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## State, Villagers, and Vagabonds : Vietnamese Rural Society and the Phan Bá Vành Rebellion

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## State, Villagers, and Vagabonds: Vietnamese Rural Society and the Phan Bá Vành Rebellion

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This paper argues that in traditional Vietnamese society, in addition to the state and the villages, there existed a third social element composed of people who drifted out of their own villages: *vagabonds*. The existence of these people was the outcome of the general poverty and various hardships caused by natural calamities and social inequalities. The vagabonds were one of the major reservoirs of dissident elements: thieves, bandits and pirates.

The existence of vagabonds and dissident social elements was not only a grave menace for the state but also for the villages. Since the state did not have sufficient means of coercion, it could not put an end to social disturbances. Under these circumstances, villagers had to protect their property and their lives by themselves. Village autonomy and self-protection were not only important *vis-à-vis* interference by government authorities, but also *vis-à-vis* harassment by local dissident elements. In one sense, the self-protection of villagers was part of the conflict between those who remained in the village and those who left. At the same time, however, this did not preclude the possibility of villagers collaborating or conspiring with local dissident elements, if they felt that by so doing they might better protect themselves. In this sense, the villagers' relations with them were ambivalent, as were their relations with the state. In some cases the villagers rejected and fought outlaw groups. But in other cases, villagers tried to find a way to negotiate and coexist with them, especially when the latter were transformed into rebels. A successful rebel leader was one who intended to overthrow the existing regime and establish a new political order. He very often declared himself a king or an emperor: a righteous ruler.

The paper develops this argument by examining a case study of events which took place in the northern part of Vietnam during the middle 1820s in the reign of Minh Mạng, the second emperor of the Nguyễn dynasty. The first section discusses various social causes of local disturbances especially the phenomenon of people drifting away from villages. It also discusses relations between the villagers and the outlaw groups. The following four sections describe a large-scale rebellion which took place in the lower Red River delta. Its leader, Phan Bá Vành, a poor villager who had drifted out of his native place and joined an outlaw group, finally succeeded in rallying the local population and declared himself a king.

The penultimate section describes the Nguyễn government's responses to this rebellion, and discusses measures taken by the Huế court to stop the people

drifting away, or at least to lessen the number of existing vagabonds. In most cases, however, these efforts did not produce any tangible results.

The final section emphasizes that social and economic differentiation in traditional Vietnamese rural society manifested itself as a struggle between those who remained in villages and those who were forced to leave. The section concludes with a hypothesis concerning the transformation of Vietnamese rural society during the colonial period.

[VAGABONDS, BANDITS, REBELS, VILLAGE SELF-PROTECTION, THE PHAN BÁ VÀNH REBELLION, THE NGUYỄN GOVERNMENT, VIETNAM]

## INTRODUCTION

Trên trời có ông sao tua  
 Ở dưới hạ giới có vua Bá Vành  
 Up in the heavens there is Mr. Comet  
 Down in this world there is King Bá Vành

In 1825 or earlier, a rebellion broke out in the lower delta region of northern Vietnam, which covered the coastal provinces<sup>1)</sup> Nam Định, Hải Dương and the neighbouring provinces. Its leader Phan Bá Vành styled himself king. With several thousand men and more than a hundred boats under his control, he besieged prefectural towns and coastal positions, invaded villages, and defeated official land and naval expeditions sent against him. The Vietnamese court at Huế finally had

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The first draft of the present paper was written in 1976 while I was at Cornell University. In October 1978 I presented a paper based on the first draft, with the title 'Phan Bá Vành's Rebellion in North Vietnam in the 1820s', to the annual meeting of the New England Conference of the Association for Asian Studies, held at Yale University, in the session 'Social Dissidence and Government Suppression on the Sino-Vietnamese Frontier', chaired by Professor David Wyatt. I read a paper with the same title in June 1980, at the monthly meeting of the West Japan Section of the Association of Southeast Asian History, at the University of Kyoto, which was chaired by Professor Yoneo Ishii.

Many people have helped me in various ways since the writing of the first draft: Professor David Wyatt, Ms. Dian Murray, Ms. Esta Unger, Ms. Yvonne Yung Ying Yue, at Ithaca; Mr. Yumio Sakurai at Kyoto; Professors Georges Boudarel, Philippe Langlet, Nguyễn Thế Anh, Tạ Trọng Hiệp, and Ms. Christine Rageau, at Paris. I also owe much to Dr. Shigeharu Tanabe and Dr. Andrew Turton, conveners of the present symposium, who encouraged me to finish the paper; and to the participants in the symposium, especially Dr. Chatthip Nartsupha, for his useful comments.

- 1) During the early years (until 1831) of the Minh Mạng reign, the Nguyễn dynasty still used the military protectorate (trấn) system and had not yet introduced the provincial (tỉnh) system of the Ching dynasty in China [WOODSIDE 1971: 141-142]. Nevertheless, in this paper, I will use the term province to indicate trấn. Table 1 shows the names of trấn and doanh for the period in question.

Table 1. Provinces of Vietnam (Early Nguyễn Dynasty)

Central Government (Huế)		
South Vietnam	Central Vietnam	North Vietnam
The Citadel of Gia Định (Gia Định Thành 嘉定城)		The Citadel of the North (Bắc Thành 北城)
Protectorates (trấn) 鎮	Protectorates (trấn) 鎮	Protectorates (trấn) 鎮
Gia Định 嘉定	Thanh Hoa (Hoá) 清華(化)	Hà Nội 河內 (Sơn Nam
Biên Hòa 邊和	Nghệ An 乂安	Thượng 山南上)
Vĩnh Thanh 永清	Quảng Nghĩa 廣義	Nam Định 南定
Định Tường 定祥	Bình Định 平定	Sơn Tây 山西
Hà Tiên 河僊(仙)	Phú Yên 富安	Bắc Ninh 北寧
	Bình Hòa 平和	Hải Dương 海陽
	Bình Thuận 平順	Tuyên Quang 宣光
		Hưng Hóa 興化
		Cao Bằng 高平
		Lạng Sơn 諒山
		Thái Nguyên 太原
		Quảng Yên 廣安
	Military Departments (doanh) 營	
	Quảng Đức 廣德	
	Quảng Trị 廣治	
	Quảng Bình 廣平	
	Quảng Nam 廣南	

Source: Woodside [1971: 141ff.].

Notes:

The highest official in each Citadel (Gia Định Thành and Bắc Thành) was Tổng Trấn 總鎮 (Governor-General or overlord).

The highest official in each Protectorate was Trấn Thủ 鎮守 (Protector), a military official. The second official of the Protectorate was Hiệp Trấn 協鎮 (Associate Defender), a civilian official.

to commit several thousand soldiers and many naval vessels before eventually crushing the rebellion early in 1827.<sup>2)</sup>

The rebellion of Phan Bá Vành was one of the largest in nineteenth-century Vietnam [*Lịch Sử Việt Nam* 1971: 90–91; NGUYỄN Phan Quang 1971: 205–208; TRẦN Trọng Kim 1971: 203]. Phan Bá Vành's name has been remembered even to the present through local legends transmitted from generation to generation, not only among the peasants of Nam Định but also in provinces of central Vietnam where his rebellion did not reach [HUỠNG Sơn and CẦN Mẫn 1973: 56]. In contemporary Vietnamese historical scholarship, the rebellion of Phan Bá Vành has become a

2) The years given in Sino-Vietnamese sources have been converted in this paper to the years of the western calendar. For example, the seventh year of Minh Mạng becomes 1826. Thus the twelfth (lunar) month of the seventh year of Minh Mạng is converted to be the twelfth (lunar) month of 1826, although strictly speaking that lunar month should be January (solar month) 1827 in the western calendar.

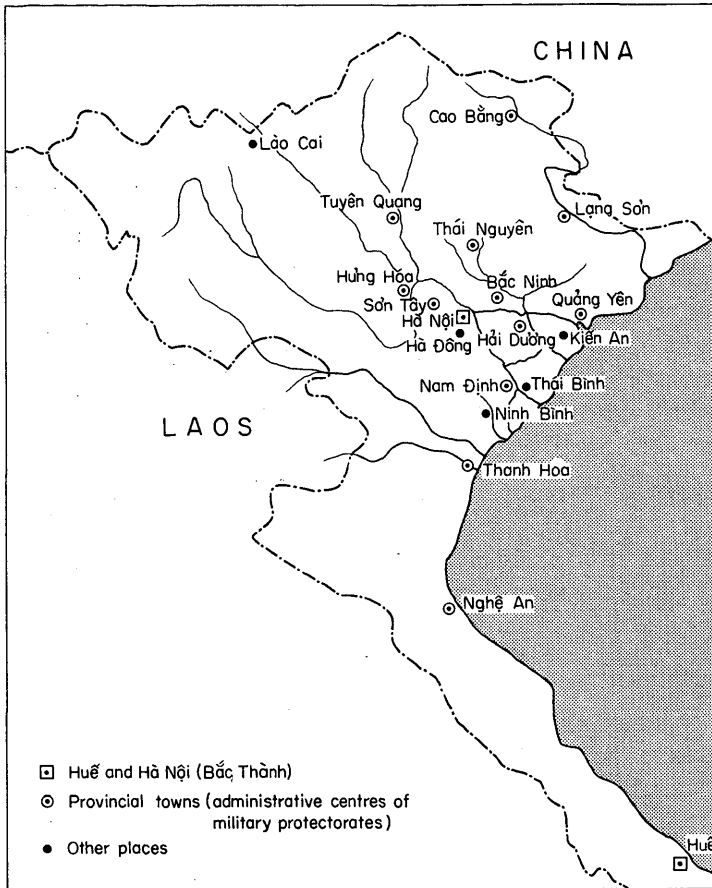


Figure 1. Provincial Towns in Northern Vietnam

popular subject of discussion.<sup>3)</sup>

In this paper, I examine the social origin of Phan Bá Vành, the causes and characteristics of his rebellion, and the Nguyễn court's responses to it. In so doing, I try to raise some issues which might contribute to a better understanding of the social structure of pre-colonial Vietnam and later transformations. Whereas many authors have discussed changes in Vietnamese rural society during the colonial period, very few efforts have been made to study pre-colonial and traditional Vietnam.<sup>4)</sup>

3) For instance there have been five articles on Phan Bá Vành's rebellion in the *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử*, a monthly (sometimes bi-monthly) organ of the Institute of Historical Studies, National Committee of Social Sciences [ĐẶNG Huy Vận *et al.* 1966; HOA BẮNG 1966; TRƯƠNG Hữu Quỳnh 1972; HU'ƠNG Sơn and CẦN Mẫn 1973; NGUYỄN Phan Quang *et al.* 1979].

4) Exceptions in Western languages include Nguyen Thanh Nha [1970] and Woodside [1971]. For studies in Vietnamese, see Ủy Ban Khoa Học Xã Hội Việt Nam [1971] for the period before the establishment of the Nguyễn dynasty; and for the period of the Nguyễn dynasty: Nguyễn Thế Anh [1970].

A study of pre-colonial Vietnam is, however, very important for understanding not only the living conditions of the people in this historical period, but also later developments in Vietnamese politics and society in general. In addressing the transformation of society from the pre-colonial to the colonial era, it is almost impossible to develop persuasive arguments without adequate and precise knowledge of the traditional society.

I wish to show that there existed large numbers of people who had dropped out of normal village life for various reasons and become *vagabonds*. The existence of vagabonds was an outcome of political, social and economic inequalities and instability, and these vagabonds were a major source of bandits, pirates and rebels. I conclude that Phan Bá Vành's rebellion was originally that of vagabonds, and that this group of people who drifted away from their own villages should be regarded as a third social component of traditional Vietnamese society, in addition to the better known elements: the state and the village, or the élites and the villagers.<sup>5)</sup>

### SOCIAL CAUSES OF DISTURBANCES

Some scholars [for example NGO Vinh Long 1973; SCOTT 1976] have argued that the living conditions of the peasantry became increasingly precarious after the colonial state had established its bureaucratic machine and exploitative systems, and after the market economy had eroded the self-sustaining rural economy of corporate and closed villages. However, even if one agrees with this argument, it is absolutely incorrect to see traditional Vietnamese society as one of tranquillity and harmony.<sup>6)</sup> According to Woodside [1971: 135] 105 separate uprisings occurred during the Gia Long reign (1802–19), and 200 during the Minh Mạng reign (1820–40).<sup>7)</sup> Clearly the existence of local disturbances was not an exceptional, but rather a general phenomenon in the Nguyễn period.<sup>8)</sup> What were the social causes of these disturbances?

First, it should be pointed out that outlaws and professional bandits seem always to have existed in pre-modern Vietnamese society. Such people were usually cut off from ordinary civil livelihood, and regularly pillaged and robbed both on land and on Vietnam's inland and coastal waterways. If forced to do so, they encountered and

5) For the development of my argument I owe much to Yumio Sakurai's studies on traditional Vietnamese society [SAKURAI and ISHIZAWA 1977; SAKURAI 1978, 1982].

6) See Popkin [1979: especially Chapter 3] and also my brief critical comments on Scott's argument on this point [SHIRAISHI 1980: 103ff.].

7) Chu Thiên [1960: 17–18] gives different figures: more than 70 uprisings during the reign of Gia Long; more than 230 during the reign of Minh Mạng; more than 50 during the reign of Thiệu Trị (1841–7); and about 40 uprisings, 49 invasions by Chinese bandits and 27 assaults by pirates during the reign of Tự Đức before 1883. Nguyễn Đoàn [1967: 57] calculates 73 rebellions in the Gia Long period and 234 in the Minh Mạng period.

8) For the first two reigns (1802–40) of the Nguyễn dynasty (1802–1945) see Hoa Bằng [1966: 50] and Đặng Huy Vân [1966: 23–24]; for the reign of Tự Đức (1848–83) see Hoa Bằng [1967]. A list of peasant rebellions in the years 1511–22 and 1737–61 is given in Nguyễn Đổng Chi [1964].

Table 2. Occurrences of Banditry in Nghệ An and Northward 1825-1826

Province	date	(vol. : page)		
Thanh Hoa and Nghệ An	4/25	(32 : 24)	Official forces in Nghệ An capture over 80 bandits.	
	8/25	(34 : 18)	Official forces in Nghệ An encounter bandits and suffer severe losses.	
	10/25	(35 : 18)	Nghệ An suffers from banditry. Two senior military and civilian officials appointed to the area.	
	11/25	(36 : 6)	Official forces in Thanh Hoa capture and kill many bandits.	
	12/25	(36 : 19)	Emperor declares Thanh-Nghệ to be the most urgent area in terms of rebels.	
	1/26	(37 : 3)	Many bandits in Nghệ An. Emperor asks how to subdue them.	
	1/26	(37 : 5)	Emperor informed about a powerful rebel in Thanh Hoa.	
	2/26	(37 : 22)	A bandit leader in Thanh-Nghệ rallies many people.	
	6/26	(39 : 15)	Bandits in Thanh-Nghệ suppressed.	
	7/26	(40 : 8)	Emperor declares two provinces of Thanh-Nghệ have been calmed.	
	9/26	(41 : 6)	Sea pirates in Thanh Hoa defeated.	
	10/26	(41 : 17)	Emperor informed that 80-90% of the bandits in Thanh-Nghệ have been arrested and the remnants are being eliminated.	
	Nam Định	2/26	(37 : 12)	Vũ Đức Cát defeats official troops but is finally arrested.
		3/26	(38 : 10)	Phan Bá Vành defeats official troops.
10/26		(41 : 15)	A high official in Hanoi citadel reports that government forces have lost control of Nam Định and Hải Dương.	
10/26		(41 : 18)	Ministry of Justice reports that many houses have been burned by bandits.	
11/26		(42 : 11)	Official soldiers defeated.	
Hải Dương	12/26	(42 : 19)	Phan Bá Vành and Nguyễn Hạnh invade Hải Dương protectorate.	
	7/26	(40 : 19)	9 districts have a bad crop. Many bandits and vagabonds reported.	
	7/26	(40 : 21)	Emperor informed that famine and banditry are most serious in Hải Dương.	
	10/26	(41 : 15)	A high official in Hanoi citadel reports that government forces have lost control of Nam Định and Hải Dương.	
	11/26	(42 : 11)	Official soldiers defeated.	
	12/26	(42 : 21)	Frequent resistance to official forces by bandits. Reinforcements sent.	
	12/26	(42 : 26)	Official troops seriously defeated by bandits.	
Sơn Nam (Hà Nội)	11/25	(36 : 4)	800 bandits reported. Official troops fire on them.	
	3/26	(38 : 8)	400 bandits reported. Official troops kill several dozen of them.	
Sơn Tây	11/25	(36 : 3)	An officer of Vĩnh Tường prefecture catches a bandit leader.	
	4/26	(38 : 23)	600 bandits reported. Official troops kill several dozen of them.	

	7/26	(40 : 5)	A bandit leader caught by troops sent from Hanoi citadel.
	11/26	(42 : 6)	A district chief killed by bandits.
	11/26	(42 : 13)	An officer of Vĩnh Tường catches a bandit leader.
	12/26	(42 : 30)	200 official soldiers encounter over 1,000 bandits and defeat them, killing about 30.
Bắc Ninh	11/25	(36 : 3)	An officer of Thiên Phước prefecture catches a bandit leader.
	6/26	(39 : 22)	50 soldiers from Hanoi citadel encounter 500 bandits at Gia Lâm district and are seriously defeated.
Hưng Hóa	11/26	(42 : 10)	A highland minority chieftain rebels.

Source: *TL*.

