông (1782-1786) sought the support of Thanh-Nghệ soldiers as a foundation for his lordly throne (Bùi Dương Lịch, 2004, vol. 2, fols. 128a-b). When Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh returned to Đông Hải to recruit troops in support of Lê Chiêu Thống in 1786, he raised between fifty and sixty thousand men in only one month. By early 1787, after defeating Phan Huy Ích, Chỉnh's army had reached 120,000 soldiers (Bùi Dương Lịch, 2004, vol. 2, fols. 81a-81b). The resources of Nghệ Region thus became the driving force behind Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh's political ambition. He relied on Nghệ An troops not only to establish his personal power, but also to pursue the plan of creating a new “princely residence” to replace the Trịnh and to confront Nguyễn Huệ in order to preserve the Đàng Ngoài monarchy. The following table lists several Nghệ An figures who followed Chỉnh northward and were placed in new positions of power.

Table 2. Selected Figures from Nghệ Region Who Participated in Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh's Military Campaign (1787)

Name	Native Place	Office / Examination Status	
Nguyễn Khuê	Đặng Xá commune, Chân Phúc district	Instructor, <i>Huấn đạo</i>	Associate Assistant Minister of State Affairs (<i>Đồng tham tri chính sự</i>); attained the rank of metropolitan laureate.
Lê Hằng	Nộn Liễu commune, Nam Đường district	Instructor, <i>Huấn đạo</i>	Assistant Secretary of the Privy Council, <i>Thiêm thư Khu mật viện</i> ; assigned to govern Thanh Hoa, <i>trấn Thanh Hoa</i> .
Nguyễn Phi Hiển	Đan Chế commune, Thạch Hà district	Provincial graduate, <i>Hương cống</i>	Assistant fiscal administrator of the Ministry of Revenue, <i>Độ chi hiệp biện tài phú</i> .
Hoàng Viêt Tuyển	Vạn Phần commune, Đông Thành district	Military student, <i>Biên sinh</i>	Assigned to govern Sơn Nam, <i>trấn Sơn Nam</i> ; ennobled as Duke <i>Quận công</i> .
Nguyễn Như Thái, descendant of Nguyễn Xi	Thượng Xá commune, Chân Phúc district	—	Entrusted with the governorship of Nghệ An, <i>giữ trấn Nghệ An</i> ; ennobled as Duke, <i>Quận công</i>
Nguyễn Cảnh Thước, descendant of the meritorious official Nguyễn Cảnh Mô	Đô Lương commune, Nam Đường district	—	Assigned to govern Kinh Bắc, <i>trấn Kinh Bắc</i>
Lê Hân	Nộn Liễu commune, Nam Đường district	—	Acting governor of Hải Dương, <i>Thự trấn Hải Dương</i>
Nguyễn Trọng Khoan	Yên Việt Thượng commune, La Sơn district	Provincial graduate, <i>Hương cống</i>	Commander of the Four Inner Districts of the Capital, <i>Đề lĩnh Tứ thành</i>
Lê Văn Trương	Nghĩa Đông commune, Nam Đường district	—	Acting official in charge of artisans and construction works, <i>Thự chức công tượng</i>
Lê Văn Cẩn	—	—	Acting governor of Hải Dương, <i>Thự trấn Hải Dương</i>
Lê Văn Tái	—	—	Acting officer in the Cẩm Y Guard, <i>Thự chức ở vệ Cẩm Y</i> ⁹

After the defeat of Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh and Lê Chiêu Thống, Nguyễn Huệ's project posed larger geopolitical challenges concerning whether the capital should be located at Phú Xuân, Nghệ An, or Thăng Long. These were early political experiments aimed at finding ways to organize state rule from newly emerging centers of power. The dynamism of the frontier had risen to challenge established centers of authority. When Nguyễn Huệ sent troops northward to destroy Chỉnh, he also ordered Vũ Văn Nhậm to recruit soldiers in Nghệ.¹⁰ When Qing troops entered in the winter of 1788, Quang Trung came to Nghệ An, summoned Nguyễn Thiếp to ask for counsel, and recruited Nghệ soldiers at the rate of one man for every three adult males in

⁹ "In addition, among civil officials there were prefects and district magistrates, and among military officials there were commanders of boat units, too numerous to count" (Bùi Dương Lịch, 2004, vol. 2, fols. 129a129b).

