

THE
REBEL DEN_{OF}
N Û N G T R Í C A O
LOYALTY AND IDENTITY ALONG THE SINO-VIETNAMESE FRONTIER

James Anderson

The Rebel Den of Nùng Trí Cao



Image of Nùng Trí Cao's father Nùng Tôn Phúc among his clansmen and followers

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JAMES ANDERSON

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Preface and Acknowledgments

My own interest in Nùng Trí Cao is three-fold. First, early on I found his life story to be an intriguing narrative. In the course of my studies on the evolution of post-Tang Sino-Vietnamese tribute relations, the bold and perhaps “devil-may-care” attempts of Trí Cao and his clan to carve out a political place between two powerful overlords stood out starkly in the reams of materials I pored over in my research. I have always been drawn to tales of marginalized characters and communities in all walks of life, and Nùng Trí Cao appeared to be a valiant but hopeless character struggling to find his place on the edges of recorded history. The more I read, the more I became fascinated by his short-lived achievements. Trí Cao’s initial limited reliance on kinship and lineage alliances gave way briefly to the chieftain’s dream of establishing a region-wide kingdom encompassing a much more diverse population along the entire South China coast. My curiosity was stirred not by his failure to establish such a realm but instead by Trí Cao’s belief that such a kingdom might actually prevail against all odds.

Second, after some examination, I discovered that the Nùng Trí Cao rebellions fit a pattern of political behavior that emerged in what is often called the “Classical Period” of Southeast Asian history. This period, from roughly the ninth century until the fourteenth century, witnessed the appearance of a group of traditional states that would, in turn, play either territorial or symbolic roles in the establishment of modern nation-states in Southeast Asia, including Pagan (Burma/Myanmar), Sukhothai (Thailand), Angkor (Cambodia), Đại Việt (Vietnam), Sri Vijaya (Malaysia), and Majapahit (Indonesia). The actual periodization and historical importance of this era is not without controversy among Southeast Asia scholars.* However, the Classical Period does represent for many scholars a significant transitional phase between the era of relatively small and self-sufficient kingdoms that existed before this time and the age of larger, trade-oriented, multi-ethnic imperial orders that emerged after it.

Lastly, once I had completed my initial textual study of Trĩ Cao's revolts and had had the opportunity to visit the Sino-Vietnamese border region, I began to see similarities between events "on the ground" along the eleventh-century frontier and certain social and cultural changes occurring in the present age of globalization. Trĩ Cao, in his day, appealed to the Vietnamese and Chinese courts for patronage, but he also sought local support by evoking indigenous symbols of political identity. In recent years a variety of cultural events have also been conducted in the Sino-Vietnamese border region to express a local attachment to the legacy of Nùng Trĩ Cao. New scholarly and folkloric studies have been published, and conferences have been held both in China and in Vietnam to discuss and broadcast to a wider audience the endeavors of this historical figure. As I will discuss in my final chapter, temples and public memorials are two important aspects of this renewed cultural activity. However, one ought also to take into consideration international changes to explain the surfacing of such pursuits.

Along the route to completing this book, I received help from a large number of scholars, colleagues, and friends. I very much wish to acknowledge the intellectual debt that I owe so many. Every project has a beginning, and mine started at the University of Washington with a suggestion from Hok-lam Chan that I explore a foreign relations topic from China's imperial period. Under Professor Chan's guidance I first looked at the court debates that swirled about during the Ming's invasion and aborted occupation of the Vietnamese kingdom in the early fifteenth century. Because my interest in Middle Period China gravitated toward the Northern Song period, I explored the possibility that similar tensions existed between China and Vietnam at that time as well. Little did I know then that these tensions were two millennia in the making and that the Sino-Vietnamese relationship was a defining feature of multiple states founded by rulers in this region with varying degrees of success!