**Table 3.** Occurrences of Banditry in the Northern Provinces other than Nam Định and Hải Dương 1827–1828

Province	date	(vol. : page)	
Sơn Nam (Hà Nội)	2/27	(43 : 20)	An official of the Ministry of Ritual Affairs arrests one bandit leader.
	2/27	(43 : 26)	8 bandits killed and their weapons captured.
	2/27	(43 : 27)	Former protector of Sơn Nam pretends to be sick to avoid the campaign, and is dismissed.
	5/27	(45 : 37)	Former villagers of Tôn Xã fight bandits and many are killed or wounded, villagers rewarded.
	12/28	(56 : 5)	Bandits escape arrest.
Sơn Tây	1/27	(43 : 15)	A bandit leader caught.
Bắc Ninh	2/27	(43 : 38)	Several thousands of bandits reported. Two leaders and eighty followers killed or arrested.
	5/27	(45 : 21)	About a dozen bandits killed and their weapons captured.
	1/27	(43 : 15)	Many highland peoples rallied by Xá Văn Nhi.
Hưng Hóa	2/27	(43 : 23)	Protector of Hưng Hóa attacks Lê Duy Khương in Sơn Tây territory.
	3/27	(44 : 17)	Xá Văn Nhi and his sons captured.
Quảng Yên	2/27	(43 : 38)	50 boats of sea pirates reported. 14 killed and 16 captured.
	6/27	(46 : 33)	A bandit leader arrested and executed.
	12/27	(49 : 38)	Sea pirates rally several hundred fishing boats. Chinese bandits reported.
Phú Yên	6/28	(52 : 16)	Over 500 bandits reported.
	5/27	(46 : 13)	Highlanders reportedly engaged in plundering. A dozen of them arrested.
Tuyên Quang	7/28	(53 : 4)	Bandits reported on the border with Yunnan.
Thanh Hoá	7/27	(47 : 12)	One bandit captured.
	9/27	(48 : 6)	A bandit leader executed.
	6/28	(52 : 26)	Sea pirates captured.

Source: *TL*.



fought official patrols and troops. Government officials called these outlaw elements wicked people, and distinguished them from good people or commoners. Nevertheless, these outlaws by no means completely separated from the ordinary people. They originated from a rural society where most people lived honest lives. Moreover, such outlaw groups could not survive without contacts with ordinary people, whether such contacts were hostile or friendly. According to the Nguyễn court's official history, the leaders of the Tây Sơn rebellion<sup>9)</sup> were originally leaders of one such outlaw group in the highlands of central Vietnam [*Đại Nam Chính Biên Liệt Truyện Sơ Tập*: Vol. 30].

As we shall see later, various legends collected and recorded by French and Vietnamese authors state that Phan Bá Vành had been a member of such an outlaw group. Regardless of the truth or falsehood of these legends, it is important to note that such were the people's views of Phan Bá Vành in his own locality. Phan Bá Vành's story is by no means unique: it was common for lawless or unruly people to be ejected from the normal life of the village, or for unprivileged people to be forced to quit their own village; and it was natural that some of these people should gather together in places beyond the effective reach of government control. Such groups were not seen by government to be especially dangerous, so long as their influence remained local, and they could be handled by the resources and skills available to local officials. Nonetheless, when the influence and power of these outlaw groups reached a point where they endangered more than local security, or they came to declare themselves rebels rather than bandits, then the situation was perceived differently. Generally speaking, in regions where central government's authority did not effectively reach, bandits tended to grow in number to the point where central government could no longer ignore them. One such place was Bình Định province, where the Tây Sơn rebellion originated; another was in the Sino-Vietnamese border area.

In this respect, Nam Định was also a favourable place for bandits to congregate and grow in number. Like the Sino-Vietnamese border area, Nam Định too faced a frontier—in this case the sea. Just as bandits on the border could escape by crossing into China, bandits along the coast could escape pursuing government forces by fleeing out to sea. As we shall note later, Phan Bá Vành had both land and naval forces at his command. And just as bandits on the border could trade with Chinese smugglers, bandits in the coastal area could trade with Chinese sea pirates. Indeed, the official chronicle records that Phan Bá Vành's fleet was in league with Chinese pirates. Thus coastal provinces like Nam Định and Hải Dương where Phan Bá Vành rebelled provided conditions very much like those on the Sino-Vietnamese border, though the ethnic composition of the two areas differed.

The bandits were in most cases of peasant origin. It is noteworthy that official chronicles often describe in the same passage the twin phenomena of the movement of people away from their native villages, and of the rampancy of banditry. This movement of people was an outcome of the general poverty of rural society, and at

9) A massive peasant upheaval, led by three brothers, which began in Bình Định province in 1771 and which finally put an end to the rule of the Lê dynasty in 1788.

the same time it provided a reservoir for banditry. Yumio Sakurai has described Vietnamese society in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as one of 'a drifting people' [SAKURAI and ISHIZAWA 1977: 29–30]. Some villages were entirely abandoned [SAKURAI 1982]. This phenomenon of 'drifting' was not necessarily peculiar to Vietnamese society of the time; the abandonment of villages by peasants also occurred during the Lê dynasty [SAKURAI 1978]. Nevertheless the phenomenon had become very prevalent and serious by the last days of the Lê dynasty in the mid-eighteenth century. In the course of events in the turbulent decades which followed—the Tây Sơn rebellion, the Chinese invasion, and Gia Long's pacification campaign—the Vietnamese peasants, especially in the north, suffered to an unbearable degree. Their human and material resources were plundered by all parties to these conflicts. Furthermore, a half-century of confusion made it impossible for the government to maintain the delicate system of water control of the Red River delta. Under these circumstances, peasants became increasingly vulnerable to the damages caused by floods, typhoons, and the encroachment of salt water. When such calamities struck, the authorities were unable to provide sufficient relief measures or tax exemptions, thereby forcing many people to flee from the famine in their villages.

It seems that this situation improved somewhat after the founding of the Nguyễn dynasty in 1802. Yet once people had been uprooted they were not so easily settled down again. Political and social stability could not be quickly re-established in the countryside, and the repair of the water control system took a long time, even though civil war and foreign invasion had ended. There is an astonishing number of accounts concerning starvation, drifting people, and bandits in the official chronicle. In most cases the government tried to rescue the people by reducing or exempting taxes, and in some cases by providing or lending rice and money.<sup>10)</sup> For example, in the first month of 1824, Emperor Minh Mạng, ordered the sale of rice at a low price to the starving people of Nghệ An province [TL 25: 2–3]. However, in that area the famine caused by crop failure in the previous year was too grave. In the second month, according to the chronicle, 'Nghệ An experienced famine and theft rose' [TL 25: 11]. And by 1825, after a series of famines, Nghệ An, and its neighbouring province, Thanh Hoa, had become the most turbulent areas (see Table 2).<sup>11)</sup> In the fifth month of 1825, the emperor ordered the postponement of the scheduled census (*duyệt tuyền*) in these provinces [TL 27: 5], thereby suspending new recruitment of peasants to *corvée* and military service. After the famines and the havoc wrought by rebellions and the government's expeditionary campaign, the people were both scattered and impoverished.

These relief measures,<sup>12)</sup> however, could not match the frequency of crop failures.

10) For a discussion of official relief measures, see Scott [1976: Chapters 1–2 and pp. 178ff.].

11) See further TL [25: 5–6; 26: 9–16; 27: 5, 12; 28: 2–7, 9–10; 29: 8–9, 12; 30: 8].

12) Nguyễn Thế Anh [1967: 20] provides a list of major instances of government famine relief measures in the first half of the nineteenth century which clearly shows that famine was a very frequent phenomenon throughout the period and all over the country.

As early as the intercalary seventh month of 1824, when he ordered paddy to be loaned to the people of Hải Dương, the emperor had to confess:

This summer, Hải Dương had a natural calamity and a crop failure. I have sold rice (at a low price), exempted tax, and distributed money for hiring labourers. Why do I now find that the price of rice is going up day by day, that thieves are rampant, and the rich become poor, the poor become needy? [TL 28: 15]

Under these circumstances, disorder increased rapidly in the north, especially in Hải Dương province. In the fifth month of 1824 the Hanoi citadel reported to the emperor that there was a growing number of thieves in the north, especially in Hải Dương. The emperor ordered the Hanoi citadel to devote itself to pacifying the north, especially Hải Dương and Bắc Ninh, the two most troublesome provinces [TL 27: 2]. Moreover, in the eighth month of 1824, there were more than 100 Chinese boats in the sea off Hải Dương [TL 28: 18–19]. Later, in 1826 the Chinese sea pirates were to become important allies of Phan Bá Vành. The Nguyễn government's embargo on exports of rice [for example TL 29: 12] was one of the major reasons for the growth of Chinese sea pirates. Pirates from Kwangtung, Hainan and Fukien frequented the sea off Nam Định, and especially Hải Dương. The Chinese in Vietnam, and Vietnamese fishermen conspired with the pirates [TAKEDA 1975: 532–535].

Thus crop failures resulted in famines; and famines forced the people to drift away from their villages, giving rise to dissident elements, such as thieves and bandits [NGUYỄN Thế Anh 1967: 13–14]. Their depredations, and the official punitive actions which followed, further harassed the local population—creating a vicious circle of misery. For instance, after Phan Bá Vành's rebellion had been neutralized, the emperor received a report that there were ordinary people in Nam Định whose houses had been burned, but who had not been compensated. He ordered that money and rice be provided. The Commissioner for Pacification, who was sent to investigate Nam Định and other provinces where Phan Bá Vành had rebelled, carried out the relief measures according to the emperor's order [TL 41: 18; 45: 1–2]. From the amount of money dispensed we can calculate that at the very least, over two thousand families suffered from the fighting in Nam Định.

In addition to natural calamities, banditry and rebellions, there was another condition which caused distress among the local population: official maladministration and oppression of villagers—despite the fact that central government not only severely prohibited such misconduct, but also tried to lessen the burdens of the peasantry by ordering tax reductions and exemptions and a reduction in forced labour and military service. In examining the causes of Phan Bá Vành's revolt, the emperor increasingly suspected that the trouble stemmed from the corruption and misconduct of local officials. The local officials tended, of course, to deny this view for fear of punishment. They tended to claim that the people were cunning and that the rebellion (which they called either banditry or theft) was caused by the evil will of a few lunatics [for instance TL 37: 3–4; 40: 23; 43: 17–18]. The emperor was not satisfied with this kind of response. In the tenth month of 1826, he said:

Do the people not want peace? Are they willing to be bandits? Only because they are impoverished and have no means of petitioning do they join together and become bandits. I have read the judicial decisions of the Ministry of Justice. There were cases in which, although the ordinary people reported the presence of bandits, the police officers believed that they were lying, and in extreme cases demanded bribes from the informants. This has a tremendously evil influence. This is why the people feel anxious for their livelihood and become bandits [TL 41: 8].

In the first month of 1827, reacting to the recent period of unrest, the emperor ordered officials in Nam Định to investigate the actual conditions of the officials, soldiers and ordinary people, in order to ascertain: (1) whether or not the soldiers conducted themselves properly when they pursued the bandits; (2) whether or not there were greedy and cruel officials in the prefectures and districts; and (3) whether or not the poor people were flocking to join the bandits. But the administrators in the province gave evasive answers and disappointed the emperor [TL 43: 5-6]. In the same month, due to a state of military emergency, the emperor required the eleven northern provinces to report good omens and calamities, the people's situation, and instances of official corruption, as well as monthly reports on the price of rice [TL 43: 16]. The emperor finally launched a serious investigation in the Nam Định and Sơn Nam areas at the beginning of the third month of 1827, just after the defeat of Phan Bá Vành's rebellion. He appointed a Commissioner for Pacification, who sent his report to the emperor in the following month. The commissioner investigated the villages in Nam Định and discovered many greedy and cruel officials and clerks. Some were executed or dismissed. Among the officials and clerks of Nam Định and Sơn Nam provinces, prefectures, and districts, those who were sued, interrogated, or who ran away, numbered several hundred. The emperor downgraded and later dismissed, three senior officials in Nam Định, for failing to report the situation as requested [TL 44: 1-2; 45: 2-3; 47: 8].<sup>13)</sup>

In addition to warfare, natural calamities,<sup>14)</sup> and maladministration, we may consider as external causes of the phenomenon of 'drifting', the exploitative system of the Nguyễn dynasty itself. The Nguyễn court and its bureaucratic machine constantly extracted natural and human resources from the local population in the form of tax, corvée, and military service. Needless to say, the official chronicle is rather silent about this, since it touches on the legitimacy of the emperor and the regime as a whole. Scott [1976: 29, 31] argues that the peasant's criterion of exploitation is whether what is left after outside claims have been met is enough to maintain basic requirements, rather than the level of the claims; or put another way, that the peasant asks how much is left before he asks how much is taken and by what right.

13) The official account, needless to say, reflects the emperor's point of view; we should not therefore conclude the emperor had any greater love for the population than the officials.

14) Sakurai [1978, 1982] and Nguyễn Thế Anh [1967] discuss various natural calamities as the causes of social disturbances. Rambo [1973: 69ff.] has a rather speculative but suggestive discussion on various causes of social disturbances in the Tonkin delta.

In the light of these propositions we may conclude that the Nguyễn dynasty's extractive system was a contributory cause of population drift, especially when it extracted too much or failed to reduce its demands in times of the people's extreme need; and thereby failed to leave the peasants enough resources to maintain their minimum living standard.

There was also an internal cause of vagabondage and banditry, arising from within the village itself, namely social and economic differentiation. It is generally accepted that north and central Vietnam was free from large-scale landholding of the kind which existed in China. This does not mean, however, that there was no differentiation of wealth and landholding among the Vietnamese rural population. Vietnamese rural society was divided into the landed few and the landless many. The landed classes tended to form the local ruling class. According to scholars who have worked on the land registers for Nam Định province in 1805, village officials and notables frequently owned more land than the average landholder [NGUYỄN ĐỨC Nghinh 1975; SAKURAI 1976a, 1977]. These local privileged classes tended to increase their influence over other villagers, especially during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the central government could no longer effectively control local affairs.

Since banditry and theft were rampant, village notables, like the Chinese gentry, naturally acted to protect their own lives, families, and property against lawlessness. Even into the Nguyễn period rural notables maintained their own armed retainers:

In the 11th month [of 1825], the government prohibited the possession of weapons by ordinary people. In previous years, ordinary people conducted patrols, often in conjunction with provincial and prefectural officials and with weapons provided by them. This year, many bandits arose...They pillaged even in broad daylight and bright moonlight. They were rampant in various areas...Then for the first time, the government prohibited notables (huong hào) from keeping personal weapons [DB: 157-158].

This account suggests that village notables kept weapons and maintained armed self-defence patrols, and that the government was afraid of the possibility of bandits acquiring weapons held in villages. In spite of this official prohibition, the situation remained unchanged. It is reported that in 1867 in a commune of Sơn Tây province a canton chief dug a moat and built a mound to protect himself from attack by outsiders. He threatened and terrorized the entire population of the district. He heard all lawsuits, and those who did not accept his judgements had their houses burned, or were assassinated on his orders. Provincial officials, far from suppressing such local abuses, frequently relied on the armed force of such notables to buttress their own security [BNLT: 172].

Moreover, the notables did not stop at securing their own protection: they often used their power arbitrarily to oppress and exploit the unprivileged peasantry. In the fifth month of 1827, the emperor issued a long statement to the effect that village officials (tổng lý) exploited the villagers in the same manner as corrupt mandarins [TL 45: 24]. In the third month of 1828, the emperor said that notables (tổng lý hương hào) often pocketed the peasants' taxes, taking advantage of the government's orders

to reduce taxes or exempt from taxation [TL 51: 11]. In the ninth month, Nguyễn Công Trứ, a high official who was sent to Nam Định to suppress Phan Bá Vành's uprising, asked the emperor to end the evil practices of notables [TL 54: 5-6]. Nguyễn Công Trứ made two proposals. First, he proposed to take up the worst cases and to punish severely the most wicked notables according to law. Secondly, he proposed to abolish the system of lending out communal lands, since it was quite often used by village notables to their own profit. The emperor ordered court officials to study Trứ's second proposal. They turned it down, saying that the regulation clearly prescribed that the term of loan should be limited to three years, and that therefore the regulation itself was not wrong. They further emphasized that the system of lending communal lands (as opposed to distributing them equally among registered villagers) was very necessary as a relief measure for people in need in hard times [TL 54: 6]. This official account is an apt and typical demonstration of the great gap between the government's intention, or logic, and the actual functioning of the communal land system. Although Nguyễn Công Trứ knew well the realities of the system in practice and claimed that it did not work in the spirit of the regulation, the court officials stubbornly insisted on preserving the system, reasoning that the regulation itself was not wrong, only those who abused it.

It seems that the central government did not have any effective countermeasures against abuses by notables. To control the internal affairs of the villages, it would have been necessary to increase the power of the local bureaucracy. Yet, as Woodside concludes, the emperor did not want to make his local agencies excessively powerful, since he was afraid that the local mandarins would become masters of their own territory and challenge the central authority [WOODSIDE 1971: 158]. Generally speaking, the central government preferred to leave village affairs in the hands of notables, while limiting the influence of local bureaucrats. This tendency is apparent in the small numbers of local officials in each province [see SMITH 1974: 162; SAKURAI and ISHIZAWA 1977: 26-27]. The number of soldiers in each prefecture was also small [TL 50: 14; 54: 10-11; *Đại Nam Điền Lê Toát Yếu*: 28-32]. Consequently, the number of officials, clerks, and soldiers seems to have been too small to control the vast territory of each province. Village life was therefore largely regulated by the inhabitants themselves. Nevertheless, the traditional state's hesitation and inability to intervene directly in village affairs did not necessarily mean that a kind of village egalitarianism existed along with village autonomy. Popkin [1976] has convincingly criticized the view that mutual harmony and a collective ethos prevailed among the villagers [MUS 1952; MCALISTER and MUS 1970], and has emphasized the existence of internal conflicts and differentiation inside the villages of Vietnam. As Vu Van Hien [1939] has argued, the state itself was concerned about the bad effects of excessive differentiation among the villagers. Emperors often issued decrees prohibiting abuses of power by notables in the distribution of communal lands, even though there were not the means to make the decrees effective. French authors writing at the end of the nineteenth century also observed that, 'Authority in the commune was in the hands of the Council of Notables', and this council 'possessed,

above all else, the administrative organization of the commune; it was independent *vis-à-vis* the central power, it was at the head of a small republic' [NGUYEN Van Phong 1971: 100].