¹⁰ Before this, Nguyễn Huệ and Nguyễn Nhạc had fought each other, and according to Bùi Dương Lịch, the number of soldiers "killed and wounded was beyond counting" (Bùi Dương Lịch, 2004, vol. 1, fol. 48a; vol. 2, fols. 84b85a).

preparation for the spring offensive of 1789 (Hoàng Xuân Hãn, 1952, p. 130). In 1790, Quang Trung again ordered Nguyễn Quang Diệu to recruit Nghệ An troops for the campaign against Vạn Tượng [Lanchang] (Bùi Dương Lịch, 2004, vol. 1, fol. 49a). Immediately after the Qing court invested Nguyễn Huệ as King of An Nam, he began constructing a capital at An Trường commune, Chân Phúc district [present-day Vinh] (Cao Tự Thanh, 2020, p. 263; Bùi Dương Lịch, 2004, vol. 1, fols. 49a-49b).

The political ideas that the Tây Sơn ruler reserved for Nghệ An, however, formed part of a long-term strategy. When he was informed that Chỉnh had brought troops northward, had been enfeoffed as Duke Bằng [Bằng Quận công], and had taken power in Thăng Long, Nguyễn Huệ sent a letter inviting Nguyễn Thiếp to join him. The letter reached the sixty-five-year-old scholar precisely on the fourth day of the first lunar month. In it, Nguyễn Huệ urged him to “abandon your lofty pleasures, think of my sincere and anxious heart, leave the plough and cast aside the fishing rod, and take up the enterprise of Yi and Jiang”. He would be welcomed as a military counselor for a new dynasty with ambitions to build a great enterprise. In this way, “not only would my country [the Tây Sơn court] be fortunate, but the people of the twelve administrative units [*thừa tuyên*] in the North would also be greatly fortunate” (Hoàng Xuân Hãn, 1952, p. 98).

Nghệ An was becoming a major strategic stage in the race to define the political configuration of the eastern littoral of mainland Southeast Asia, especially between Nguyễn Huệ and the power groups of Bắc Hà. Nine months later, a second letter from the Tây Sơn general appeared, dated 21 September 1787 (Hoàng Xuân Hãn, 1952, p. 103). He was trapped between two forces: to the north stood Chỉnh’s hundreds of thousands of troops; to the south, Nguyễn Nhạc had become the Central Emperor in Quy Nhơn. Because of the conflict surrounding the events of 1786, the two brothers fought a brief but devastating war in which both sides suffered heavy losses (Bùi Dương Lịch, 2004, vol. 2, fols. 84b-85a). In this second appeal, Quang Trung sent two high ministers as envoys. He invoked the fate of All Under Heaven [*thiên hạ*] to press Nguyễn Thiếp to descend from the mountain and enter service (Hoàng Xuân Hãn, 1952, p. 102). Yet the refusal of the eminent scholar led to a third letter only ten days later, on 23 October 1787. This time the envoy was Hồ Công Thuyên, Minister of Justice. The ideas in the letter reveal the outline of Nguyễn Huệ’s political project and the way in which he positioned his dynasty within the geopolitical currents of “Đại Việt”: “I was born in a remote place and learned from what I heard and saw. Meeting such times, I had no choice but to raise troops. Those who assisted me at that moment were all bold fighting men. ... Unexpectedly, when I now look toward Lục Niên citadel, I find that a man of talent is there. This is Heaven reserving you, Master, for me. Although you do not deign to come, the common people are waiting with expectation...” (Hoàng Xuân Hãn, 1952, pp. 105-107).