As a graduate student at the University of Washington, I benefited from my interaction with so many wonderfully talented people. I especially wish to acknowledge R. Kent Guy, Laurie Sears, Alan Wood, Gary Hamilton, Robert Stacey, Kenneth Pyle, William Boltz,

John Pemberton, and Patricia Ebrey for all their advice and help. I also wish to thank my classmates Michele Thompson, Li Yi, Steve Miles, Steve Udry, Jennifer Rudolf, Tom Reilly, and George Dutton, and my good friends Scott and Laura Heinlein, for all their help and suggestions. Li Yi deserves special thanks for reading and commenting on my translations of imperial edicts in the days when I was first getting accustomed to the particular style of Song-period bureaucrats. Michele Thompson must also be singled out for her assistance during the summer of 2003, when she read a full-length draft of the manuscript and then offered editorial suggestions over several rounds of coffee at the Broadway Au Bon Pain in New Haven, Connecticut.

I would also like to thank Professors Paul J. Smith, Don Wyatt, John Whitmore, and all my friends and colleagues at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro who have read all or parts of the manuscript. This project has benefited immensely from their comments and criticisms. Elizabeth Nelson, my UNCG colleague from the Department of Geography, deserves special thanks for the wonderful set of maps she created for this project. My original hand-drawn approximations of the frontier terrain lacked the precise detail that Liz presents so clearly in her maps. Working with Liz also revealed to me how much more one can accomplish in an interdisciplinary partnership.

Research for this book also took me overseas on numerous occasions, and I must thank all those persons who made these trips so profitable. Huang Kuanchong, before, during, and after his tenure as director of Academia Sinica's Institute of History and Philology, the current director, Wang Fan-sen, Liu Li-yen, and Chen Kuo-tung offered me a great deal of guidance at various stages in this project. Chen Zhichao at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, Dai Kelai of Zhengzhou University, Zhao Heman at the Guangxi Academy of Social Sciences, and Nong Bing from the southern Guangxi village of Xialei all assisted me beyond measure.

In 2001 I spent eight months on a Luce-funded fellowship at the Australian National University's Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies in Canberra and at the Sino-Nom Institute in Hanoi. In Australia, Professors David Marr, Craig Reynolds, and the fellowship's coordinator, Ben Kerkvliet, were extremely helpful and supportive. I also wish to

give Professor Phan Huy Lê, former director of the Sino-Nom Institute Phan Văn Các, the late Trần Quốc Vượng, and the late Hoàng Văn Lâu special thanks for their time, advice, and professional assistance, which allowed me the opportunity to gather notes, photocopies, and photographs of archeological and epigraphic materials unavailable in the United States.

Various organizations provided the funding necessary to complete this project, including Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad Fellowship, Ford Small Research Grant in Southeast Asian Studies, and the ACLS/Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation Fellowship. I also would like to make special mention of the Pacific Cultural Foundation Research Grant in Taipei for funding support during my overseas research in graduate school. More recently, I benefited from six months as a fellow in the John W. Kluge Center for International Studies at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. I made extensive use of the Library of Congress's collections of gazetteer materials for southern China, and I received very helpful comments on this project from my fellow Kluge scholars throughout my stay in Washington. For this opportunity I am grateful for the research assistance offered by so many members of the Library research staff, including Frank Wang, Judy Lu, and Lien Fielder in the Asian Reading Room. The Kluge Center's director, Prosser Gifford, deserves special recognition and thanks for all the support he offered to visiting scholars.

Regarding the editing and production of this book, I wish to thank my two anonymous readers commissioned by the University of Washington Press for their valuable comments, as well as Laura Iwasaki for her assistance in editing and polishing the manuscript. I also want to thank my editor Mary Ribesky and my executive editor Michael Duckworth at the Press. Their support for this first-time author was greatly appreciated.

Finally, I wish to thank my parents, Frederic and Anita Anderson, my siblings, Haideen and John, my wife, Yueh-miao, and our daughters, Claire Elisabeth and Svea Haideen for putting up with a "lifetime" student and distracted father for so long. Without their support and encouragement I could not have begun, let alone completed, this project.

I have published an early version of chapter 4 as “Man of Prowess or Errant Vassal: Nùng Tồn Phúc’s 11th Century Bid for Autonomy,” *Southeast Review of Asian Studies* 22 (2002) and a section of chapter 7 as a research note titled “Monumental Pride: Sino-Vietnamese Cross-border Commemorations of Nùng Trí Cao” in the *Thai-Yunnan Project Bulletin*, no. 1 (July 2001): 1–2. I wish to thank the editorial boards of these publications for permission to include material from these articles here.