In these circumstances, it would seem that the least privileged villagers were the first to be compelled to leave their native villages and become wanderers or drifters—forced to do so by the privileged élite. Those villagers who remained might have found themselves marginally better off, once the weakest members of village society had left. As Migdal suggests:

One additional way besides frontiers and migration that [demographic] pressure could be relieved historically was through action on the part of one segment of the village against the other. If one group was successful, it could eliminate the other from the village, being left with the additional resources.... The burden of these driven-out people then shifted from individual villages to refugee centers... [MIGDAL 1974: 119–120].

As we shall see in detail in the following section, legends concerning Phan Bá Vành suggest that he was expelled from his native village by his uncle (or his employer), who owned a number of water buffalo and thus was apparently better off. At the same time, those who left the village harboured resentment against villagers who had not helped them, or had even forced them out. These 'dropouts' were the principal recruits to thieving and banditry. Not all of them became bandits, however. Instead, they might have survived as scavengers or beggars, or, if lucky enough, might have settled down elsewhere as peddlers, fishermen, agricultural labourers, and so forth. Only those sufficiently reckless and physically strong decided to join bandit gangs.

The least privileged were forced to leave their villages for various reasons, including natural calamities, warfare, banditry, heavy taxation, and exploitation by officials and village notables. In addition, there was another source of drifters and vagabonds: soldiers who deserted from the army. For example, in the second month of 1824, provincial officials in Bình Định reported that because the population of thirty hamlets had fled, they could not register the required number of soldiers; and that the number of deserters was increasing day by day [TL 25: 11–12]. Reports of desertion from the army occur quite frequently in official chronicles, for the whole territory of the north [TL 28: 2–3; 35: 5; 37: 20–21] and the other areas. In the sixth month of 1826, the desertion of soldiers was reported in the north, where the government was urgently engaged in suppressing Phan Bá Vành's rebellion. The emperor was informed that many soldiers had run away. He ordered the Hanoi citadel to group the 1,600 remaining soldiers into three battalions (cơ). More than a month passed. The soldiers still continued to desert, and at last only about 200 men remained [TL 39: 25]. In the tenth month of 1826, the emperor was told that army officers in the north frequently refused to fight bandits, saying that they were sick. The emperor then ordered that the exhausted, the weak and the sick be separated from the other soldiers and forced to retire [TL 41: 9]. In the eighth month of the same year, the emperor was told that troops in the provinces, prefectures

and other posts, as well as the reinforcements from the Hanoi citadel, when informed of the existence of bandits, deliberately went slowly to the spot and, on arriving after the bandits had gone, plundered the ordinary inhabitants [TL 40: 34]. Generally speaking the soldiers were themselves either poor villagers, or drifters who were conscripted into military service as 'soldiers of the unregistered' (ngoại tịch).

Thus in traditional Vietnam, there were two categories of villagers: those who resided permanently in their own villages; and those who drifted out. Some of the latter probably died of disease, hunger, or were murdered. Some were fortunate enough to be able to settle down in other villages, where they remained 'unregistered' (ngoại tịch) and worked as wage labourers, peddlers, or fishermen. Others joined bandit gangs. The bandits and the drifters, taken as a whole, were undoubtedly an important social component in traditional Vietnam. In one sense, banditry became a form of revenge by the drifters against the ordinary villagers who had abandoned them. In general, agrarian conflict in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and even before, tended to manifest itself as a conflict between those who remained in the village and those who had been forced to leave, as well as a conflict between the state and bandits or rebels. Natural calamities, permanent social disturbances, insufficient official relief measures and inner struggles among the villagers produced a continuous flow of drifters or vagabonds. With insufficient soldiers and local officials, provincial governors could not subdue the bandits. The bandits knew how to fight and made full use of guerrilla tactics. In the case of Phan Bá Vành, they even had their own fleet. It was almost impossible for the government navy to pursue these 'outlaws', who hid in the maze of canals and rivers, or in the waters around the many small islands.

Thus for the villagers, and more especially the village notables, self-protection became a daily concern. It was important not only *vis-à-vis* interference from government authorities, but also *vis-à-vis* harassment by local dissident elements: bandits, thieves and vagabonds together. This self-protection was institutionalized in village administration in the form of an officer in charge of security, and in the system of guarding against theft [CHAUTEMPS 1908: passim]. Each commune created its own militia and organized its own defence with a system of moats, walls and watchtowers; and in the Tonkin delta households tended to be grouped into fortified villages [RAMBO 1973: 241-243]. Popkin [1976: 435] argues: 'Despite the increased internal conflicts and stratification, the institutionalized resistance to outsiders continued.'

There are many official accounts which report that villagers fought or arrested bandits; that villagers accompanied official forces in the pursuit of bandits or pirates. For instance, in the eleventh month of 1826, the emperor rewarded the peasants of two villages in Hải Dương who had refused the bandits' request for food and money, and instead had caught and transported them to the Hanoi citadel [TL 42: 12]. In the second month of 1827, when official forces captured sea pirates in Quảng Yên, villagers accompanied them [TL 43: 38]. The report of the Commissioner for Pacification in Nam Định mentions that ordinary people who were killed while



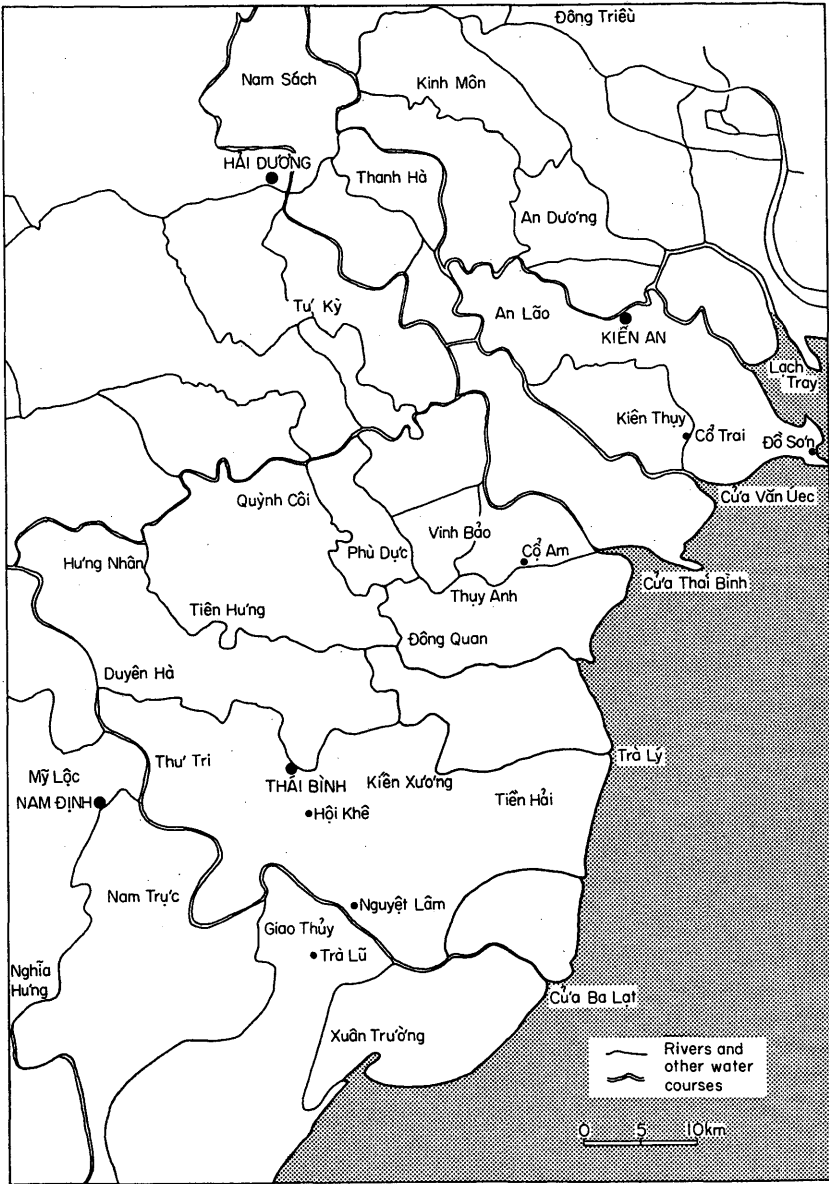


Figure 2. Map Showing the Hải Dương and Nam Định Areas

fighting bandits were compensated [TL 45: 2]. In Sơn Nam, a canton chief (cai tổng) led villagers in a fight with bandits. He himself was killed, and many villagers were also killed or wounded [TL 54: 37]. Rebellions in nineteenth-century Vietnam were in one sense fights between the 'village self-defence forces' and bandits who were alienated from village life [SAKURAI and ISHIZAWA 1977: 30–32].

The self-protection of villagers, especially of notables, was thus part of the conflict between those who remained in the village and those who left. But this does not exclude the possibility that ordinary villagers and notables might collaborate or conspire with bandits if they felt that in so doing they might better protect their lives and property. In the case of Phan Bá Vành, it is evident that his party recruited its soldiers and received food from villagers. In the eleventh month of 1826, the emperor complained: 'When they hide themselves, the bandits are sheltered by the people' [TL 42: 8]. The official chronicle also states that bandits in the north often concealed themselves among the population in their search for money, food, intelligence about government troops, and finally recruits [TL 42: 12; 43: 17–18; 51: 8]. There is a case in which a bandit from a commune in the Bach Hạc district of Sơn Tây province was given shelter by a canton chief of another district. The bandit and his group clashed with official troops in the early 1830s. They then settled down in the mountain forests and continued to pillage the local population of Sơn Tây. Official troops pursued them in vain for eight or nine years. In 1842, the newly appointed governor (tổng đốc) of the province simultaneously sent soldiers to attack the bandits' base in the mountains, and ordered the repair of Buddhist temples in the province. He dispatched monks and nuns to go around asking for donations, and at the same time to act as spies. They eventually discovered that the bandit leader had hidden in the house of a canton chief (cai tổng) in Hiệu Lực commune of Tùng Thiện district. When the governor sent soldiers to the house, the bandits managed to escape, but the canton chief was arrested and executed [BNLT: 86–98].

In brief, the relations of villagers (and more especially of village notables) with bandits, thieves, and vagabonds were ambivalent, just as their relations with the state were ambivalent. In some cases villagers rejected and fought the bandits, but in others they tried to negotiate and coexist with them. In either case their aim was the same: to protect themselves and survive in a turbulent society.

## PHAN BÁ VÀNH: FROM VAGABOND TO CHARISMATIC HERO

The official record seldom mentions Phan Bá Vành's personal background. It tells us merely two things: that Phan Bá Vành was 'a bandit in Nam Định' [TL 38: 10]; and that, according to a different source, his surname was Đổ, 杜 instead of Phan [TL 37: 12]. An alternative source gives additional information:

In the year of Bình Tuất, the seventh year of Minh Mạng [1826], a bandit in Nam Định, named Phan Bá Vành, a man from Nguyệt Lâm commune, Vũ Tiên district, who was skilled in military arts, rallied a party and plundered [BNLT: 40].

Local legends and documents collected and recorded by present-day Vietnamese scholars also affirm that Phan Bá Vành was born in Minh Giám commune (later divided into two villages [thôn] of Nguyệt Lâm and Nguyệt Giám),<sup>15)</sup> Vũ Tiên district, Kiến Xương prefecture (of present-day Thái Bình province). Vũ Tiên was one of four districts in Kiến Xương prefecture and consisted of four cantons and about 45 communes. Nguyệt Lâm was among twelve communes belonging to Lạc Đạo canton [NTC (Nam Định): 11–12, 128]. Minh Giám lay on the Red River about 12 km from the prefectural town of Kiến Xương [TRUÔNG Hữu Quỳnh 1972: 35].<sup>16)</sup>

Although the official chronicle and *BNLT* consistently call him Phan Bá Vành (the former spelling it 潘伯鑠 and the latter 潘伯錄),<sup>17)</sup> there are various accounts concerning his name. A supplement to the official chronicle calls him Đỗ Bá Vinh/Vanh 杜伯榮 [DB: 161, 166, 168]. Some people say his family name had been originally Nguyễn 阮; others that his surname had been Phan 潘, but after his death, the Phan families in the village changed their surname to Nguyễn, and later reassumed their original surname [TRUÔNG Hữu Quỳnh 1972: 36]. The commune's cadastral register (địa bạ) records his personal name Phan Bá Vinh, instead of Phan Bá Vành, which is also found in some official documents. There are also many old people, and distant descendants of Phan Bá Vành in his native place who remember various stories in which he was called Phan Ba Vành. Some interpret it as follows: he was called Ba Vành because he had three (ba) rims (vành) on his eyes, or else his forehead or neck. Others interpret it saying that he was the third (ba) child and that his given name was Vành [ĐẶNG Huy Vện *et al.* 1966: 21 note 3; TRUÔNG Hữu Quỳnh 1972: 36].

Nguyễn Phan Quang and others [1979: 31–32] have discovered that one of Phan Bá Vành's descendants still keeps the appendix (phụ ý) of the lineage record (gia phả), although its major parts have been lost. According to it, Phan Bá Vành was the third of five children,<sup>18)</sup> the eldest (son)—Phan Thanh Cầu; the second—the name is missing; the third (son)—Phan Bá Vành; the fourth (son)—Phan Cầm; and the fifth (daughter)—Phan Thị Bàu. His father's name is unknown; his mother, Mai Thị

15) According to the local population, after the suppression of Phan Bá Vành's rebellion, the Nguyễn government erased the letter *nhật* 日 from the word *minh* 明, leaving the remaining part *nguyệt* 月 for the name of the commune. Yet there is some evidence that the original name of Minh Giám may have continued to be used at least until the 1860s or 1870s [TRUÔNG Hữu Quỳnh 1972: 38 note 2].

16) DB [161] gives a different account of his birthplace.

17) The letters 鑠 and 錄 have the same pronunciation in Sino-Vietnamese, Vành. Their meaning in Vietnamese is a rim or brim; and in Chinese, the sound of a bell, a kind of weapon, etc.

18) According to Trương Hữu Quỳnh [1972: 36] he was the third of six children. He was the second, or perhaps third son. His younger sister, said to have been very beautiful, committed suicide after being raped by an influential person in the locality [NGUYỄN Phan Quang *et al.* 1979: 82].

Vẻ, came from Cối Kê commune or Làng Cối<sup>19)</sup> (which later changed its name to Hội Khê and now is Vũ Hội commune, Vũ Thư district, Thái Bình province) [NGUYỄN Phan Quang *et al.* 1979: 32].

According to various popular legends Bá Vành's social origin was very humble; either his father was a boatman and fish-breeder or his parents lived by catching and selling fish [ĐẶNG Huy Vận *et al.* 1966: 21; NGUYỄN Phan Quang *et al.* 1979: 32]. The village of Minh Giám was very poor. Being on the Red River, fishing was a traditional though humble occupation [TRUÔNG Hữu Quỳnh 1972: 35–36]. His father died early and left his family in poverty, which meant that Phan Bá Vành could not go to the village school, but had to tend his uncle's water buffaloes during his childhood [HOA BẮNG 1966: 51; TRUÔNG Hữu Quỳnh 1972: 36]. Local legends speak of his strength and skill in martial arts. One of them narrates:

Phan Bá Vành had long arms like a gibbon. His two thighs grew black bristles like a caterpillar. He ate more than the others did. He was very strong and ran very fast. He could throw a javelin to kill a man at a distance of 100 paces, and he did not fail even once in a hundred times. Standing far from a rice field of several acres, he could hit the mark even if he threw the beam of a plough from one side to another [HOA BẮNG 1966: 51. See also ĐẶNG Huy Vận *et al.* 1966: 23 note 1; NGUYỄN Phan Quang *et al.* 1979: 32].

Legends also relate that, while he watched the water buffaloes in the fields, he often played at soldiers with other boys. Thanks to his strength and cleverness, he was always chosen to be the leader. His team often fought with the buffalo-boys of the neighbouring village, Trà Lũ. Trà Lũ was very famous for its skill in Vietnamese wrestling (*đô vật*); and held a big wrestling festival every three years. It has been suggested that Phan Bá Vành may have attended the festival and learned the traditional martial arts of the locality [TRUÔNG Hữu Quỳnh 1972: 36–37].

One day he slaughtered one of the water buffaloes he was tending, and served the meat to his friends. One version says he did so because he was shocked by the people's poverty [HOA BẮNG 1966: 51]. Another says that it was because he wanted to feast after playing warrior-like games [TRUÔNG Hữu Quỳnh 1972: 37]. Whatever the reason, he could no longer stay in the village—or was driven out by his uncle, the owner of the water buffalo—and had to leave behind his mother, and in some versions his wife [HOA BẮNG 1966: 51–52; TRUÔNG Hữu Quỳnh 1972: 37]. According to Hoa Bắng [1966: 51], this occurred in 1825 when he was nineteen years old. There is another legend explaining the reason for Phan Bá Vành's leaving the village:

While he forgot himself in playful combat with the other boys, his water buffaloes ate the paddy of a cruel landowner whom the villagers hated. The landowner cursed Vành, who became angry and killed him. Vành then killed the water buffalo and served its meat, and left the village [TRUÔNG Hữu Quỳnh 1972: 37].