What drove such intensity and “patience” in a thirty-five-year-old general, a man said to have “captured Hữu Chỉnh as if capturing a child, and killed Văn Nhậm as if slaughtering a pig”? What was he seeking from a sixty-five-year-old elder of Nghệ Region? From July 1786

to the summer of 1788, Nguyễn Huệ had personally led at least two northern expeditions, marching 700 kilometers from Phú Xuân to Thăng Long. He also once sent a great general northward to destroy Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh. During this period, at least two of his generals stationed in Bắc Hà “rebelled” against him: Nguyễn Duệ and Vũ Văn Nhậm. After Nhậm’s death, he “abolished” the Lê king and replaced him with a “regent”. This meant that Nguyễn Huệ’s rapid northern campaigns of suppression had not yet come to an end.

The distance of 700 kilometers was a serious obstacle to military operations in the kingdom he was trying to establish, stretching from Lạng Sơn to Quảng Nam. This journey was by no means a peaceful road. As a traveler in 1835 described it: “From Quảng Bình to Nghệ An is about 400 miles [*dặm*]. The land is low and wet, the road slippery as grease, and the mud clings so tightly to the feet that one cannot pull them free. The fields are vast and deserted; for several dozen *dặm* one sees not a single house. Bandits often hide in the dense bushes, so travelers cannot avoid being anxious and on guard” (Trần Ích Nguyên, 2008, p. 200). It was precisely for this reason that, while on the road north to punish Vũ Văn Nhậm in 1788, Nguyễn Huệ held his first meeting with Nguyễn Thiếp and asked him to help select land for establishing a capital in Nghệ An. On 3 July 1788, on his return journey, when Nguyễn Thiếp had not yet produced the results of his geomantic inspection, Nguyễn Huệ personally wrote a letter in vermilion ink urging him: “Previously, I entrusted you, Master, to return to Nghệ An to inspect the land for establishing the capital in time for my northern expedition to return and reside there. Why is it that, now that I have returned there, nothing has yet been done? ... I therefore issue this edict to you, Master, that you should quickly consult with Governor Thận and proceed with the matter, inspecting the land for establishing the capital at Phù Thạch... Master, do not delay and refuse to examine it” (Hoàng Xuân Hãn, 1952, pp. 119-120).

5. TRUNG ĐÔ THE CENTRAL CAPITAL

The emergence of Trung Đô in Nghệ An was one of the most ambitious geopolitical plans of the Tây Sơn dynasty. It was a Vietnamese “experiment” in connecting and governing a newly configured territorial system after the Gianh River had ceased to function as a dividing line. Yet because the project remained unfinished, and especially because the Tây Sơn dynasty was ultimately defeated, it fell into oblivion. As a result, one of the most “daring” political ideas that might have altered the fate of modern Vietnam was forgotten along with the ruins of the dynasty and its fortifications.

Although the Trịnh army had crossed the Gianh River in 1774, the Tây Sơn dynasty was the first to place the entire territory along the South China Sea under a single political entity. After 1787, when civil war broke out between Nguyễn Nhạc and Nguyễn Huệ and the two sides took Bến Ván as their boundary, there existed at least one political entity stretching from Quảng Nam to the Sino-Vietnamese border: the Quang Trung regime. The length of this new territory was nearly 1,000 kilometers, and the need to maintain regular military activity across this space became a persistent concern for Phú Xuân. A central authority located so far from the administrative and territorial limits of its realm had no precedent in Vietnamese history at that

time. Under the Trịnh lords, the distance from Thăng Long to the northern bank of the Gianh River, the furthest point of their governing system, was only about 500 kilometers.