* For recent studies of this scholarly controversy, see Michael Aung-Thwin, “The ‘Classical’ in Southeast Asia: The Present in the Past,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 26, no. 1 (March 1995): 75–92. See also Craig J. Reynolds, “A New Look at Old Southeast Asia (Early Southeast Asian Historiography),” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 54, no. 2 (May 1995): 419–47.

Conventions

I have attempted to remain as historically precise as possible when naming kingdoms and periods through various time periods and political shifts. However, some of the language I have used may not satisfy every reader. Prior to the twentieth century, modern names for the countries examined in this book and modern names for their inhabitants would not be relevant. In his recent study of East Asia to the tenth century, Charles Holcombe noted, “It is critical to a clear understanding of the origins of East Asia to realize that none of the modern nation-states of the region existed yet as such — not even “China” in a modern sense, although the limitations of our vocabulary may at times force us to use the modern English names.”[†] Mindful of Professor Holcombe’s prudent admonition, I have used the following modern English terms in this study.

I have chosen “Vietnamese” and “Vietnam” as terms to describe persons and places associated with political power situated in the vicinity of the Red (Hồng) River delta. I have rendered the Chinese characters for these persons and places in their Vietnamese (quốc ngữ) readings. Moreover, I have used the term “Chinese” to describe persons and places associated with courts and political centers north of the Red River delta, and I have rendered the characters for these persons and places in their modern (Mandarin) Chinese readings. This practice circumvents the issue of Tai names, but I do not mean for these terms necessarily to indicate modern ethnic identity. The terms “Tai” and “Tai-speaking” are used primarily as linguistic distinctions to mark the Sino-Tibetan language family spoken by the communities of indigenous people who claim descent from the powerful frontier clans in the period under study.

Wherever possible, I have used dynastic terms to indicate a person’s political affiliation.

[†] Charles Holcombe, *The Genesis of East Asia: 221 B.C.—A.D. 907* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 166.

The Rebel Den of Nùng Trí Cao

1

The Great King Nùng Trí Cao: A Rebel's Role in Shaping Regional Identity along the Modern Sino-Vietnamese Border

Why should we in the early twenty-first century pay particular attention to the collective identity of and historical relationship between the regions now ruled as the People's Republic of China and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam? I once asked myself this question while standing in a valley near the commune of Hà Quảng on the Sino-Vietnamese frontier, where Chinese tanks had rolled through as recently as 1979, retracing the well-trodden paths of cavalry and foot soldiers from centuries earlier. Identities forged in the eleventh-century borderlands remain surprisingly salient today, reminding us of more volatile examples from other regions of the world, such as the Basques, the Kosovars, and the Kurds. Transnational bonds are an important aspect of these groups' collective identities and are often a source of tension in their relations with their respective national governments.

One important reason for paying attention to the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands is the modern reemergence of China as a regional power. Southeast Asian countries, once under the thumb of colonial masters, gained their independence just in time to face the effects of China's growing influence. Southeast Asia, Vietnam included, shows great



Figure 1.1. View from the border region at Sóc Hà Commune, Hà Quảng County, Cao Bằng, Vietnam (James Anderson)

potential for vigorous growth and innovation, supporting the development of an integrated, transnational economic power. Nevertheless, widespread confidence in the economic autonomy of this region, which suffered a financial crisis at the end of the twentieth century and the economic slump induced by severe acute respiratory syndrome at the beginning of the twenty-first century, may have been overstated.

In this destabilized economic environment, China became more involved in Southeast Asian affairs, and the large northern neighbor's influence on the region could surpass that of the United States in the near future. However, the historical record reveals that the Vietnamese and other Southeast Asian peoples have resisted northern pressures for ages, even as they borrowed institutions and practices with which to create and perpetuate their own regimes of local control. To understand this complex north-south relationship, we must develop a stronger sense of its genealogy. If we also take a closer look at the communities that reside along the political border separating modern-day Vietnam and China, we find numerous upland hillside- and plateau-dwelling ethnic groups

that historically have resisted total incorporation by their politically and economically more powerful neighbors. Moreover, leaders of the Kinh Vietnamese, riverine-valley and delta dwellers, were not alone in their dreams of territorial autonomy apart from the region's dominant power, China. Looking back through history, we see that the emergence of an independent Vietnamese polity in 968 created a Sino-Vietnamese frontier region over which the Vietnamese court maintained limited administrative control. Under these political conditions, upland leaders who resided north of the Red River and south of the most densely settled population centers of South China (Ling Piao) also envisioned separate domains of authority. By the late tenth century, some local leaders from this region had succeeded in establishing such domains, while others attempted to do so in the ensuing years.