19) Vietnamese traditional communes and villages usually had two names: one was more official and was in Sino-Vietnamese; and another was more colloquial and was frequently in vernacular Vietnamese [ORY 1894: 9–11].

In short, according to various legends, he was of humble origin; and since his father died early, his family led a marginal existence, engaging in minor occupations. It was this poverty, combined with his personal characteristics of recklessness and bravery, which made him abandon his native village. The village of Nguyệt Lâm was particularly poor with insufficient private and communal lands [TRUONG HỮU QUYNH 1972: 36]. It was a common enough phenomenon for the poor to be forced to abandon their villages, for various reasons we have argued earlier. Even in the last days before the August Revolution in 1945, there were numerous villagers who had been forced to leave their villages, and move to other provinces. Only after the August Revolution did these 'vagabonds', now old in years, gradually come back to settle down in their home villages.

Of course, we cannot totally accept that these legends are objectively accurate, but it is even more important to know what the people's subjective image of Phan Bá Vành was and is. In these stories, Phan Bá Vành typifies a hero of humble origin, forced to abandon his own village but who, thanks to his prowess, finally became a king. In this respect his story brings to mind that of Đinh Bộ Lĩnh (reigned 968-79), the first ruler of Vietnam to call himself emperor. Đinh Bộ Lĩnh was from Ninh Bình, adjacent to Phan Bá Vành's province. According to the *Việt Sử lược*, Lĩnh too had lost his father when he was small, and lived with his mother and five sisters. And as a child, he had tended the cows (cow in the Sino-Vietnamese text might be interpreted as water buffalo) together with the other boys. He was chosen by them to be their leader, and was treated with the honour due to a master. When the children were not busy, they gathered brushwood for him as corvée labour. At night they brought it to his mother's house. She was very glad and treated them to dishes of pork. All the people regarded him as extraordinary and obeyed him, with the exception of his uncle who alone did not obey him [*Việt Sử lược*: Vols. 1, 16]. The *Đại Việt Sử ký Toàn Thư* (Bản Kỷ: Vol. 1) has almost the same description. Certain legends narrate another more mythical version of the story: Đinh Bộ Lĩnh's father was an otter, who raped Lĩnh's mother. His father in name, General Đinh Công Trứ, had died earlier. So had his real father, the otter. While he was young, he tended his uncle's water buffaloes. He was chosen by the other boys to be their leader and always won in fights with other children. One day he killed a water buffalo in order that he might treat his friends to a feast. His uncle, the owner of the water buffalo, pursued him and Lĩnh quit the village [MATSUMOTO 1933; AKASHI 1935; XU' SI 1973: 6-8].<sup>20)</sup>

20) It is noteworthy that the stories of the two legendary heroes both state that their relations with their uncles were (or became) hostile. As Scott [1976: 27] has argued: 'there is an entire range of networks and institutions outside the immediate family which may, and often do, act as shock absorbers during economic crises in peasant life. A man's kinsmen, his friends, his village, a powerful patron, and even—though rarely—the state, may help tide him over a difficult period of illness or crop failure.' Among these 'shock absorbers', assistance from kinsmen should be the most reliable; the legends of Đinh Bộ Lĩnh and Phan Bá Vành suggest that they had lost the most reliable sources of assistance next to self-help.

Such a close resemblance between the stories of the two persons is unlikely to be accidental. Heroic legends are often transferred from one person to another [YAMAMOTO 1941: 925–944; 1943: 104ff.]. Nonetheless, there remains a factual core to Phan Bá Vành's story; the fact that he was among those poor villagers who were forced to abandon their native place. Yet the prowess of this vagabond made him a leader of a large rebellion. And he was to become such a hero that the local population have, whether intentionally or unconsciously, compared him with another legendary hero, Đinh Bộ Lĩnh.

Legends continue the story of Phan Bá Vành's life after he left the village. After being driven out by his uncle, Phan Bá Vành went to work under an expert in martial arts, whose name was Huyện Ngọc, who taught his skills to his children. The name Huyện Ngọc indicates that he used to work as a district (huyện) official. Phan Bá Vành secretly observed Huyện Ngọc's lessons and mastered the martial arts by himself. One day he challenged Huyện Ngọc and his children to a contest, and twice he won. Later, some misconduct was revealed and he could not stay any longer. He fled to Mount Voi in Kiến An [TRUÔNG Hữu Quýnh 1972: 37]. Mount Voi (elephant) may be identical to Mount Yên Tử, since the latter was also called Mount Tượng (elephant in Sino-Vietnamese). Mount Yên Tử was a sacred mountain where the Trần emperors had established a pagoda, and which was situated some 25 km northeast of Đông Triều district, Hải Dương province [NTC (*Hải Dương*)]. One legend states that a monk from the temple of Yên Tử in Hải Dương was involved in Phan Bá Vành's rebellion and was executed [HUÔNG Sơn and CẦN Mẫn 1973: 57]. Another source says that Phan Bá Vành first raised a rebellion at Mount Voi in the present-day Kiến An province and stayed there for a time before returning to Nam Định to rally the people [ĐẶNG Huy Vận *et al.* 1966: 24–25].

Phan Bá Vành was a vagabond, and at the same time an expert in martial arts. These two factors suggest that he was a member of an outlaw group. And if he really started his rebellion at Mount Voi in Hải Dương province as the legends relate, then it is reasonable to suppose that the rebellion must have had an outlaw group at its core playing an initiating and decisive role, since Mount Voi was a sacred and remote mountain where a dissident group could easily congregate and flourish. A popular ballad narrates:

Nguyễn Cầu, Phan Liễn and Ba Vành  
 Raised a flag at Voi Phục which waved into four directions.  
 The generals were extraordinarily brave and the soldiers were strong.  
 They attacked the coastal region and opened the way to the capital  
 [cited in NGUYỄN Phan Quang *et al.* 1979: 37].<sup>21)</sup>

The *Quốc Sử Di Biên* also relates that Đỗ Bá Vinh, physically strong and skilled in martial arts, rose first in Hải Dương [DB: 161].

21) Nguyễn Cầu was a canton chief, and from the same village as Bá Vành. Phan Liễn was Bá Vành's relative. Voi Phục is Mount Voi in Kiến An [NGUYỄN Phan Quang *et al.* 1979: 42 note 19].

In brief then, Phan Bá Vành, a poor villager in Nam Định, abandoned his village and become a vagabond. Roaming from place to place, he mastered martial arts and finally joined an outlaw group in Hải Dương. His group gradually stirred up the local population to rebellion. Later, he returned to Nam Định to launch a full-scale revolt, and was called a king.

### DOWN IN THIS WORLD THERE IS KING BÁ VÀNH

We have argued that villagers' relations with bandits, thieves and vagabonds were ambivalent, as were their relations with the state; in some cases villagers rejected and fought the bandits, in other cases, they tried to negotiate and coexist with them. In Phan Bá Vành's case, the official chronicle has to admit that the local population often collaborated with the rebels. Rebels invariably resorted to armed force, and their efforts to persuade the local population of the legitimacy of their actions were in many cases effective only when backed by coercion.

Everywhere the villagers were required to supply food. The strongest men were taken to be in the vanguard. Any villages which did not obey were burned down. In several weeks the bandits numbered ten thousand. The local people bent before this storm [BNLT: 42].

Most rebels, however, tried or claimed to win popular support through means other than coercion.<sup>22)</sup>

Thus the question arises as to the circumstances in which the thieves, or bandits and pirates won the support of ordinary villagers, regardless of the latter's willingness or reluctance. In some cases, the thieves and bandits might be regarded as 'social bandits', as Hobsbawm [1969] has called them. It is evident that Phan Bá Vành was a hero within the context of various legends and popular ballads transmitted from generation to generation among the local population.

Weak government control and an increasing momentum in the strength of the bandits often made possible early bandit successes in fighting against government forces. In these circumstances, successful bandits were sometimes transformed into rebels. Whereas bandits broke laws but did not aim to destroy the existing government, rebels on the other hand had as their objective the overthrow of the existing regime [HSIAO 1960: Chapters 9-10]. Moreover, rebellion intended not only to overthrow the existing political order but also to establish a new political order. Thus, rebels became something more than social bandits. Generally speaking, a rebel leader denounced the existing government as evil and illegitimate, and regarded himself as a righteous ruler who could re-establish a harmonious society free from natural calamities, starvation, or political disorder. He attempted to demonstrate that he had the right and legitimacy to become the new and true

22) Trương Hữu Quỳnh emphasizes that the rebels led by Phan Bá Vành seldom pillaged; they did so only when they met with some opposition or merciless landowners. The people willingly donated food and money [TRƯƠNG Hữu Quỳnh 1972: 38; see also ĐẶNG Huy Vãn *et al.* 1966: 23].

ruler. This was not just a matter of convincing a rebel band of a ruler's right to lead: a rebel leader also expected to extend his claims of legitimacy over the whole area in which the rebels operated. Persuading the local population was an important and by no means easy problem for the rebel leader. He tended to differentiate bandits from rebels, which government officials failed to do [NGUYỄN Phan Quang 1982: 15].

The rebels' armed force was not simply a means of coercion, but also a kind of asset to demonstrate their legitimacy. By using armed force, they successfully fought the government forces and thus demonstrated their invincibility, one of the main sources of legitimacy. At the same time, defeating the official forces made the insurgent area a kingdom of rebels. In the case of Phan Bá Vành, Gaultier [1935: 194] says: 'Those who revolted were ... the masters of the whole of the southern part of Tonkin'.

Countless soldiers of the government forces were killed. All those who went (as government soldiers) to the front, first of all entrusted their family with future affairs, and only when they had done so did they start out. When they arrived at the battlefields, on seeing and hearing the fighting, they shrank back. Therefore, banditry increased day by day [BNLT: 42].

Nonetheless, military strength was not the only, nor perhaps the most decisive, source of legitimacy.<sup>23)</sup> The rebel leader very often called himself a king or an emperor.

Phan Bá Vành not only claimed to be a king, but acted as such. He made his own 'official' seals and kept 'official' documents. According to the official record when the government forces finally defeated Phan Bá Vành, they confiscated all of their boats, weapons, and 'false' seals and documents [TL 43: 34]. Phan Bá Vành also designated his troops as central, left-hand, right-hand, and front armies [TL 38: 10–11; 43: 34; HOA BẮNG 1966: 51; NGUYỄN Phan Quang *et al.* 1979: 33]. Thus he treated his troops not as a patchwork of unorganized and undisciplined gangs, but as an organized, coherent force.

There was additional support for his claim to legitimacy. When he began to rally his party and call himself a king, a comet appeared in the southeastern sky. A rumour spread in the form of a popular ballad, declaring:

Up in the heavens there is Mr. Comet  
Down in this world there is King Bá Vành [BNLT: 42].

Various versions of this ballad have been collected and recorded by Vietnamese scholars.<sup>24)</sup> The comet omen is also recorded in the official chronicle. It reports that the comet appeared in the southeastern sky in the eighth month of 1825; it was seen until the beginning of the eleventh month of that year and gave the emperor an

23) Đặng Huy Vân *et al.* [1966: 22–23] rightly argue that one should not attribute Phan Bá Vành's success solely to his personal powers.

24) In another version, for instance, the ballad runs, 'Up in the heavens there is Mr. Comet; while in the village of Minh Giám there is King Bá Vành [HOA BẮNG 1966: 51; *Ty Văn Hóa Thông Tin Thái Bình* 1981: 291–292].



Table 4. Incidence of Banditry and Piracy 1802-1883 listed in the *BNLT*

	South	Khanh-Huế Hoa to Quang- Nam	Quang-Binh Tri	Thanh-Hoa Nghê-An Ninh-Binh	Tran-Ninh	Son-Tây Bac-Ninh Hà-Nội Nam-Định Hải-Dương	Quảng-Yên	Thái-Nguyên Tuyên-Quang Hưng-Hóa Lạng-Son	Sub-total	Total
Gia Long (1802-1819)	thieves/bandits	1	—	1	—	3	—	2	7	
	pirates	—	—	—	—	—	2	—	2	
	ethnic minorities	—	3	—	—	—	—	—	3	13
	Lê remnants	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	1	
Minh Mạng (1820-1840)	thieves/bandits	1 <sup>a)</sup>	—	2	1	2	—	2	8	
	pirates	—	1	1	—	—	—	—	2	
	ethnic minorities	—	3	—	1 <sup>b)</sup>	—	—	2	6	26
	Chinese pirates	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	1	
	Lê remnants	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	1	
	others	3 <sup>c)</sup>	—	1 <sup>e)</sup>	—	1 <sup>d)</sup>	—	—	—	8
Thiệu Trị (1841-1847)	thieves/bandits	1	—	—	—	1	—	—	2	
	Chinese pirates	—	1	1	—	—	2	—	4	8
	others	2 <sup>g)</sup>	—	—	—	—	—	—	2	
Tự Đức (1847-1883)	thieves/bandits	1	—	2	—	4	1	1	9	
	pirates	—	—	—	—	1	3	—	4	
	ethnic minorities	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	1	
	Chinese bandits	—	—	—	—	—	—	9	9	37
	Chinese pirates	—	—	—	—	1	1	—	2	
	Lê remnants	—	—	1	—	4	3	2	10	
	coup d'état	—	2	—	—	—	—	—	2	

thieves/bandits	4	—	—	—	5	1	10	1	5	26
pirates	—	1	—	—	1	—	1	5	—	8
ethnic minorities	—	6	—	—	—	1	1	—	2	10
Chinese bandits	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	9	9
Chinese pirates	—	1	—	1	1	—	1	3	—	7
Lé remnants	—	—	—	—	2	—	5	3	2	12
coup d'état	—	—	2	—	—	—	—	—	—	2
others	5	3	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>84</b>

Source: *BNLT* [8-224].

Notes:

*Thieves/bandits* includes: phi (匪), thổ phi (土匪), nghịch phi (逆匪), phi cừ (匪梟), đạo tặc (盜賊), bô phạm (逋犯). The cases in which the Vietnamese text gives titles and/or native places are also included here.

*Pirates* includes hải phi (海匪) and thủy phi (水匪).

*Ethnic minorities* includes: man (蠻), ác man (惡蠻), man phi (蠻匪), thổ tù (土酋), and thế tù (世酋).

*Chinese pirates* are those described as thanh phi (清匪) and as possessing boats.

*Chinese bandits* are those who are described as thanh phi (清匪), but not possessing boats.

*Lé remnants* includes those who declared themselves to be Lé emperors, and their supporters.

a) This was the rebellion of Lê Văn Khôi in 1833-35. He was originally a chief of an ethnic minority group in Cao Bằng (Cao Bằng thổ mục (高平土目)); he surrendered to Lê Văn Duyệt and was appointed a military officer in the south, where he later revolted.

b) This was the case in which a man named Chiêu Nôi, whose title was quân thiếp phủ lộ (管攝府路), conspired with the Siamese. His name Chiêu Nôi suggests that he belonged to a minority group in Vietnam.

c) This includes one case of Cambodians attacking border provinces in 1820; one case of a raid by Đờ Bà pirates (Đờ Bà thủy phi (關閩水匪)); and one case of attack by Siamese official troops around 1833.

d) This includes a case of an attack by Siamese official troops around 1833; a case in which a Vietnamese guided an invasion by Siamese bandits in 1834; and a case of a raid by Đờ Bà pirates in 1835.

e) These were attacks by Siamese official troops around 1833.

g) These were the invasions by Siamese official troops in 1841 and 1842.

Several incidents in Cambodian territory, and one incident in Lao territory are excluded from this list.

ominous presentiment. He was so worried by it that, while the comet could still be seen, he ordered his meals to be made simpler and refrained from court amusements and entertainments [TL 34: 13–16]. The government clearly recognized that this omen was understood by the local population as a sign of the rebels' legitimacy [TL 36: 18; 37: 8; 43: 17].

While the Huế government regarded this phenomenon as an ill omen, for the local population the comet omen was associated with the prevailing misery and was taken to be an indisputable sign of the decline of the existing government and the advent of a new ruler. In the twelfth month of 1828, when the emperor visited Quảng Nam province, a man appealed to him, saying: 'In the past seven or eight years, there have been eclipses, swarms of locusts, landslides, droughts, storms, epidemics, comets, insurgents, and famines... Only the ruler is in the boat, while the people are in the water. The water can turn the boat over, but the boat can never turn the water over' [DB: 175–176].

The emperor further expressed his anxiety during an audience one month after Phan Bá Vành's defeat in 1827, with the high officials who had successfully suppressed the rebellion. The emperor asked them,

The rebels called themselves (the people of) Lê Hoàng 黎皇.  
What did they mean by this?

One of the officials replied,

I asked the prisoners about it. They all said that Lê meant people and that Hoàng meant great. Therefore by this term they were not referring to remnants of the Lê dynasty. I would hazard a guess that the rebels were all thieves. They induced the ordinary people to follow them. Many people were ensnared by them [TL 45: 8–9].

At first sight, it is natural that the word Lê Hoàng should be understood as the Lê emperor, since Hoàng also means emperor. Emperor Minh Mạng was anxious precisely because he interpreted it in this way. The official explained it in a different way. He did so at least partly because he knew the emperor was extremely sensitive about the existence of remnants of the Lê dynasty, and about the northerners' continuing loyalty to the old dynasty [TL 35: 18; 38: 21; WOODSIDE 1971: 134]. Of the 84 disturbances between 1802 and 1883 listed in one Sino-Vietnamese compendium [BNLT], 60 (71%) occurred in the north and in Thanh Hoa and Nghệ An, the areas formerly controlled by the northern overlords, the Trịnh; and 12 were by professed heirs or supporters of the Lê (see Table 4). This indicates that the Nguyễn court, located in Huế, never fully convinced the northerners of its legitimacy especially in the earlier days of the dynasty. In addition the memory of Nguyễn Huệ, the youngest of the Tây Sơn brothers, was still fresh in the north. Beginning as a rebel, he ultimately married a daughter of the last Lê emperor, and called himself emperor. This had occurred only 40 years before the Phan Bá Vành rebellion.