Nguyễn Huệ’s answer was Nghệ An. This choice was shaped not only by the idea of ancestral land, since the original lineage of the Tây Sơn brothers was the Hồ family of Hưng Nguyên in Nghệ An, but also by new administrative designs that pushed the ruler to seek a geographical and territorial solution for his kingdom. In an edict sent to Nguyễn Thiếp, Quang Trung argued:

“Now the capital at Phú Xuân is geographically obstructed. To govern Bắc Hà from so far away is extremely difficult. According to the deliberations of the court ministers, only by establishing the capital in Nghệ An will the distance be properly balanced. From there, it will be possible to control both the South and the North, and people from the four directions who come to submit petitions will find travel convenient... When passing Hoành Sơn, I personally opened the map and saw that in Chân Lộc district, Yên Trường commune, the terrain is spacious and the atmosphere bright. It can be chosen for the construction of a new capital. It is truly a fine place for establishing a capital... Since you, Sir, clearly understand rise and fall and fully comprehend the affairs of the age, you will naturally understand this” (Hoàng Xuân Hãn, 1952, pp. 124-125).

This determination was strengthened when Nguyễn Huệ planned to abandon the Lê in mid-1788 (Hoàng Xuân Hãn, 1952, p. 123). The capital was initially planned near Phù Thạch village and Nghĩa Liệt Mountain, beside the Lam River. It was later moved to Yên Trường commune, present-day Vinh, with its southern side backed by the Lam River. There, he ordered the construction of palatial buildings at the foot of Kỳ Lân Mountain and named the site Trung Đô, the Central Capital (ĐNLT, First Collection, vol. 30, fol. 40b). Seven months after defeating the Qing army, Nguyễn Huệ accelerated the establishment of this new political center. This information appears in a letter that the king wrote to the Governor-General of Liangguang: “In the seventh month, your small feudatory returned from Thăng Long to the locality of Nghệ An to build a small settlement... At present, the construction of the citadel will be temporarily suspended in order to prepare for the journey to Thăng Long to receive investiture” (Hoàng Xuân Hãn, 1952, p. 133; Hoàng Văn Lân, 2014; Nguyễn Quang Hồng, 2019).

In this sense, the Quang Trung court placed northern and north-central Vietnam within a new geopolitical structure. This structure included a “Northern Capital” at Cổ Bi in Gia Lâm, a site considered sacred and one where both Trịnh Cương in 1727 and Trịnh Doanh in 1755 had once wished to establish the lord’s residence. Phú Xuân became the “Southern Capital”. In two letters sent to Nguyễn Thiếp on 21 November 1789 and 17 September 1791, Trung Đô was referred to as Vĩnh Kinh (Hoàng Xuân Hãn, 1952, p. 148). Quang Trung had only about two years to carry out all of these ideas, while simultaneously conducting large-scale diplomatic missions with Beijing and planning a decisive blow against the Nguyễn forces in the lower Mekong region (ĐNTL, First Reign, vol. 6, fols. 2b3a). Population management, taxation, and military service became central policies of the new state. In 1791, the king declared that “the

realm is now pacified and order has been established”, and that it was therefore time for “villages to compile registers and for the people to carry identification cards as proof” (Hoàng Xuân Hãn, 1952, p. 291; Bùi Dương Lịch, 2004, vol. 2, fol. 66b). These cards recorded each person’s name and native place and bore a fingerprint. In Nghệ An, the number of registered people reached 125,000 (Bùi Dương Lịch, 2004, vol. 1, fol. 48b).¹¹

This policy of taxation and military service replaced the system that had applied to Nghệ Region under the Restored Lê. Previously, this region had been required to provide military service but did not have to pay taxes. “Now both soldiers and provisions had to be supplied. The number of soldiers increased day by day” (Hoàng Xuân Hãn, 1952, p. 141). According to *An Hội thôn chí*, from 1740 the Lê intensified the conscription of men from Thanh Nghệ at the rate of one man for every three adult males and exempted the people from land tax. In 1742, the poll tax was also remitted. Under the Tây Sơn, however, the Thanh Nghệ region began to pay both poll tax, two strings of cash [quan] for each registered adult male, and land tax, twenty-two bowls per mẫu of paddy land (Hoàng Xuân Hãn, 1952, p. 141). From that point onward, Nghệ An had both poll tax and land tax (Bùi Dương Lịch, 2004, vol. 1, fols. 49a-b).