Map 1. Modern Political Map of Sino-Vietnamese Border (Elizabeth Nelson)

In terms of methodology, the general approach to frontier studies in Western scholarship has shifted direction in recent years, and this study has been influenced by that shift. Amy Turner Bushnell contends in a recent conference volume that both the “paradigm of power” and the related “paradigm of the victim” have given way to the “paradigm of negotiation” as an effective explanatory model in the study of relations between premodern core and peripheral communities. She writes that “the paradigm of negotiation examines the mechanisms other than force that deliver balance to relationships and keep disparate societies in equilibrium.”¹ The paradigm of power, with its focus on agents of political, economic, and cultural hegemony, is only inverted by the paradigm of the victim, which accepts that power defined the terms of all essential core-periphery relationships. In this book, I note the importance of political and military power in certain situations, but I also note cultural and ritualistic power and highlight ritual practices and symbolic acts as essential tools in the brokering of relations between the core leadership and the peripheral communities, where acceptance of any terms of hegemony was shaped by local circumstances.

In the mountainous region separating Vietnam and China, far from the central governments in Hanoi and Beijing, there are a scattered handful of temples and memorials dedicated to the life and deeds of the eleventh-century Tai-speaking leader Nùng Trí Cao (ca. 1025–1055). Trí Cao, a rebellious local chieftain and would-be founder of an independent kingdom at the frontier between the Chinese Song (968–1279) empire and the emerging Vietnamese Đại Cồ Việt (Great Việt) kingdom (968–1054) achieved an influence on this region that has shifted from issues of political identity to those of community-defining “identity politics” since his final failed rebellion in 1052. Moreover, Trí Cao produced titles of authority and legitimacy when he created Chinese character-based names for his various attempted kingdoms and reign periods and for the noble titles he awarded himself and his followers. In his struggle to form independent kingdoms, Nùng Trí Cao engaged in the type of “finding of the middle ground” suggested by Bushnell’s paradigm of negotiation. He fought for political differentiation with a set of titles that spoke two languages of power, indigenous terms of authority understood among his own upland neighbors and Confucian-

patterned terms understood in the distant courts of Kaifeng and Thăng Long (modern-day Hanoi).

The Chinese-script titles adopted by the rebellious Trí Cao translated a claim to power grounded in local traditions into terms understood by the power brokers of his region. In his study of mid-twentieth-century Kachin chiefs and their relations with the Chinese court and the lowland Shan state, anthropologist Edmund Leach notes a similar balance of cultural symbols employed to enhance the political prestige of local leaders.² The rulers of the Song empire and the Đại Cồ Việt kingdom would certainly have grasped the Confucian messages of political legitimization implied in Trí Cao's actions, while border communities would have responded to signs of local prowess and leadership.³ So strong is the legacy of Nùng Trí Cao's claims to independence that twentieth-century Marxist-trained Chinese scholars, following predominantly nationalist concerns, denigrated these titles in order to fit Trí Cao's identity into a more contained category of "local feudal authority."⁴ Today, Trí Cao's ancient effort to shape a distinct political identity along the Sino-Vietnamese border continues to contribute to a modern sense of collective ethnic identity that links communities straddling the border between Chinese and Vietnamese states.