The compiler of the *Quốc Sử Dị Biên* [DB] suggests that Phan Bá Vành had relations with the old Lê dynasty: he entered into an alliance at Đồ Sơn (Hải Dương province) with Cát and Hạnh to support Lê Duy Lương. He falsely called himself

Yellow Dragon (Hoàng Long). His clothes and flags were all in black [DB: 161]. The Vietnamese have traditionally regarded the yellow dragon as a symbol of kingship. Therefore this account suggests the highest probability that Phan Bá Vành called himself king (or emperor).<sup>25)</sup> It is also noteworthy that according to this record, his group was supporting Lê Duy Lương who was a descendant of the Lê family and started a prolonged rebellion, probably in 1816, at Ninh Bình, adjacent to Nam Định. With the support of ethnic minorities, Lê Duy Lương expanded his influence from a base camp in a mountainous region to the whole areas of Ninh Bình, Thanh Hoa and Hưng Hóa. The rebellion reached its highest point in the early 1830s. He himself was killed in 1836, yet his supporters continued to rebel until the mid-1840s [ĐU NGHỆ 1968].

Various legends and local documents also suggest that, although he himself was very poor, Phan Bá Vành's ancestors were nobles who served the Lê emperors. According to these sources, Phan Bá Vành was a descendant of Ngô Tư, a native of Thanh Hoa and a participant in the Lam Sơn insurrection against the Chinese which Lê Lợi (reigned 1418–37), later founder of the Lê dynasty, launched in his home province of Thanh Hoa. Ngô Tư was originally a servant (*gia nô*) of Lê Lợi, but he later became a noble when his daughter was chosen to be one of the wives of Lê Thánh Tông, the fourth emperor. During the sixteenth century, the Ngô family stood against the Mạc family who usurped the Lê emperor's throne. Later, the Ngô family moved to Minh Giám in Nam Định province where their maternal family originated, and changed their surname to Phan [HOA BẰNG 1966: 50–51; TRUÔNG HỮU QUÝNH 1972: 36; NGUYỄN PHAN QUANG *et al.* 1979: 31–32; NGUYỄN PHAN QUANG 1982: 15–16].

To summarize, a small bandit group augmented by vagabonds destroyed government troops, captured their firearms and boats, and became rebels. Their early military victories, the comet omen, and the fresh memory of the Lê dynasty and Nguyễn Huệ, combined with prevailing social grievances, led many ordinary people to accept the legitimacy of Phan Bá Vành as a righteous king. He became a legendary hero whose name was to be remembered by local people of later generations.

## THE WAXING OF THE REBELLION

In the official chronicle, Phan Bá Vành's name first appears in the description of events for the second and third months of the seventh year of Minh Mạng (1826) [TL 37: 12–13; 38: 10]. The Sino-Vietnamese documents also suggest that Phan Bá Vành's rebellion started in 1826 [BNLT: 40; DB: 161]. Hoa Bằng [1966: 51] suggests

25) An episode in the early life of Đinh Bộ Lĩnh involving yellow dragons is also recorded in the *Việt Sử lược* [Vol. 1: 16]. When he was pursued by his uncle, two yellow dragons suddenly appeared and protected him. This may be further evidence of some influence of the Đinh Bộ Lĩnh's legend on that of Phan Bá Vành. It is noteworthy that the DB was compiled in the early 1850s, only 25 years after the Phan Bá Vành rebellion. It is possible that Phan Bá Vành and his contemporaries actually considered him to be a reincarnation of Đinh Bộ Lĩnh.

that Phan Bá Vành left his village in the sixth year of Minh Mạng (1825), and that a comet appeared in the seventh month of that year [see also NGUYỄN Phan Quang *et al.* 1979: 36]. Other sources say that Phan Bá Vành raised his revolt in 1821 [ĐẶNG Huy Vận *et al.* 1966: 24–25; NGUYỄN Phan Quang *et al.* 1979: 36–37]. Another source even says that, 'In the tenth year of Gia Long (1811), Phan Bá Vành was active as a bandit in Hải Dương, and had a reputation for bravery [NGUYỄN Phan Quang *et al.* 1979: 37].

Thus Vietnamese scholars argue that Phan Bá Vành started his rebellion well before 1826, and that it was only in 1826, when it became rampant, that the Nguyễn court paid attention to the insurrection [ĐẶNG Huy Vận *et al.* 1966: 24–25; NGUYỄN Phan Quang *et al.* 1979: 36–37]. According to the official chronicle, the comet was seen during the eighth and eleventh months of that year [TL 34: 3–16], while another source says that it first appeared in the second month [DB: 151]. Thus it is reasonable to think that Bá Vành's insurrection started during, or even before the period of the appearance of the comet. Yet it is also plausible that in 1825 the rebellion was not yet so serious for the Nguyễn government, since even in the twelfth month of 1825 the emperor still regarded the most urgent areas in terms of banditry to be Thanh Hoa and Nghệ An, but not Nam Định [TL 36: 19–20].

It is also possible that Phan Bá Vành first raised his rebellion outside his native province. As we have seen, various sources say that he first joined an outlaw or bandit group at Mount Voi, and that he eventually rallied the local people in Hải Dương. According to the official chronicle, as we have seen in the first section, it was in Hải Dương rather than Nam Định where the people were starving and banditry was rife in the years 1824–5.

In brief, Phan Bá Vành apparently joined an outlaw group in another province after he had abandoned his village and became a vagabond; he probably became a member of a rebel group in Hải Dương, the province neighbouring his own; he subsequently returned to Nam Định to become what Woodside [1971: 57] calls 'a charismatic leader'.

The first reference to Phan Bá Vành in the official chronicle is, as has been mentioned, in the passage describing the events of the second month of 1826. The central figure in this description, however, is not Phan Bá Vành himself, but a man named Vũ Đức Cát. The official chronicle states:

Vũ Đức Cát, a bandit in Nam Định, committed theft in the small islands [the area commonly called Tiên Châu, now Tiên Hải district] off the coast of Trà Lý... Cát was formerly a post commander (thủ ngự) at Ba Lạt. Because his son committed homicide, he was dismissed from his post. Afterwards, he rallied fugitive criminals, such as Phan Bá Vành and Nguyễn Hạnh, and intended to violate the law and rob. He defeated Đặng Đình Miễn, and Nguyễn Trung Diễn, post commanders (thủ ngự), at Trà Lý and Lân Hải respectively [TL 37: 12].

Thus according to the TL, the first leader of the bandits in Nam Định was Vũ Đức

Cát, and it was he who rallied 'fugitive criminals': Phan Bá Vành and others. In another passage the official chronicle more clearly states:

A bandit in Nam Định, Phan Bá Vành, rebelled. After Vũ Đức Cát was captured, more than two thousand bandits in hiding gathered and chose Vành as their [new] leader...[*TL* 38: 10].

Contrary to this official account, Vietnamese scholars believe that Phan Bá Vành had been the leader of the bandits since the early 1820s, and that Vũ Đức Cát joined them only in 1826 [ĐẶNG Huy Vãn *et al.* 1966: 25]. Vành may well have joined the uprising before Vũ Đức Cát, since the official chronicle says that Vành was already a 'fugitive criminal'. Yet it is possible that when Vành entered into an alliance with Cát, he treated Cát as a superior because, as an ex-military officer, Cát would have been more prestigious and more skilled in military affairs. Moreover, Cát may then have been over 70 years old [*DB*: 161; NGUYỄN Phan Quang *et al.* 1979: 33, 37] while Vành was probably 36 or 37 years old [NGUYỄN Phan Quang *et al.* 1979: 37].

Vũ Đức Cát's expertise in commanding armed forces is clearly demonstrated in the descriptions just cited above. He defeated the post commanders at Trà Lý and Lân Hải, both maritime customs stations. He had formerly been commander of the Ba Lạt post, also a maritime customs post at Giao Thủy district. All of these were in the Nam Định province. Cát's base area was in the small islands off the coast of Trà Lý. These facts already strongly indicate that Cát was a sea pirate leader. It is clear that Vũ Đức Cát possessed his own boats, employed a kind of guerrilla warfare involving decoy boats, and increased his fleet with captured government vessels:

Thủy Đạo Cát was a former general of Tây Sơn. He was already more than 70 years old. He commanded 200 boats on the sea, and based himself at Trà Lý. He sent his men to report falsely to the provincial government of Nam Định that bandits were in the harbour of Tiên Hải and that one could attack them because the harbour was shallow. The provincial official believed it and commanded the navy to go down to Tiên Hải. Cát, standing in their way, laid an ambush. The official soldiers were badly defeated. Thập cơ and thống đồn were killed. The provincial official [protector] was also killed. They lost all of their boats and weapons. The emperor ordered the bodies of the officials killed to be beaten. Not long before, Cát was captured by local notables and sent to the citadel of the North where he was executed. His son, Chiêu Trường, assumed the title of thủy đạo [*DB*: 161].

The official chronicle also reports in the entry for the second month of 1826 that the protector of Nam Định, Lê Mậu Cúc, was trapped by decoy boats, ambushed and killed by Vũ Đức Cát [*TL* 37: 12-14]. With the participation of Vũ Đức Cát, the rebels in Nam Định became very powerful indeed.

The Nguyễn government was shocked by the death in battle of Lê Mậu Cúc, the highest governor and commander in Nam Định province. His failure meant that the government could no longer control all of the province. The Hanoi citadel sent reinforcements including both army and navy forces under the command of General

Trương Phúc Đăng, senior officer responsible for security in the north. He knew Nam Định very well since he had assumed the post of protector of this province [TL 32: 16]. While his troops were approaching their destination, the bandits ran away to avoid serious confrontation. Thanks to the boats under their command, the rebels could flee quickly to remote places such as Quảng Yên. After the rebels had dispersed, the main part of the citadel's reinforcements withdrew, leaving only a small force. Although the citadel was able to send a big expeditionary force, it could not maintain it in Nam Định for a prolonged period. After the main force withdrew, the rebels tried to regain their foothold in Nam Định. Vũ Đức Cát was caught by the villagers, however, while he was back in his home province and hid himself in the Đông Hào commune, Giao Thủy district [TL 37: 14]. After the arrest of Vũ Đức Cát, Phan Bá Vành became the leader of the rebels. Most of the areas in which Phan Bá Vành formerly operated were inland regions, according to the official chronicle [TL 38: 10–11]. Although the navy as well as the army had been sent to suppress Vũ Đức Cát's group, only soldiers (and elephants) were sent against Phan Bá Vành. One might conclude that there were two bandit (or rebel) groups in Nam Định: one the pirates on sea led by Vũ Đức Cát; another the bandits on land led by Phan Bá Vành. Whatever the case, after Vũ Đức Cát was captured in about the second month of 1826, the sea pirates gradually came under Phan Bá Vành's leadership.

The rebels very soon recovered from the damages caused by Trương Phúc Đăng's expedition and by Vũ Đức Cát's arrest. The bandits, led by Phan Bá Vành, plundered the two districts of Vũ Tiên and Chân Định in Kiến Xương prefecture. The Hanoi citadel again sent reinforcements. They fought the rebels at Phú Cốc in Vũ Tiên district, but this time they were severely defeated. The bandits then besieged the prefectural town of Kiến Xương, in the district of Vũ Tiên, and went on to attack the prefectural town of Thiên Trường [TL 38: 10–11]. Popular ballads depict the scale of the rebellion of that time:

The head of the troops is at Bo river (or bridge); the tail of the troops is at Kênh Kem pier [ĐẶNG Huy Vận *et al.* 1966: 24; TRU'ƠNG Hữu Quỳnh 1972: 35].

The Bo river and its bridge were situated to the north-west of Thái Bình city; the Kênh Kem pier lay between Minh Tân and Vũ Bình communes, and is now called Minh Giám pier. The distance between Bo river (bridge) and Kênh Kem pier was 21 km [ĐẶNG Huy Vận *et al.* 1966: 24 note 3; TRU'ƠNG Hữu Quỳnh 1972: 38 notes 3 and 4].

To rescue the official forces in Kiến Xương, 500 government soldiers were dispatched, and the besieging rebels withdrew. The Hanoi citadel furthermore sent soldiers with elephants to search out and destroy the remaining rebels [TL 38: 11]. By the tenth month of 1826, a high official in the Hanoi citadel regarded Nam Định and Hải Dương as the most troublesome provinces in the north [TL 41: 15–16]. By this time, Phan Bá Vành's influence had clearly expanded to Hải Dương province:

A bandit of Nam Định, Phan Bá Vành, and his follower Nguyễn Hạnh rallied more than 5,000 men and invaded the districts of Tiên Minh and Nghị Dương in Hải Dương province. At the same time, they conspired with Chinese bandits, robbed on the high sea, and opposed official forces [TL 42: 19].

The Chinese bandits mentioned were evidently sea pirates. It is reasonable to suppose that Phan Bá Vành invaded the Hải Dương area by boat. Therefore, by this time, he had put the sea pirates in Nam Định more or less under his direct control. The protector of Hải Dương, Nguyễn Đăng Huyền, tried to pursue Phan Bá Vành's fleet. He engaged them, but failed to defeat them. The Hanoi citadel had to send boats under the command of Nguyễn Văn Phong [TL 42: 19]. This passage, for the twelfth month of 1826, indicates that the provincial forces were defeated by the rebels, this time in Hải Dương.

Phan Bá Vành's successful revolt had direct influences on other provinces [GAULTIER 1935: 191ff.; ĐẶNG Huy Vận *et al.* 1966: 25; HU'ONG Sơn and CẦN Mẫn 1973: 56]. In many provinces of the north, the official territorial forces proved insufficient to suppress the bandits and rebels [TL 39: 8, 22; 42: 6-7, 11-12]. Many insurrections occurred in Nam Định and northward in 1826, whereas the rebels in Thanh Hoa and Nghệ An were almost completely suppressed by the middle of the same year (see Table 2).

Faced with the spread of banditry throughout the northern provinces, the authorities in Hanoi and Huế devised various countermoves. Reinforcements were sent frequently from the Hanoi citadel to areas of bandit activity. Additional soldiers were recruited from the unregistered villagers and boats requisitioned. The vacant posts of military commanders of prefectures were filled [TL 38: 11; 39: 8; 40: 25-26]. A new post of vice-canton chief (ngoại ủy phó tổng) was established in the second month of 1826 in every canton of the northern provinces, in order to guard more effectively against bandits [TL 37: 22].

To cope with the critical situation in the north, the Huế government sent reinforcements to the Hanoi citadel. As early as the first month of 1826, a detachment of imperial guards was sent to the Thanh-Nghệ areas (Thanh Hoa and Nghệ An) and to the north [TL 37: 4]. In the sixth month, a naval officer at Huế, Nguyễn Văn Phong, was sent to the north to take command of the navy [TL 39: 24]. In the eighth month, the emperor ordered the recruitment of eighty platoons (4,000 soldiers) in the southern provinces to serve in the north [TL 40: 34-35]. In the tenth month, more than 1,000 soldiers from the Thanh-Nghệ areas and one or two companies from Huế were also sent to the north [TL 41: 15].

Yet these and other countermeasures could not keep up with the spread of the rebellions. One of the main reasons for the series of failures of the official forces was their demoralization. As we saw earlier, desertion of soldiers in the north had become a serious problem by this time; their morale was very low, and they were reluctant to fight Phan Bá Vành's forces. A series of rebel victories further encouraged the government soldiers' demoralization and desertion, which in turn created even more favourable conditions for the rebels.



The emperor seems to have become increasingly irritated at this turn of events, especially since the disastrous situation in the north was in sharp contrast with the brilliant victories in Thanh Hoa and Nghệ An, where officials had suppressed the bandits by the middle of 1826. He regarded the government forces in the north under the command of Nguyễn Hữu Thân and Trương Phúc Đăng as incompetent, and reprimanded the commanders for their inability to control their subordinates [TL 39: 22–23, 25].

The emperor now turned his full attention to the problems in the northern provinces. In the seventh month, when told about epidemic disease, famine and banditry which were especially rife in Hải Dương, he expressed his grave concern about these problems [TL 40: 19–21].

He reached the limits of his patience when informed of the defeat of the protector of Hải Dương, Nguyễn Đăng Huyền, at the hands of Phan Bá Vành's rebels in the twelfth month of 1826:

Vành has already rallied many people, and caused much trouble. He should be exterminated as soon as possible. Nguyễn Đăng Huyền, Vũ Văn Thân and the others have all brought up heavily armed soldiers, but they have failed to defeat the rebels, and instead have let them come and go as they please. How is this? [TL 42: 19].

The emperor ordered the interrogation and execution of officers and soldiers, of both army and navy, who had flinched and fled from the battlefield. He also ordered that patrols who showed hesitation, fear, or who avoided the 'thieves' for any reason, would be taken to the capital for interrogation. He showed his anger towards the highest commander of the north, Trương Phúc Đăng, too, ordering his recall, demotion, and disgrace [TL 42: 19–20; 43: 20; BNL: 42–44].