This produced resentment among the population and among intellectuals. Those without identification cards were regarded as unregistered people, hunted down, and sent to serve as garrison soldiers. The Tây Sơn also authorized agents to go into villages to “search for [unregistered people], to the point that even those who dug pits to hide or fled into the forests could not escape” (Bùi Dương Lịch, 2004, vol. 1, fol. 49a). This situation helps explain Gia Long’s cautious approach in 1802 when he passed through this region. He had to “prepare the ground” carefully by issuing an explanatory edict before collecting taxes in Nghệ An (ĐNTL, First Reign, vol. 15, fol. 16a).

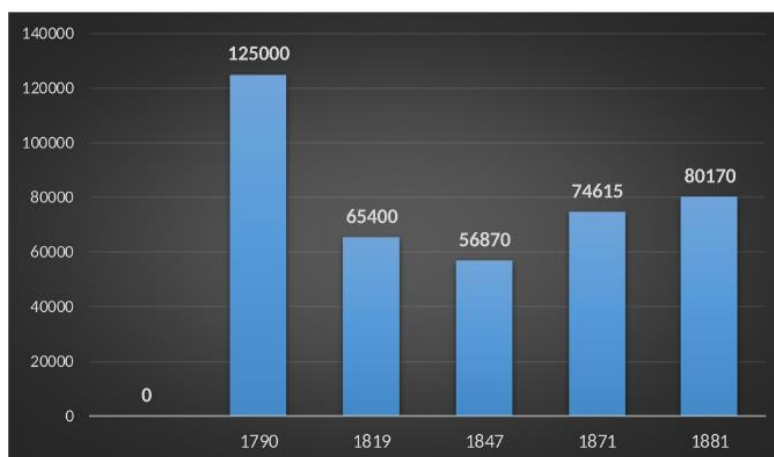


Figure 2. Registered Adult Male Population of Nghệ An, 1790-1881, unit: persons

Source: Bùi Dương Lịch, 2004, vol. 1, fol. 49a; *Đại Nam nhất thống chí*, 2006, p. 172. Gia Long stated that the figure for 1819 was 110,000 persons, while the figure for the previous year was 130,000 registered adult males (ĐNTL, First Reign, vol. 59, fol. 17a; ĐNTL, First Reign, vol. 67, fol. 10a; *Đồng Khánh dư địa chí*, 2003).

¹¹ The Tây Sơn classification of adult males included the following categories: ages 9-12, “not yet subject to regulation” (*hạng chưa đến lệ*); ages 13-55, “able-bodied males” (*tráng đinh*); ages 56-60, “elderly category” (*hạng lão*); and ages 60 and above, “exempt elders” (*lão nhiều*).

Under the Quang Trung regime, Nghệ Region was expected to lead the scholarly life of the kingdom then being organized. Quang Trung established the Sùng Chính Institute in 1791 at Nam Hoa village (present-day Nam Kim, Thanh Chương), under the direction of Nguyễn Thiếp, who was to mobilize his students and local scholars to translate and annotate Chinese classical works. Yet with the king’s death and the increasingly large-scale northern offensive of the Gia Định army, the Quang Toàn court in Phú Xuân became little more than a military apparatus. Quang Trung’s ideas for building a complex administrative system were largely forgotten, including his final instructions.

In that collapse, one final aspect deserves attention: the military consequences of the Tây Sơn loss of control over Nghệ An, the region that had once enabled them to dominate Bắc Hà. Quang Trung’s strategic idea was to construct a multi-layered defensive system along the central coast, including Quy Nhơn, Phú Xuân, Quảng Bình, Nghệ An, and Thanh Hóa, particularly Tam Điệp, creating a mutually supporting chain across land, sea, and mountain routes (Vũ Đức Liêm, 2017). This system was gradually broken apart by divisions among Tây Sơn commanders. After the Battle of Thị Nại in 1801, the Tây Sơn navy was neutralized, and Nguyễn Văn Trương’s fleet intensified the disruption of river mouths, seaports, and overland communication and supply routes of the Tây Sơn.