Perhaps due to the continuing peripheral status of the Sino-Vietnamese border region, the historic example of Nùng Trí Cao holds a very real attraction for modern-day indigenous inhabitants. The current source of regional pride in the eleventh-century chieftain may be found in tales of his three ambitious attempts to establish a border kingdom. In 1042, at the age of seventeen, Trí Cao established his first kingdom with the title Kingdom of the Great Succession (Dali Guo). For his efforts, Trí Cao was captured by Vietnamese troops and held at Thăng Long for several years. After his release in 1048, Trí Cao announced the founding of the Kingdom of the Southern Heavens (Nantian Guo).⁵ Following this announcement, the Đại Cồ Việt court launched an attack on Trí Cao's stronghold, succeeding only in relocating the rebel leader and his closest followers farther north into Song territory. During his third attempt to gain regional recognition in 1052, Trí Cao not only proclaimed the establishment of the Kingdom of the Great South (Danan Guo) but also granted himself

the title Benevolent and Kind Emperor (Renhui Huangdi). Finally, in the spring of 1052, Nùng Trí Cao ordered the burning of villages under his control and led five thousand of his subjects in a revolt that soon gained momentum and swept across the South China coast to the city of Guangzhou. Within the year, Song imperial troops had routed the rebels, and Trí Cao fled to the nearest independent kingdom founded by another Tai-speaking society, the Dali kingdom (937–1253), located in modern-day Yunnan. In official Chinese accounts, a wary Dali ruler reportedly executed Nùng Trí Cao and presented the rebel's severed head to Chinese authorities. According to popular accounts, however, the rebel was offered escort into northern Thailand, where his descendants continue to thrive today.

Officially, both Chinese and Vietnamese court historians have long labeled Nùng Trí Cao an insurgent and a troublemaker. In the shared vernacular of court-centered historiography, the image of Trí Cao became a trope for “trouble,” and official handling of his rebellion provided a litmus test for judging proper conduct among the Chinese and Vietnamese court representatives who had the misfortune to be involved. Trí Cao's official image was not rehabilitated until Marxist regimes took power in these countries. He is now remembered on both sides of the border as an officially sanctioned “hero of the people,” although the identity of “the people” remains curiously unclear.

This book examines how eleventh-century Sino-Vietnamese tributary relations shaped frontier administration in the southwest. The influences of local politics and regional trade during the tenth and eleventh centuries led to a transformation of Sino-Vietnamese relations, granting the Vietnamese leadership a much greater degree of autonomy and establishing points of contact beyond the control of a central Chinese authority. Eventually, conflict between the Song and Đại Việt courts shifted from concerns of royal succession and political legitimacy to focus on a strict reckoning of territorial administration along the two states' shared frontier.⁶ Song rulers unquestionably placed the Vietnamese kingdom at the top of a hierarchical system of relationships with leaders along the southern frontier. Local Vietnamese leaders negotiated their status within the Chinese tribute system in such a way as to establish regional independence while maintaining a check on Chinese incursions.

If relations between the Song and the Đại Việt changed with nearly every tributary encounter, the same could be said of other local polities, such as that of Nùng Trí Cao, in their exchanges with Chinese and Vietnamese centers of power. Other frontier leaders also negotiated their positions between the Chinese and Vietnamese courts through tributary ties and thereby occasionally found support for their efforts to expand and challenge their neighbors. David Kertzer notes that “creating a symbol or, more commonly, identifying oneself with a popular symbol can be a potent means of gaining and keeping power, for the hallmark of power is the construction of reality.”⁷ For Tai-speaking leaders, given the brutal environment of political struggle in the early eleventh century along the frontier region, the option of a political reality constructed around the Chinese imperial order encountered locally through tributary practices certainly must have appeared appealing. Part of the story I tell here involves the process by which the local leadership of the frontier region could present the symbols of imperial submission as an act of reclaiming regional independence.

Chapter 2 offers a broad overview of the prevailing Chinese court notion of world order through the first years of the Song dynasty. The early Song rulers imagined a world order shaped by a latticework of “ritual practices” (*li*) that joined all polities, large and small. Through these rituals, there soon developed a system of titles and practices, centered on the emperor’s person, which produced a hierarchical ordering of foreign courts and outlying chieftains. This new order retained its legitimacy only as long as its existence contributed to regional peace and tranquility. The Song ruler was himself constrained by this framework, because his status as emperor relied on the active participation of tributary “vassals” much as China’s smaller neighbors depended on the Song court’s sanction of authority.