Trương Văn Minh, Nguyễn Công Trứ and Nguyễn Đức Nhuận, who had successfully worked in Nghệ An and Thanh Hoa, were appointed to offices in the north. The emperor expected them to pacify the north just as they had the Thanh-Nghệ areas. The soldiers and boats formerly stationed in Thanh-Nghệ provinces were also transferred to the northern provinces. Before Trương Văn Minh started for the expedition, the emperor bestowed on him a sword as well as a male elephant and said, 'when you find flinching soldiers, don't hesitate to use this sword against them' [BNLT: 44; TL 42: 20]. The focus of imperial concerns was now fully on the situation in the north.

More than 1,000 imperial guards and 4 elephants were sent to the north, and 140 senior officials were sent to Hanoi. Imperial guards who were originally stationed in Nghệ An and Thanh Hoa, were also sent to Hanoi. Four warships from Thanh Hoa and fourteen warships from Nghệ An were sent to Hải Dương under the command of Phạm Văn Lý and Nguyễn Văn Phong. The emperor required the commanders to report every two days, and in case of emergency to report without delay [TL 42: 20–21].

The most urgent task for the authorities was to suppress the bandits in Hải Dương, where Protector Nguyễn Đăng Huyền had had bitter experiences. In the

twelfth month of 1826, the emperor ordered the Hanoi citadel to dispatch soldiers to Hải Dương: 1,000 soldiers from the south, and 1,000 soldiers from Thanh-Nghê. He ordered each of the provinces of Nam Định, Sơn Nam, Hải Dương, Bắc Ninh and Sơn Tây to send one or two excellent officers and 500 or 600 soldiers; and the province of Hưng Hóa was to send 300 or 400 soldiers. In short, about 5,000 new troops, in addition to the soldiers and boats already stationed there, were thrown into battle in Hải Dương. The emperor instructed that the soldiers from the south and Thanh-Nghê should guard the provincial citadel. Outstanding officers, such as Phạm Văn Lý, were entrusted with the command of soldiers with elephants and firearms, and ordered to march by various routes and to meet the rebel forces in Hải Dương. The emperor ordered 100 artillerymen from Huế, with 300 muskets, to the north. While 20 of them remained at the Hanoi citadel, the rest were dispatched to Hải Dương, with three cannons on wheels and 30 mountain guns. The muskets were distributed to troops in the rear [TL 42: 20–22].

Moreover, the emperor ordered that,

It should be declared in that region that those who are threatened, and forced to join the bandits, should all be released if they repent their sin and surrender themselves; and that any bandit who is able to capture or behead the most important criminals, Phan Bá Vành and Nguyễn Hạnh, and to bring their heads, would not only be exempted from punishment but would also be rewarded with 300 taels of silver. Any government soldiers or ordinary citizens who succeed in capturing or killing the leaders would also be rewarded in the same manner. In addition, anyone who captures or kills any other important criminals would be sufficiently rewarded [TL 42: 22; see also DB: 165; BNLT: 42].

The government forces failed again, however. In the twelfth month of 1826, Nguyễn Đăng Huyền, the protector of Hải Dương who had been degraded but retained in office, led units of the army and navy in a drive to suppress the bandits. They arrived at Cổ Trai commune of Nghi Dương district, where they were informed that bandits' boats were still at Đồ Sơn where a maritime post was located. He ordered nine boats to block the mouth of the river at Tam Giang, and eighteen boats to block the river at Cổ Trai. Nguyễn Đăng Huyền himself commanded the land soldiers with elephants. Under cover of night, the bandits attacked the mouth of the river at Tam Giang and captured one government vessel. The bandits were counterattacked and withdrew. The following day, the bandit fleet again attacked, and dispersed the government naval force. The bandits, taking advantage of this victory, approached the river at Cổ Trai. Nguyễn Đăng Huyền's land troops arrived too late to help. The two government commanders at Cổ Trai both fought, and died, in a last ditch endeavour. More than 80 soldiers were killed. The rest of the troops were routed. All of the boats and artillery were captured by the bandits [TL 42: 26; see also DB: 166].

Nguyễn Đăng Huyền reported this defeat to the Hanoi citadel, covering up and distorting the true facts. The emperor became angry. Two commanders were sentenced to immediate decapitation; three others were sentenced to detention in

prison to await execution. The deceased commanders were accorded due honours [TL 42: 26–28]. Nguyễn Đăng Huyền was replaced as protector of Hải Dương [TL 43: 2; DB: 169].

After the victory at sea, and still in the twelfth month of 1826, there were more than 100 bandit boats in and around the coastal villages of Đồ Sơn and Trục Cát. Informed of this, the emperor requisitioned about 100 large private ships on which several dozens of men could sail. These ships, manned by heavily armed soldiers from the south, were to proceed with much fanfare to the Thanh Hoa and Ninh Bình areas. At the same time, the people of Quảng Yên were informed that private boats would be requisitioned from them. The land troops were to co-ordinate their march with the movement of the naval forces. The aim was to prevent the bandits from landing [TL 42: 28–29]. This operation was evidently carried out for the purpose of confining the bandits within the territories surrounded by Thanh Hoa, Ninh Bình and Quảng Yên: the areas of Nam Định and Hải Dương. Meanwhile, Phạm Văn Lý and Nguyễn Văn Phong's fleet were ordered to attack Đồ Sơn, the heart of the bandits' forces. But the bandits fled before the arrival of the fleet [TL 42: 28–29].

In the first month of 1827, after Phan Bá Vành's group escaped from Đồ Sơn, his group of several thousand men and more than 100 boats fled to the areas of Tiên Hưng and Thái Bình, the northern prefectures of Nam Định. Phạm Văn Lý and Nguyễn Văn Phong's fleet pursued and destroyed them at Tam Giang. Many bandits were captured or killed, and their boats and firearms were confiscated. The two commanders were rewarded by the emperor. Nguyễn Thương, who caught and killed more than 300 bandits, was also rewarded [TL 43: 7–8]. However, in the same month, Phan Bá Vành rallied his bandit forces at Thiên Trường and Kiến Xương prefectures of Nam Định [TL 43: 8]. The officials in the Hanoi citadel asked the emperor to send further soldiers, boats and firearms from Huế, but the emperor decreed that he had already sent enough soldiers and weapons, and that if the troops waited for further reinforcements they would lose their chance, for the bandits would have recovered from their setback at Tam Giang. The emperor impatiently ordered an attack upon the remaining bandits without delay, and in the end also sent two additional companies from Huế [TL 43: 8–10]. The 5,000 bandits who had plundered Kiến Xương in Nam Định, were attacked; many were killed or wounded, and the rest fled [TL 43: 12–13].

Still in the first month of 1827, more than 20 bandit boats plundered Gia Viên commune. The district chief of An Dương (Hải Dương province) attacked them. His troops captured one boat and killed four bandits; many bandits drowned. Other official forces captured two bandit leaders, probably members of Phan Bá Vành's forces, in Hải Dương [TL 43: 15].

In the second month, Phan Bá Vành divided his followers to blockade the sea and land routes in the Thu Trì district of Nam Định. Phạm Văn Lý's naval forces fought them at the River Bồng Điền and defeated the bandit force. Phan Bá Vành withdrew and besieged Phạm Đình Bảo's troops at Quán market. The official soldiers under the command of Phạm Văn Lý and Nguyễn Công Trứ came to the rescue by three

different routes. The bandits were routed, and Phan Bá Vành fled to the Trà Lũ commune of Giao Thủy district. There more than 2,000 rebels built fortified positions with moats [TL 42: 23–24]. Thus, Phan Bá Vành finally applied a strategy of prolonged defensive resistance, by constructing a base in Nam Định.

A vagabond, Phan Bá Vành, joined an outlaw group, which eventually rallied the local population in Hải Dương. After returning to Nam Định, and in alliance with other bandit leaders, his influence waxed day by day. He commanded both the land and naval forces. His forces apparently practised guerrilla warfare. One military officer complained in the third month of 1827:

Although the official soldiers come to scatter the bandits, the latter flock together again as soon as they have been dispersed [TL 43: 20].

As we have seen already, they frequently used decoy boats and laid ambushes to trap the official fleet. Phan Bá Vành and his fellow rebels more than once defeated the provincial forces under the direct leadership of the protectors of the two provinces of Nam Định and Hải Dương. They also hit back at the reinforcements sent from the Hanoi citadel. Phan Bá Vành moved freely with his boats from Nam Định to Hải Dương and from Hải Dương to Nam Định. The authorities declared that Nam Định and Hải Dương were the most turbulent provinces in the north. Many rebels in other provinces rose in revolt. Whether they were directly related to Phan Bá Vành or not, it is evident that they were inspired by his success. In many provinces in the north, the official forces turned out to be insufficient to suppress the bandits.

In the third month of 1827 when the emperor appointed a Commissioner for Pacification, the latter was charged with investigating Sơn Nam (Hà Nội) and Nam Định, where the damage from the bandits was the most serious [TL 44: 1]. As we shall see later, when Phan Bá Vành was caught, his body was cut into three pieces and pilloried in Sơn Nam as well as in Nam Định and Hải Dương [TL 43: 35]. Furthermore, in the seventh month of 1827, when his two deputy leaders were arrested, their heads were sent round to Bắc Ninh, Hải Dương, Sơn Nam and Nam Định [TL 47: 9]. From these and similar references [TL 43: 20; 48: 20] we may suppose that Phan Bá Vành's revolt had some influence on the surrounding areas. Yet it seems that his movement did not extend to the Ninh Bình area south of Nam Định, for the emperor rewarded the senior official there, in the third month of 1827, saying:

Although the territory of Ninh Bình borders on Sơn Nam and Nam Định provinces where a lot of troubles have occurred, only Ninh Bình has maintained its security [TL 44: 11].

The general poverty of the population, frequent natural calamities, the existence of vagabonds, weak government control, and Phan Bá Vành's personal prowess enabled him to become leader of a large-scale rebellion. His successes in rallying the people, and in fighting official troops made him a master of the region. The comet omen convinced the local population of his mystical fortune and his legitimacy. He became a king and a legendary hero.

The people believed that Phan Bá Vành was a remnant of the Lê dynasty. As suggested earlier, he may have been a supporter of Lê Duy Lương who declared himself a Lê emperor in Ninh Bình, Thanh Hoa and Hưng Hóa [DB: 161]. Vũ Đức Cát may have been a former supporter of the Tây Sơn brothers [DB: 161]. Nguyễn Hạnh, Phan Bá Vành's closest lieutenant, may have been a faithful friend of the Tây Sơn brothers [GAULTIER 1935: 189–192]. If these stories were also believed by their contemporaries, then the combination of Vành, Cát and Hạnh was a fusion of the two anti-Nguyễn-dynasty forces: the remnants of the Lê and the Tây Sơn rebels.

Phan Bá Vành was also surrounded by excellent commanders. Although Vũ Đức Cát was killed in the early stage of the rebellion, Vành had Nguyễn Hạnh as his right-hand man. The official chronicle often refers to both Vành and Hạnh in the same passage. According to these records, Hạnh commanded the Right-hand Army (chưởng hữu quân) [TL 38: 10–11]. Another source says that Vành organized the Central Army (trung quân) which was led by himself and the Right-hand Army (hữu quân) which was led by Nguyễn Hạnh [HOA BẰNG 1966: 51; NGUYỄN Phan Quang *et al.* 1979: 33]. According to the official chronicle, in the second month of 1827, when Phan Bá Vành was captured, Nguyễn Văn Liễn and Vũ Viết Đăng were also arrested. The former had the title of the Front Army commander (chương tiền quân), and the latter had the title of the Left-hand Army commander (chương tả quân) [TL 43: 34]. Vietnamese scholars mention some rebel commanders who may be identical with Nguyễn Văn Liễn and Vũ Viết Đăng. According to them there was a leader named Hải Dương or Hay Đăng from the northern part of Trà Lũ (Trà Lũ Bắc), who was said to be able to travel as fast as if he were flying, even on muddy roads. According to one ballad:

Bá Vành governed the country on the throne. Our Trà Lũ had Mr. Hai Đăng.  
He assumed the official post (of King Bá Vành) for several months...

According to one source, he commanded the Left-hand Army (tả quân) which was stationed at the Đường Nhất Ngoại village, the northern part of Trà Lũ commune [HOA BẰNG 1966: 52 and note 1; TRUÔNG Hữu Quỳnh 1972: 38; NGUYỄN Phan Quang *et al.* 1979: 24]. He was undoubtedly the Vũ Viết Đăng mentioned in the official chronicle.

Many Vietnamese scholars also mention a leader named Chiêu Liễn. He was a descendant of a noble family of the Lê dynasty and a nephew of a mandarin. He was also an intellectual, a native of the same place as Phan Bá Vành, and he was invited by Vành to be his strategist [HOA BẰNG 1966: 52; ĐẶNG Huy Vện *et al.* 1966: 22; HUÔNG Sơn and CẦN Mẫn 1973: 56; NGUYỄN Phan Quang *et al.* 1979: 34]. He could perhaps be identical with the Nguyễn Văn Liễn mentioned in the official chronicle. Another source states that there was a Chiêu Lý who was from Tứ Kỳ in Hải Dương. The son of a high mandarin, he became dissatisfied with the Nguyễn government, and joined the rebels [TRUÔNG Hữu Quỳnh 1972: 37; HUÔNG Sơn and CẦN Mẫn 1973: 57; NGUYỄN Phan Quang *et al.* 1979: 34]. Grossin [1929: 8–9] mentions Pham Dinh Lé (*sic*), from Bồ Xuyên commune, Vũ Tiên district, a descendent of a

noble family of the sixteenth century which had been allied with the Mạc and later Trịnh families. Phan Dinh Lé joined Phan Bá Vành's rebel group, and in 1828 was captured by Nguyễn Công Trứ together with Vành and sent to Hanoi, where they were both executed. Some Vietnamese scholars think that Chiêu Liễn, Chiêu Lý and Phan Dinh Lé were the same person [ĐẶNG Huy Vận *et al.* 1966: 22; HƯƠNG Sơn and CẦN Mẫn 1973: 56–57; NGUYỄN Phan Quang *et al.* 1979: 34]. Hương Sơn and Cần Mẫn [1973: 56–57] further suggest that a monk named Thanh Giáo from the Yên Tử temple in Hải Dương, who was skilled both in literature and in martial arts, might be identical with Chiêu Liễn and Chiêu Lý. Whether or not all of these personalities were identical, it is noteworthy that Phan Bá Vành was believed to have an excellent military and political adviser who was from a mandarin family and who had some intellectual background.

Vietnamese scholars have collected the names of at least 38 other followers of Phan Bá Vành. For some cases we are given their occupation, economic and social status, place of birth, and ethnic origin. They include women and men, members of the Mường and Thổ peoples, intellectuals, a monk, village notables, former policemen, soldiers and sailors, richer as well as poor villagers, former officials, and descendants of noble families. [HOA BẰNG 1966: 52; ĐẶNG Huy Vận *et al.* 1966: 22; TRƯƠNG Hữu Quýnh 1972: 37–38; HƯƠNG Sơn and CẦN Mẫn 1973: 56–58; NGUYỄN Phan Quang *et al.* 1979: 33–36]. This gives some indication of the wide range of people involved in Phan Bá Vành's rebellion. Whether or not they actually existed, these people have lived on as legendary heroes in the historical consciousness of the peasants of Nam Định.

Woodside [1971] has called Phan Bá Vành a charismatic leader. Yet he became a charismatic leader only when there existed a vast population whose resentment against the existing regime exceeded the critical temperature, and who were therefore ready to join his rebellion.<sup>26)</sup>

## THE WANING OF THE REBELLION

The commune of Trà Lũ belonged to Trà Lũ canton, Giao Thủy district, Kiến Xương prefecture,<sup>27)</sup> Sơn Nam Hạ (Nam Định) province, and consisted of three villages (thôn): Trà Bắc (present Xuân Bắc commune), Trà Đông (present Xuân Phương commune), and Trà Trung (present Xuân Trung commune). The Ninh Cơ

26) The Vietnamese scholars further suggest that Phan Bá Vành's rebellion had a tint of a class struggle. Nguyễn Phan Quang *et al.* [1979: 37–38] stress this point, citing various descriptions in local documents which relate that Phan Bá Vành's party attacked rich villagers and notables and seized their property (sometimes their land). Đặng Huy Vận and others [1966: 23] emphasize the fact that Phan Bá Vành's party called itself Lê Hoàng. They interpret Lê Hoàng as 'the great people', and thereby argue that Phan Bá Vành's rebellion clearly reflected the class nature of the rural poor who fought the Nguyễn government.

27) According to the *NTC* (Nam Định) and the *DB* [321–322], Trà Lũ canton belonged to Giao Thủy district, Thiên Trường prefecture.