The Tây Sơn defensive system in the upper Lam River region also began to weaken. In the autumn of 1801, Nguyễn forces combined with 4,000 Lao troops and advanced along the upper route to attack Hương Sơn and La Sơn, then struck Lục Niên citadel in Thanh Chương. They killed a Tây Sơn admiral, and soldiers “came to surrender as if going to market. Nghệ An was shaken”. The Tây Sơn then burned the houses of civilians in several districts as a scorched-earth strategy, forcing Nguyễn troops to withdraw (ĐNTL, First Reign, vol. 15, fols. 1b2a).

Even so, Nguyễn Phúc Ánh’s commanders, Nguyễn Văn Trương, Đặng Trần Thường, and Phạm Như Đăng, immediately recognized Nghệ An as a weakness in the Tây Sơn defensive system: “At present, from the Gianh River to Hoàng Mountain, the rebel party is not watching at all. Scouts all report that everywhere in Bắc Hà is in turmoil and waiting for the royal army, while the rebel troops in Nghệ An number fewer than three thousand. We can take advantage of this opportunity. We request that additional elephant troops and boats be dispatched so that we may advance by both land and water. First, this will expand the realm; second, it will bind people’s hearts. This is a great opportunity for the restoration. Moreover, the rebel party in Quy Nhơn relies on Nghệ An as the place where interior and exterior support each other. Once Nghệ An is lost, Diêu and Dững will lose heart, and Quy Nhơn can be taken as easily as spitting into one’s hand” (ĐNTL, First Reign, vol. 15, fols. 13b-14a).

Nguyễn Phúc Ánh put this assessment into practice when he ordered an attack on Phú Xuân. Quang Toàn’s chaotic flight northward destroyed the last opportunity to stop the Nguyễn army at the gateway to Bắc Hà by establishing two interlocking defensive systems along the Gianh River and the Lam River. Such a system had once enabled the Trịnh forces to block the advance of the Nguyễn lords in the seventeenth century. In the eighteenth century, Nguyễn Huệ had

relied on Nghệ An to conquer Bắc Hà; his son would lose Bắc Hà because he neglected this strategic region. That failure brought an end to the Tây Sơn project of “Vietnam”. In its place emerged the “Vietnam” of Nguyễn Phúc Ánh.

6. CONCLUSIONS

It would be naïve to believe that the Quang Toản regime collapsed simply because Nghệ An had not been transformed into the Central Capital according to Quang Trung’s final instructions. Yet modern Vietnam was born from precisely such mistimed moves, military calculations, and geopolitical disorder. The contest among regional political projects and imperial ambitions in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries drove the formation of a new spatial structure for Vietnam. Modern Vietnam was the transformation from the space of “Đại Việt” into the space of “Vietnam”, and the early modern period played a decisive role in that transformation (Vũ Đức Liêm, 2018). This article has sketched the history of a locality in order to illuminate national history, while also using national history to reposition local history within the larger currents of an age, through the case of Nghệ Region.

This region stood at the center of the transformation of political spaces and regional identities along the eastern littoral of mainland Southeast Asia, leading to the emergence of the S-shaped territory. Nghệ An shifted from a frontier, gateway, and rear base “The land expands for a thousand miles / The curtain of Heaven spreads like a screen / Strengthening the frontier fence of Hoan and Diên / Ai Lao and Lạc Hoàn bring elephants across” (Bùi Dương Lịch, 2004, vol. 1, fol. 28a) into a strategic stage that helped decide the fate and identity of the Vietnamese space. The changing geopolitical, geoidentitarian, and geocultural meanings of this region reveal the powerful evolution of Vietnamese territorial and demographic structures in the early modern period. The movement of Nghệ Region within the space of “Vietnam” therefore exceeds the scale of a local story. It reflects the journey of a people.

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