In the same chapter, I also examine the development of the Chinese court’s *jimi* (loose reins) system of frontier management as an extension of tributary relations. Japanese scholarship on the *jimi* system makes reference to a pacification policy of “appeasement control” in the early Song court’s approach to managing its southern frontier giving way to Wang Anshi’s (1021–1086) “positive policy” by the mid-eleventh century. One of my related arguments is that while the Song court may have

developed a “multistate” system of relations with its military equals along the northern frontier, Song rulers sought to impose a strictly hierarchical framework of tributary relations on their less powerful southern neighbors, including the small frontier communities. These southern polities posed no direct military threat to the Song leadership, and so the Song court was not compelled to offer southern leaders the same “appeasement” it offered northern leaders, as was the case in the delicate relations it maintained with the Khitan leadership of the Liao kingdom (907–1125).

Chapter 3 briefly reviews the period of Sino-Vietnamese relations from earliest times to the early eleventh century. Important episodes in the development of Sino-Vietnamese court relations before the Song period may be divided into four related categories, each of which provided both Vietnamese rulers and upland local chieftains with different patterns of interaction with the Chinese leadership. The distinctive nature of cultural exchange amid contestations for political power distinguishes the revival of Sino-Vietnamese ties in the early Song period from both the Song court’s relationships with northern nomadic kingdoms and the Sino-centric tribute relations that other Southeast Asian kingdoms would establish with the Song court.

Chapter 4 focuses on the frontier region and its inhabitants, looking closely at local competition for political control. Specifically, I examine the motives behind the brash actions taken by Nùng Trí Cao’s father, the frontier chieftain Nùng Tôn Phúc, and his followers. Did he act as a rebellious vassal, who had abandoned his responsibilities to his direct superior, the Vietnamese ruler? Or did Tôn Phúc draw on political currents that found their origins beyond the court politics of Kaifeng or Thăng Long? A careful examination of these same events from an indigenous perspective reveals a complex balancing of local and interregional concerns, targeting multiple audiences.

Chapter 5 studies events leading to the Nùng Trí Cao rebellions and their immediate aftermath. In a network of collective and individual associations, the Nùng Trí Cao rebellions may be viewed as violent outbursts at the center of several sets of regional tensions. Trí Cao’s rebellions meant different things to contestants for authority in the region, the local inhabitants as well as the Song and Vietnamese courts. These

differences are explored within the context of the frontier's unstable political topology.

Chapter 6 looks at the pacification campaign launched against Nùng Trí Cao's followers in the 1050s, examining how the subsequent submission to the direct control of the Song court on the part of strategic Tai-speaking frontier communities contributed to the outbreak of the Sino-Vietnamese border war of 1075–77. In this chapter, I investigate both Chinese and Vietnamese accounts of specific conflicts—episodes involving disputes over the policing of local bandits, frontier revolts, and border disagreements—that led to military action. This study demonstrates how conflict between the Song and Đại Việt courts shifted from a context defined by the ideological aspects of the tributary relationship to one focused more on spatial relations between two neighboring states. I take a closer look at the indigenous communities that inhabited the frontier between the Song empire and the Đại Việt kingdom and examine shifts in the physical border between the two through the end of the eleventh century.

Chapter 7 explores the historical implications of cross-border difference in public commemorations of Nùng Trí Cao from the imperial period through the modern age, examining where the figure of ancient “local hero turned local deity” fits in today's cross-border community affiliations in the Guangxi–Cao Bằng region. These commemorations have been closely linked to differing Chinese and Vietnamese frontier- and, later, border-management policies as well as to differing local responses from communities living on both sides of the border. These communities still share a common thread of identity, preserved in part by devotion to the figure of Nùng Trí Cao. Their reverence for this eleventh-century rebel leader is a sentiment that transcends modern political demarcation.