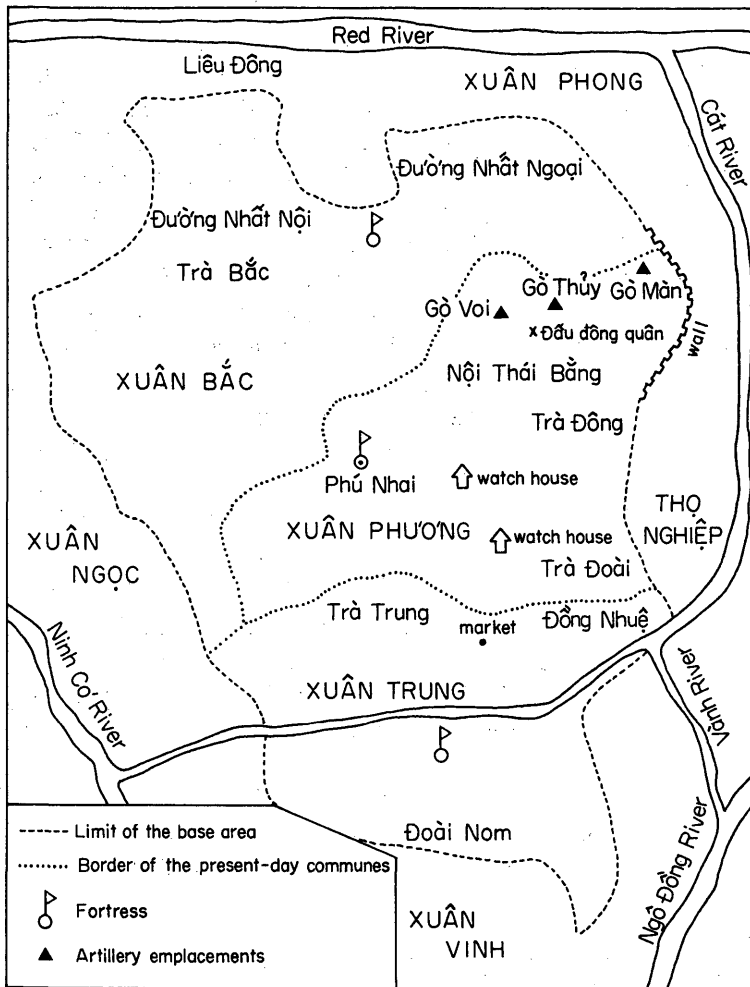


Figure 3. The Base Area of Trà Lũ

Source: Nguyễn Phan Quang *et al.* [1979: 43].

river is about 3 km west of the commune; the Red River is nearly 4 km to the north. On the opposite bank of the Red River is Nguyệt Giám where Phan Bá Vành was born. Trà Lũ was connected with rivers through various canals, and the villagers mainly used boats for daily transportation. Trà Lũ was poor, as Nguyệt Giám was: during the Gia Long reign it had 1,115 mẫu 5 sào of public land, but during the Minh Mạng reign it had only 800 mẫu [NGUYỄN Phan Quang *et al.* 1979: 40].<sup>28)</sup>

According to local documents, Trà Lũ was one of the places where Phan Bá Vành's rebels were established from the earliest stage, even as early as 1820. Nguyễn Phan Quang and others [1979: 40–41] argue that, in the early months of 1826, after

28) 1 mẫu = 10 sào  $\approx$  3,600 m<sup>2</sup>.

returning from Hải Dương, the rebels built their first fortress in Trà Lũ. In these months, Phan Bá Vành also constructed fortresses in other places: Hội Khê, Dương Liễu, An Bồi etc. According to the field research conducted by the local people, Phan Bá Vành built a fortress and dug moats at Hội Khê, when he came back from Đờ Sơn, Hải Dương province. The fortress was high and had four gates: Cổng Vọng (north), Cổng Miếu (northeast), Cổng Chùa (west) and Cổng Đông (south); one can easily recognize even today the traces of the fortress and canal systems of the time. But Phan Bá Vành found that Hội Khê was not an ideal place for the concentration of his boats, and decided to shift his major base to Trà Lũ.

During the spring of 1826, the rebels based themselves at Trà Lũ and extended their influence to the whole area of Giao Thủy. When the Nguyễn government sent large-scale reinforcements at the end of the year, Phan Bá Vành decided to fortify Trà Lũ against them, and constructed further fortresses there. Inside the commune, he set up his headquarters at the present-day Phú Nhai village (see Figure 3). To the east of Phú Nhai was the defence system of Nội Thái Bằng; its task was to guard against attacks by official troops from Phong Miêu, the point where the Cát river flowed into the Red River. At Nội Thái Bằng, the rebels built platforms for their artillery; made a ground for the soldiers' assemblies and training, *đấu dong* (*sic*) *quân*;<sup>29</sup>) and constructed a wall. To the north of the headquarters there was the defence system of Đờng Nhất Ngoại (at present in Xuân Bắc commune), where the Left-hand Army was stationed under the command of Hai Đàng. From this front they could reach the Lieu Đông pier and Thái Bình across the Red River. To the south of Phú Nhai there was the base of Chợ Trung (Trung market, now in Xuân Trung commune). This base was strategically important because from it the rebels could reach the Ninh Cơ river, the only river route connecting with Vị Hoàng: the provincial citadel.

According to the official chronicle, after the rebels had been routed at Quán market, they fled to Trà Lũ and there more than 2,000 of them built fortified positions and dug moats. The official record continues:

When informed of this, the emperor said that, although he was happy to have heard of a series of victories, he was not completely satisfied, for the bandits were not yet totally exterminated. He ordered the troops in Nam Định to go forward to the bandits' fortresses. He also gave 1,000 taels of silver to Phạm Văn Lý to reward brave officers and soldiers according to their merits in campaigns [TL 43: 23–24].

The government force constructed 17 platforms for their artillery at Khê Thủy in the Thọ Nghiệp commune, Giao Thủy district, which lay on the other side of the Cát river [NGUYỄN Phan Quang *et al.* 1979: 41].

Still in the second month, the senior officials in the Hanoi citadel, Nguyễn Hữu Thận and Trương Văn Minh, reported that the bandits in Nam Định had a base at

29) According to Nguyễn Phan Quang *et al.* [1979: 41], the people have discovered two big guns and one heavy (1 kg) shot, which are now kept at the museums of the district and the province. The name *đấu dong quân* is still used by the people as the name of the locality.



Trà Lũ; that the route to Trà Lũ was very steep and narrow; and that, furthermore, it was the rainy season, which made it inconvenient to attack it immediately. The emperor was critical of this report, saying that the enemy were after all only bandits, not the forces of a powerful neighbouring country, and that the official forces were greater in number. He also scolded Trương Văn Minh, who stayed in Hanoi and refused to go personally to Nam Định [TL 43: 24–25].

Phạm Văn Lý and Nguyễn Văn Phong marched to Trà Lũ and besieged Phan Bá Vành's base. After ten days, they could still not force it to surrender. The emperor was afraid that his soldiers had relaxed their attention after so long a siege. So he sent his courtier Nguyễn Văn Tinh to put the soldiers under strict discipline. Before he arrived, however, the rebels had attacked the front line of the government navy under cover of night. The government navy was unprepared and lost a large number of weapons and boats. The commander of the official forces, Phạm Văn Lý, executed thirteen of the officers and soldiers responsible for the defeat. The emperor reprimanded and downgraded Phạm Văn Lý and Nguyễn Văn Phong, as well as Nguyễn Hữu Thân and Trương Văn Minh in Hanoi. At the same time, the emperor ordered Trương Văn Minh to join the campaign at once [TL 43: 31].

Despite these victories, Phan Bá Vành's rebellion was finally crushed. By the end of the second month of 1827,<sup>30)</sup> Phan Bá Vành's forces were suffering severely as a result of the long siege by government forces. He finally rallied his boats and tried to escape out to sea by a small river, under cover of night. Phạm Văn Lý ordered Phan Bá Hùng to intercept Bá Vành. Hùng fought well, and the rebels were routed. The government soldiers, who were stationed to block all routes, simultaneously rushed into the 'bandits' den'. They killed over 160 men, and captured more than 760 rebels, including Phan Bá Vành himself and his commanders Nguyễn Văn Liễn of the Front Army and Vũ Viết Đăng of the Left-hand Army. They also confiscated all the rebels' boats, weapons, and 'false' seals and documents. The news of this victory was immediately reported to the emperor [TL 43: 34].

After his arrest, Phan Bá Vành soon died of his wounds. His head was cut off, and his body was cut into three pieces and displayed in the provinces of Nam Định, Sơn Nam and Hải Dương. Nguyễn Văn Liễn and Vũ Viết Đăng were taken to Huế, where they were executed. The other captives were sentenced by the Hanoi citadel. The emperor eventually reduced the sentence of about 400 of them, and ordered them to enlist in the army, because he thought that they had been coerced into becoming rebels.<sup>31)</sup> Phan Bá Hùng and others were rewarded. The troops from Huế and Thanh-Nghệ were ordered to return to their own provinces [TL 42: 35–36].

There are other versions of the last days of Phan Bá Vành.

30) The official chronicle enters the description of Phan Bá Vành's fortification at Trà Lũ in the passage for the second month of 1827. Yet it is hardly credible that Vành held the base for merely two weeks. Various legends cited by the Vietnamese scholars suggest that his defensive struggle lasted for several months. Therefore one should not necessarily suppose that the base was constructed in that month.

31) As for Thanh Giáo, a monk from the Yên Tử temple, one legend says that, after being

A canton chief Hổ, who had married his daughter to the bandit, was caught by the official forces. He asked for his release in exchange for betraying the bandits. [His plea was accepted.] On the 26th day of the second month, when [Đô Bá] Vinh was relaxing on a lake, Nguyễn [Công] Trứ [a government official] sent hostesses to entertain Vinh. The canton chief, Hổ, prepared more than 500 bamboo baskets to carry sand, as agreed with the official forces. He fired a signal to the government troops, who carried sand [in the bamboo baskets] to pave the swamps [which surrounded the bandits' camp]; Vinh tried to get out by boat through the water gate, but the water was too shallow to pass quickly. The official troops attacked the bandits from both sides, and captured a dozen bandit leaders, such as Đán, Liễn, Khương, Thự etc. Several hundred bandits were cut down, and several thousand were drowned. Vinh himself was shot in the leg and arrested... He and the other captives were taken to Hanoi, but he killed himself, by biting off his tongue... Đán and Liễn were executed by a slow death. Later, fugitive members of Vinh's party killed Hổ [in revenge] [DB: 168].

The officer of Khâm Sai planned a stratagem, and told a canton chief [cai tổng] in the locality to give his beautiful daughter to Bá Vành as his wife. The cai tổng's family happened to be holding an anniversary for a deceased relative; and Bá Vành together his wife slipped into the house at night. Bá Vành was conceited with his military prowess, and without checking to see if there was any danger, went to bed at dead of night. The soldiers waiting in ambush attacked. Vành cut down several men. The official soldiers rushed at him one after another, and killed him. The remnants of the bandit gang were suppressed, and thereafter the area was subdued [BNLT: 46].

Vietnamese scholars have also collected various stories concerning the government forces' stratagem of using beautiful girls and/or traitors [HOA BĂNG 1966: 53–54; ĐẶNG Huy Vận *et al.* 1966: 27 note 1; TRUÔNG Hữu Quỳnh 1972: 38; HƯƠNG Sơn and CẦN Mẫn 1973: 57–58; NGUYỄN Phan Quang *et al.* 1979: 41–44]. According to Nguyễn Phan Quang and others, the commune of Trà Lũ was completely destroyed by the government soldiers. One document narrates:

The captive rebels numbered seven or eight thousand, of whom several hundred were women... The official troops burned down all the houses, bamboo bushes, and trees, leaving nothing. According to the old people, there remained only the shrines of Trung village, Bắc village, and the Lê family, and a few thatched houses in Khẩu Trung hamlet [NGUYỄN Phan Quang *et al.* 1979: 38].

While many of the bandits were killed or arrested, some managed to escape. A dozen or so rebel leaders were captured, but Quận Thường, Hạnh and Hương escaped by sea [DB: 168]. Hạnh was probably Nguyễn Hạnh, Phan Bá Vành's right-hand com-

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caught, he was interrogated by an official. The latter asked whether he had joined the bandits because he was coerced by Vành. Thanh Giáo realized that the official was trying to offer him an excuse, yet he replied that he had joined the bandits of his own will. Thus he refused a chance to be released, and was executed [HƯƠNG Sơn and CẦN Mẫn 1973: 57]. This episode suggests that the Nguyễn government forgave many of the captured rebels who confessed that they had been forced to join the rebels.

mander [NGUYỄN Phan Quang *et al.* 1979: 33]. Some remnants of Bá Vinh's forces, Chánh Tiền Ngân (from the Đông Tạ commune, Tứ Kỳ district, Hải Dương) and Hương are said to have pillaged Lạng Giang prefecture, Bắc Ninh province, in 1830. The deputy commander of the garrison was unable to suppress them, and was punished by the emperor. Several months later, Hương was finally captured by the protector of Sơn Tây [DB: 199]. The Hương mentioned here may have been the fugitive Hương mentioned above. There is also a record that one Lý Công Toàn (usually called Cống Thìn), a man of Chinese origin (minh huơng khách nhân), declared himself to be a former general of Bá Vinh, and with boats and 4,000 soldiers, entered the Trà Lý river mouth to besiege Kiến Xương prefecture, Nam Định. In the second month of 1828, he was captured and executed. His head was displayed publicly [DB: 176].

The next task of the government was to pursue the remnants of the rebels, and to punish the captives. Phạm Văn Lý, Nguyễn Công Trứ and Nguyễn Đức Nhuận had come to Huế after accomplishing their initial mission. They returned to the north, ordered by the emperor to make a clean sweep of the remaining rebels within three months [TL 45: 21–22]. In the fourth month, it was decreed that criminals in the north who surrendered themselves should be tolerantly and carefully treated [TL 45: 16]. In the same month, Nghệ An province sent soldiers to the border to prevent the bandits from seeking refuge [TL 45: 17]. There were also some rebels in provinces other than Nam Định and Hải Dương (see Table 3), but by the middle of 1827, in the judgement of the court at Huế almost all of the northern areas had been pacified. In the seventh month of 1827, the emperor clearly affirmed that banditry in the north had been suppressed [TL 47: 21]. The number of persons in prisons correspondingly increased. At the end of 1825, there were about 490 cases and 930 persons under adjudication throughout the entire country [TL 40: 18]. But by the end of 1826, there were 800 cases and nearly 1,000 persons, many of whom were from the north [TL 44: 16]. By the ninth month of 1828, there were still more than 170 unresolved cases in the north alone [TL 54: 2–3].

Phan Bá Vành's rebellion finally failed. It failed, first, because the military balance of power finally shifted to the Huế government, the government of a dynasty still growing in power and able to summon sufficient troops from the other parts of the empire to suppress the rebels [ĐẶNG Huy Vận *et al.* 1966: 28]. Secondly, Phan Bá Vành did not seriously try to capture any administrative cities, the economic and communications centres and symbols of political legitimacy. When he attacked Phủ Bo (the prefectural town of Kiến Xương), some people advised Vành to seize the opportunity to advance directly to Vị Hoàng, the provincial city of Nam Định. Yet, Vành did not listen to them. The people said, 'If Vành had attacked Vị Hoàng, then the provincial city would have been surrendered to him' [HOA BẰNG 1966: 52; NGUYỄN Phan Quang *et al.* 1979: 39]. Instead, Phan Bá Vành essentially engaged in hit-and-run tactics. Thanks to his naval power he was able for a time to out-maneuvre the government troops. But, in the manner of sea pirates, he did not seriously attempt to capture any important administrative centres. Accordingly it seems that

Phan Bá Vành was unable to win the support of competitive counter-élites. At these points, Phan Bá Vành's failure may be contrasted with the success of the Tây Sơn brothers, who not only won over the counter-élites of both the Trịnh and Nguyễn ruling houses, but also succeeded in capturing a provincial town in the early stage of their uprising.

A final comment should be added. Various versions of the story of Phan Bá Vành's arrest suggest that he was betrayed by a canton chief of Trà Lũ.<sup>32)</sup> This episode again demonstrates an ambivalence in relations between the villagers (and more especially the village notables) and the bandits and rebels. We have also seen that Vũ Đức Cát was arrested by the villagers of Đông Hào in the early stage of the rebellion. The villagers and notables tended to waver between two choices: whether they should coexist with the bandits or rebels, or resist them; and whether they should stand on the side of the bandits or rebels, or on the side of the government. Either way, as we said earlier, they had but a single aim: to protect themselves and survive in a turbulent society.

## LIQUIDATION OF THE REBELLION

Phan Bá Vành's rebellion was over. It was a rebellion which almost became a civil war, and gave a tremendous shock to the Nguyễn officialdom.

Needless to say, the Huế government made the greatest efforts to suppress the rebellion using armed force. It committed large numbers of soldiers, with boats, elephants, and heavy firearms—from the Hanoi citadel and from the other areas (especially Thanh-Nghệ and Huế)—to the battlefields of the north. It ordered outstanding officials and commanders to pacify the turbulent areas. It enrolled the unregistered people into the army; and requisitioned private ships to join the campaign. The government also sought means to maintain local security more effectively, filling the vacant prefectural military offices and creating the new office of ngoại ủy phó tổng.

The Nguyễn government clearly realized, however, that these military or security counter-measures were not adequate to resolve the fundamental problems. The emperor expressed grave concern about this. Minh Mạng was an emperor who made strenuous efforts to centralize State power. For this he took as his most urgent task the setting up of a quick and efficient system for the collection of firsthand information. In 1820 he revived the institution of personal interviews with the emperor (dẫn kiến) [WOODSIDE 1971: 62–63], which he frequently used during the course of the Phan Bá Vành rebellion [TL 41: 8, 15; 43: 17–18]. He claimed that if he remained in the inner palace, remote from his officials, they would lack mutual understanding [TL 43:10]. However, generally speaking, there were permanent tensions

32) The official chronicle also states that the canton chief (cai tổng) Lê Huy and the vice-canton chief (phó tổng) Đỗ Nhu Việt were rewarded for the capture of Phan Bá Vành [TL 43: 35].

between the emperor and officials in the field, to the emperor's frustration. The emperor wanted to be well informed: the officials were reluctant to report, especially things which might damage their reputations or careers. Concerned about delays in reports from the provinces, he tried to improve the official postal system, for example by ordering, in 1825, that all postal stations should be equipped with horses. The spate of rebellions during his reign led to further efforts to adapt the system to military requirements [TL 43: 16-17; NGUYỄN Đoàn 1967: 58-59; see also NGUYỄN Phan Quang and ĐẶNG Huy Vân 1965: 20].

