The politicized world view of nôm literature during the Tây Sơn period (1771-1802):
From the “Lament for the South” [Hoài Nam khúc]
to the “Ode and Counter-Ode to the West Lake” [Tùng/Chiến tung Tây Hồ phù]

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Abstract:

The brief but tumultuous Tây Sơn period (1771-1802) has left a profound impact on Vietnamese society, not least in the realm of nôm literature. Building on the textual studies of Nguyễn Cẩm Thúy and Nguyễn Phạm Hùng (1997), in this paper I want to explore the peculiar phenomenon of a politicized world view in nôm literature of the era. To this end, I will survey and examine some key authors whose nôm works reflected a growing awareness of and an active engagement with the turbulent history and politics of their time.

As the Tây Sơn movement started in the southern realm of the Inner Region and brought down the Nguyễn seignorial ruling house, the loyalist Hoàng Quang composed his “Lament for the South” [Hoài Nam khúc] as a cri-de-coeur that would subsequently be adopted by Nguyễn Ánh as incitement to the restorationist cause. A crisis of succession in the northern Trịnh ruling house prompted the defection by Nguyễn Hữu Chinh to the Tây Sơn side. Among Chinh’s celebrated nôm works were the Eulogy to his murdered patron Hoàng Định Bảo [Văn tế Cá Công] and the vainglorious poetic expositions in which Chinh compared himself to Chinese paragons of military strategy and prowess such as Marquis Zhang Liang [Trương Lưu hưu phủ] from Han time and general Guo Ziyi [Quách Tử Nghị phú] from Tang time. When the opportunity of a northern expedition arose Chinh easily persuaded Nguyễn Huệ to invade the Outer Region under the banner of “Restoring the Lê dynasty by destroying the Trịnh ruling house” eloquently laid out in the famous “Proclamation to Fight the Trịnh” [Hịch danh Trịnh].

The Tây Sơn invasion prompted a backlash from northern Lê-Trịnh loyalists such as Lê Huy Dao. In his “Song of a Wayfarer” [Lữ trung ngâm] Dao chronicled the futile Trịnh restorationist effort against the Tây Sơn and Nguyễn Hữu Chinh whom he denounced in a series of stirring proclamations. Married to Nguyễn Huệ as reward for his support of the Lê dynasty, Princess Ngọc Hân would soon weep for her husband the short-lived Emperor Quang Trung in the celebrated “Mournful Funerary Elegy” [Ai tu văn].

The premature death of Nguyễn Huệ ushered in the eventual demise of the Tây Sơn dynasty under his ineffectual son Nguyễn Quang Toản. In the face of imminent defeat, the sycophantic panegyric of Nguyễn Huy LƯơng rang rather hollow in his “Ode to the West Lake” [Tùng Tây Hồ phù]. The unmistakable metaphor of the West Lake to stand in for the Tây Sơn dynasty elicited a sardonic rebuttal by the Lê loyalist Phạm Thái in his “Counter-Ode to the West Lake” [Chiến tung Tây Hồ phù].
The deaths of major historical figures and the deaths of countless soldiers on the battlefield lent particular potency and poignancy to the funerary oration as politicized literature. And it is perhaps fitting to close this survey with some examples of the genre, in addition to the aforementioned Eulogy to Hoàng Đình Bảo by Nguyễn Hữu Chinh and Princess Ngọc Hân’s Eulogy to her husband, but also Phan Huy Ích’s series of ghost-written funerary orations to Queen Ngọc Hân, and more importantly the funerary orations to the troops upon victory over the Tây Sơn by the generals Nguyễn Bá Xuyên and Nguyễn Văn Thành.

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