Many frontier inhabitants in the eleventh century would today be characterized as Tai. This ethnic group was certainly not the only one present. Although there has been considerable interregional migration over the ages, we find great ethnic diversity in the Sino-Vietnamese border region, even in the earliest historical sources. As mentioned above, the dominant ethnic groups of this region today are Tai speakers, a broadly defined group found from the central Malay

Peninsula to the easternmost edge of the South China coast. The current on-line edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* estimates the population of Tai speakers in the region to be 75,760,00. *Britannica* divides this into 45,060,000 people in Thailand, 3,020,000 in Laos, 3,710,000 in Myanmar (formerly Burma), 21,180,000 in China, and approximately 2,790,000 in Vietnam.⁸ Among the Tai speakers of Vietnam are the Tày, Nùng, and Thái peoples. The Tày make up the largest of these groups, with a 1999 population of 1,574,822, and the Nùng is the smallest, with 933,653.⁹ The Tày were once generally known by the Sino-Vietnamese term “Thổ” ([people of the] soil), and they were considered the most Vietnamized of Tai-speaking groups in northern Vietnam.¹⁰ The Nùng, in contrast, have long been regarded as the most sinicized of the Tai speakers in this region. The Nùng reside mainly in Cao Bằng and Lạng Sơn provinces along the border with China’s Guangxi province. The Tày live in communities stretching from Quảng Ninh province on Vietnam’s northeastern border with China to Lai Châu province, which borders on northern Laos. The various Thái subgroups, totaling 1,376,646, have been recognized as separate ethnic groups by the Vietnamese government only since the early 1960s. The Tày, Nùng, and Thái groups are very similar in customs and dress to the Zhuang of southern China and other Tai communities in the highlands of Burma, Laos, and Thailand, and they speak Tai languages as well as the national languages of their home regions.

In southwestern China, the Zhuang outnumber all other Tai speakers, with around 14.5 million in Guangxi province alone, which makes them the largest non-Han population of this region.¹¹ In fact, the Zhuang are the largest ethnic-minority group in the People’s Republic of China today.¹² Predominantly Zhuang communities are found primarily in the southern Chinese provinces of Guangdong, Guangxi, Guizhou, Hunan, and Yunnan. There are also many other Tai-speaking groups, including Ai-Cham, Bouyei (Tai Yoi), Chu, Dai, Dian, Gelao, Hlai (Li), Kam (Dong), Laqua, Lati, Lue, Mak, Maonan, Mulam (Mulao), Ong-be (Lin-gao), Saek, Shan, Sui (Shui), Tai Ahom, and Then. Moreover, numerous communities of Tai-speaking Akha and Hani are spread throughout the region, with a total population of 2.5 million people by some accounts.

In addition, a variety of upland communities live above the riverine and lowland areas inhabited by the Tai. In Vietnam, there are upland communities of Tai speakers (Sán Chay) and non-Tai speakers (Hmông, Dao, Mương), among others. These communities traditionally have lived apart from the lowland Kinh Vietnamese villages and maintained a separate system of local administration as well. Finally, there are many other non-Han peoples in the border region, including the non-Tai-speaking Hui, Miao, Yao, and Yi. Han and Kinh Vietnamese communities are also found on each side of the modern political boundary. There are also reportedly several thousand ethnic Kinh Vietnamese living in Guangxi province. Periodic Han settlement in the Red River delta once brought a large overseas Chinese population to northern Vietnam. Modern events, particularly the border fighting of the early 1980s, resulted in the permanent displacement of much of this ethnic group.

The ethnonyms “Nùng,” “Tày,” and “Zhuang” are, of course, all products of the modern age and were not employed in most of the period under study in this book. The Vietnamese terms were, as Keith Taylor states, “[categories] of French colonial knowledge.”¹³ Such terms were used to differentiate upland peoples from their lowland neighbors in a systematic arrangement of discrete spheres of colonial administration. The term “Zhuang” was the product of the “ethnic identification project” (*minzu shibie*), which the Chinese Communist government pursued in the 1950s in order to distinguish a clear set of “national minorities” contained within the multiethnic post-Liberation “New China.”¹⁴ This effort, following guidelines shaped by Stalinist categories of ethnicity, produced a list of fifty-four separate ethnic groups, to which two more have been added.¹⁵

Humankind today maintains an unwavering obsession with its own division and categorization by physical appearance, habit, and political affiliation. As Stevan Harrell notes, “People in the modern world of nation-states are members of nationally- and often internationally-defined ethnic collectivities of which their local communities are a part, and the dialectical interaction between local, national, and cosmopolitan discourses is what shapes their lives as ethnic citizens of modern nations.”¹⁶ Inhabitants of the Asia Pacific region have long defined themselves and their communities through their contact and interaction