The emperor often expressed concern about the people's misery and impoverishment caused by the havoc of war. Especially in the north, the fighting between the rebels and the official troops had destroyed a number of villages. The emperor not only asked about the situation of the people, but also ordered subscriptions of money and rice, and reductions or exemptions of taxes and corvée labour. In the tenth month of 1826, on being informed that there were ordinary people in Nam Định whose houses had been burned and who had not been compensated, the emperor ordered each family to be given 2 *man* of coins and 1 *phuong* of rice [TL 41: 18].<sup>33)</sup> In the fifth month of 1827, the Commissioner for Pacification in Nam Định reported that he had given 2 *man* of coins and 1 *hộc* of paddy to each villager whose house had been burned; and 2 *man* of coins to those who had already received paddy from officials of the Hanoi citadel. In addition, he gave 1 *hộc* of paddy to each person who had lost property but still had a house. Families were also compensated for members killed in the fighting against the bandits. For this purpose more than 5,700 *man* of coins and 1,980 *hộc* of paddy was dispensed [TL 45: 1-2]. From these figures we may estimate that at least two thousand families suffered from the fighting in Nam Định.

In the third month of 1827, the Hanoi citadel requested the postponement of the census (*duyệt tuyền*), which was approved by the emperor [TL 44: 6]. This indicates that large numbers of people were forced to leave their villages because of the fighting. The postponement of the census also meant the postponement of a new military draft and corvée charge. On hearing the report of the Commissioner for Pacification concerning the serious damage suffered by 353 villages in Sơn Nam and Nam Định provinces, the emperor ordered the cancellation of their tax for that year, and of their draft and corvée labour for the previous year which had not yet been accomplished [TL 46: 19]. The statement of the emperor in the third month of 1828 reveals that he had already exempted the northern area from unpaid tax for the period up to 1823, and that he had permitted the postponement until 1829 of unpaid tax for the period 1824-7 [TL 51: 11]. In the intercalary fifth month of 1827, the Hanoi citadel reported that at the relief centres in every province of the north, and in the Hoài Đức prefecture of Hanoi, there remained such helpless people as widowers, widows, orphans, aged people without families, and the handicapped. Those who stayed there were given 20 *văn* of coins and half a *bát* of rice a day.<sup>34)</sup> In the case of people who

33) 1 *hộc* ≅ 60 litres. 1 *phuong* ≅ 30 litres.

34) 1 *bát* ≅ 1/2 litre.

died there from disease, funeral expenses were provided according to the rule concerning soldiers and travellers [TL 46: 20].

The emperor observed that the cause of Phan Bá Vành's rebellion was not simply the evil will of a few lunatics. As we mentioned earlier, he had been informed that many ordinary people had joined the rebellion. Facing a series of large-scale rebellions, first in Thanh Hoa and Nghệ An, and then in Nam Định, Hải Dương, and other northern provinces, the emperor increasingly suspected that the trouble stemmed from corruption and maltreatment by officials. Of course, the officials in the field tended to deny this view, for fear of punishment. The officials tended to regard the problem as simply one of security. The emperor was not satisfied with this kind of answer; he said the people met together and became bandits only because they were impoverished and had no means of petitioning; and he pointed out examples of official maltreatment which forced the people to join the bandits [TL 41: 8]. In the first month of 1827, the emperor ordered the Hanoi citadel to investigate cases of official corruption and unjust treatment. Although he was not sure whether such oppression was the cause of the recent prevalence of banditry, he wanted in any case to purge the corrupt officials [TL 43: 3-4]. But the emperor evidently considered that corruption and maltreatment by officials was one cause of the fierce rebellions in the north [TL 45: 23-26; 48: 20-21].

At the beginning of the third month of 1827, just after the defeat of Phan Bá Vành's insurrection, the emperor finally launched a serious investigation in the Nam Định and Sơn Nam areas. He appointed the protector of Nghệ An, Nguyễn Văn Hiếu, to be Commissioner for Pacification (kinh lược đại thần). The Minister of Justice, Hoàng Kim Xán, was appointed Vice-Commissioner and a high official of the Ministry of War, Thân Văn Duy, was ordered to support them [TL 44: 1-2]. In the fourth month, their report was sent to the emperor. They investigated villages in Nam Định and discovered many greedy and cruel officials and clerks. The most greedy were Phạm Thanh and Bùi Khắc Kham. They were afraid of being punished and fled, but were soon arrested and executed. Their property was divided among the needy people. Furthermore, the prefectural chief of Kiến Xương, Nguyễn Công Thụy, was sentenced to death. The prefectural chief of Ứng Hoà, Phạm Thọ Vực, and the district chief of Đại An, Nguyễn Văn Nghiêm, were dismissed. Other prefectural and district officials who had not carried out their duties well were discharged from office. Of the officials and clerks of Nam Định and Sơn Nam provinces, prefectures and districts, those who were sued, interrogated, or who ran away, numbered several hundred. The emperor downgraded, and later dismissed three top officials in Nam Định: Đỗ Văn Thịnh, Trần Chính Đức, and Vũ Đức Khuê, because they had not reported the actual situation when requested [TL 45: 2-3].

Evidently the emperor considered it urgent to purge corrupt officials in order to prevent another rebellion. He denied the view that the problem of banditry was simply one of security. He regarded not only the arbitrariness of officials, but also that of village notables as a cause of rebellion. Evidently this was the major reason why the Huế court decided to reorganize village administration in 1828. The village

chiefs (lý trưởng) and vice-chiefs (phó lý) as well as canton chiefs (cai tổng) and vice-chiefs (ngoại uỷ phó tổng) should be examined every three years and be promoted or dismissed by the authorities according to the results of their works. The emperor wanted to eliminate the self-indulgence and abuse of power of village notables [TL 53: 6-7, 23-24; DB: 182]. Needless to say, how effectively the new regulations were carried out is a matter of question. Yet it is evident that the Huế government tried to control village and canton level officials, especially by the introduction of a system of triennial inspection.

An interesting measure taken by the Nguyễn government was the opening up of underdeveloped land in the Tiến Hải area of Nam Định, the old base areas of Phan Bá Vành's rebels. This mission was entrusted to Nguyễn Công Trứ, who had distinguished himself in the fighting in Thanh-Nghệ and Nam Định. He proposed three necessary measures in the third month of 1828:

- (a) To exterminate bandits by strict enforcement of regulations; (b) to encourage good administration by clearly assessing praise and blame; and (c) to give the poor people the means of livelihood by opening up uncultivated fields [TL 51: 8-9].

As to the third point, he explained that there were thousands of acres of uncultivated land in Giao Thủy and Chân Định districts of Nam Định. They were to be settled by needy peasants who would otherwise join the bandits. They were especially to open up the Tiền Châu area (later Tiền Hải) of Chân Định district, the place where the bandits had been most active. This was a measure of killing two birds with one stone, since it would deprive the bandits of their supporters and, at the same time, of their safety zone. Thus in the third month of 1828, Nguyễn Công Trứ was appointed Commissioner for Land Administration (đình điền sứ) to serve in Nam Định for six months. When he paid his farewell visit to the emperor, the latter encouraged him by saying that if the people were given ordinary means of living and permanent property, the fugitive bandits would have to disperse [TL 51: 10]. In six months Nguyễn Công Trứ settled more than 2,350 persons (đình) and opened up more than 18,970 mẫu of rice fields. The government made the Tiền Châu area an independent district named Tiền Hải, consisting of 7 cantons [TL 54: 28-29]. Nguyễn Công Trứ also opened up alluvial land in Nam Trực and Giao Thủy districts [Vũ Huy Phúc 1978: 73].<sup>35)</sup> This new policy of opening up alluvial land and settling landless people was also applied to other provinces [Vũ Huy Phúc 1978: 71-74; Văn Tân 1978: 13]

One of the side-effects of the prolonged disturbances was probably the neglect by the administration of water control in the north. In the seventh month of 1827, Sơn Tây, Sơn Nam and Nam Định suffered from serious flooding. The river banks

35) Nguyễn Công Trứ (1778-1858) was one of the most distinguished officials in the early Nguyễn period. For his personal background and activities see: Văn Tân [1978]; Văn Tạo [1978]; Nguyễn Tài Thư [1978]; Văn Lang [1978]; Nguyễn Phan Quang and Nguyễn Danh Phiệt [1978]; Vũ Huy Phúc [1978]; Chương Thâu [1978]; and Minh Tranh [1978]. Incidentally the DB [185] remarks that the Tiền Hải district was established in the spring of 1829.

collapsed, many people were drowned, and many houses and cultivated fields were flooded [TL 47: 12–13]. Public dikes were broken in about 70 places at that time [TL 51: 19]. Since the rivers overflowed in Sơn Nam, the Ninh Bình area was also flooded [TL 49: 1–2]. The emperor was shocked, and lamented that the northern population suffered first from bandits and then, without time to take a breath, from the flood [TL 47: 12–13; 48: 10]. He blamed the inactivity of the northern officials in regard to water control administration [TL 47: 12–13]. He ordered money and rice to be given to the victims and tax exemption to be granted in the flooded areas; the emperor also urged the officials to repair the embankments [TL 50: 2; 51: 19; 52: 12–13]. A year later, another serious flood hit the northern provinces. The emperor angrily reprimanded the officials responsible who had failed to prevent the recurrence of disaster despite his frequent warnings [TL 53: 11–12].

Water control works required massive manpower. Since many villagers in the north had been dispersed because of natural calamities and the fighting, it was hard work to accomplish what the emperor required. The emperor decided to launch a full-scale project. In the ninth month of 1828, the emperor first established the *dê chính nha môn* (water control office), to be manned by high officials (Le Đại Cương and others) as full-time administrators [TL 54: 13–14, 20; DB: 183]. A shrine to the water god of the north was built at Bạch Hạc commune of Sơn Tây [TL 54: 23–24]. It was reported necessary to build new dikes in eleven places (total length 3,060 *trượng*)<sup>36</sup> and to repair old dikes in seven places (total length 3,590 *trượng*). The emperor agreed to spend 175,500 *quan* of coins for these works [TL 55: 19–20].<sup>37</sup>

Despite these efforts made by the Nguyễn court, the social causes of the poverty and disturbances never ceased to exist. Even though the emperor ordered the distribution of money for the needy by hiring them for public works, the officials and notables in charge frequently pocketed the money in spite of the emperor's prohibition which had been decreed in 1825 [DB: 153]. When in 1828 the government hired the local population of two prefectures in Bắc Ninh, the labourers were not paid at all [DB: 183]. The government had no means of eliminating the corruption and arbitrariness of local officials and notables even though it tried to redress them. Furthermore, under the institutions of the Nguyễn dynasty, all burdens tended to be shifted onto the shoulders of the people at the bottom of society. Minh Mạng abolished the water control office in 1832 after only four years, thus leaving the tasks to local officials in each province. In the following year, the Nguyễn court finally decided to stop sponsoring the maintenance of embankments in the north altogether. The necessary works were neglected by the officials, and the villages had to undertake

36) 1 *trượng* = 4 metres.

37) According to the *NTC (Sơn Tây)* the tax income from the cultivated fields in Sơn Tây, for example, was 165,905 *hộc* of rice, 215,392 *quan* of coins, and 8,413 taels of silver per year (during the 1860s). The amount of 175,500 *quan* which the emperor decided to spend for the project in 1828, was therefore equivalent to 80% of the tax income in coins of Sơn Tây province. For the water control administration of the early Nguyễn period, see Woodside [1971: 137–138] and Đỗ Đức Hùng [1979].



all the responsibilities; tasks which were often beyond their capacity [Đỗ Đức Hùng 1979: 51ff.].

Thus there were no signs of a decline in social disturbances, or of the removal of their causes. Phan Bá Vành's revolt was ultimately suppressed, it is true. The northern provinces were indeed pacified, but only for a little while. The symptoms of the next occurrence of large-scale rebellion appeared as early as the eleventh month of 1828, when the emperor was informed that once again there were many 'thieves' in the north [TL 55: 13].

## CONCLUSION AND HYPOTHESIS

Phan Bá Vành, a poor villager of a poor village in Nam Định, abandoned his native place and became a vagabond. With his bravery and skills in martial arts, he joined an outlaw group in the neighbouring province, Hải Dương, and started rallying the local people. Later he came back to Nam Định and entered an alliance with other rebel leaders, including a former military officer. His rebel movement has been believed to be a fusion of the remnants of two anti-Nguyễn forces: the Tây Sơn and the Lê. He commanded both land and naval forces. They defeated government forces directly commanded by the protectors of the two provinces Hải Dương and Nam Định. He frequently besieged prefectural and district towns. His earlier successes made the region a kingdom of rebels; the government lost control. In the meantime, a comet appeared in the eastern sky; the people believed it to be a clear sign of the decline of the existing government and of the advent of a new righteous ruler. Phan Bá Vành became a king and legendary hero whose name has been remembered among the local population of later generations.

After the defeat of the rebellion, the emperor of the Nguyễn dynasty granted exemptions from taxes and corvée duties, and ordered the needy to be provided with rice and money. He was not satisfied with reports sent him by provincial officials who attributed the rebellion to a few wicked scoundrels, and said that the problem was not simply one of security. He ordered an end to the maladministration and maltreatment of villagers by local officials and troops. He even sent a commissioner to investigate and arrest a number of corrupt officials. He also tried to reorganize village administration, in order to prevent the misconduct of village notables. Emperor Minh Mạng could therefore be said to have shown astuteness in dealing with Phan Bá Vành's rebellion and its subsequent liquidation. It is also noteworthy that the emperor launched a major project to open up vast areas of undeveloped lands in the coastal and alluvial areas of Nam Định province, where pirates used to congregate and hide. This policy was also applied in other provinces. These newly opened lands absorbed deserters and supporters of the rebellion alike. He also started a large-scale project of construction and repair of the embankment of the Red River. These policies and other measures taken, clearly show the emperor's concern and intention to reduce the numbers of dissident elements, and to remove the fundamental causes of population drift. Yet his intention was in most cases not realized.

Sometimes his orders were neglected or sabotaged. Sometimes his orders merely helped local officials and notables to take further advantage of the people. The Nguyễn court at Huế never fully controlled either its local officials or its troops. It was unable to intervene in the affairs of everyday village administration. The government even abandoned the task of maintaining the water control system in the north, leaving the burden to individual villages. The frequent reduction and cancellation of tax and corvée charges, themselves indicate that these obligations were often excessively heavy for the ordinary people. The Nguyễn government was never able to resolve the fundamental problems. The general poverty continued to exist. Many people were vulnerable to changes caused by natural calamities, banditry, fighting, and exploitation by local officials and notables. The unprivileged people continued to drift away from their native villages. Banditry and rebellion continued.

The following conclusions may be drawn from this case study. First, in traditional Vietnamese society there existed a third social component, in addition to the better known elements of state and villages, or élites and villagers [see SAKURAI 1978: 553–554]. This third element was composed of people who either drifted away and became vagabonds, or who took up theft, banditry, and piracy. Thieves, bandits, and pirates were, potentially or actually, forces which posed a threat not only to the state but also to the villages themselves. For the villagers, self-protection meant not only their efforts to keep the state's interference at a minimum level. It also meant an effort to defend their lives and property from the vagabonds, thieves, bandits, and pirates themselves, through resistance, refusal, negotiation and compromise. For the state, the existence of these dissident elements was dangerous, because it seriously undermined the government's strength and efficacy of control and rule. The dissident elements also threatened the social order without which the villagers could not have maintained their livelihood. The government attempted to subdue them, and at the same time, it tried to carry out various counter-measures aimed at halting, or at least lessening, the drift towards vagabondage, usually in vain.

Based on this conclusion, we may now address the question of transformation from the traditional to the colonial period, and in particular the fate of this third social component as Vietnam entered the colonial period. It is evident that under the new circumstances in which the colonial state increased its political and administrative control, the bandits and thieves could no longer act as freely as they had done in the traditional era.<sup>38)</sup> Furthermore, with more effective means of coercion and a strict identity card system,<sup>39)</sup> the authorities were in a better position to prevent people from becoming vagabonds. The colonial regime and the market economy system also undoubtedly provided the poor villagers with alternatives to vagabondage. In other words, potential vagabonds found new social outlets: short-term migration to

38) '[The] bandit population decreased radically from 1885 to 1939 as the French gained military ascendancy' [RAMBO 1973: 165]. 'One source of increased stability was the suppression of large-scale uprisings, banditry, and piracy' [POPKIN 1979: 136]. See also Shiraishi [1980: 104].

39) For an account of the identity card system applied in Indochina, see Obrecht [1942].

plantations, mines, and urban centres where they could find some minor jobs with low pay and hard work [see POPKIN 1979: 153–154]. In addition, the colonial system needed labour for the construction of railways, roads and bridges, in order to extract local resources and increase its administrative efficiency. To this end (especially in constructing the Trans-Indochina railway), a number of poor villagers was absorbed as requisitioned but waged labour. It is apparent, however, that these new social outlets were far from adequate to cope with the large number of potential drifters.<sup>40)</sup> Thus under a strict control system with insufficient social outlets, a majority of the unprivileged people were confined to the place where they lived. If it is correct to argue that social and economic differentiation in traditional rural society manifested itself as a struggle between those who remained in villages and those who were forced to leave, then differentiation in the colonial period tended to intensify tensions inside village society itself.<sup>41)</sup> The struggle between the privileged and the unprivileged ceased to be a struggle between those who remained and those who drifted away. In traditional Vietnam, theft and banditry were the most typical expressions of social grievances. The ordinary villagers and notables were mainly concerned about the protection of their village as a whole. Now in the colonial period, the struggle between the privileged and the unprivileged became a conflict among the inhabitants of the village itself. Hence, at the core of both the *Nghệ-Tĩnh* Soviet movement in 1930–31 and the August revolution in 1945 where the revolutionary movement developed, stood an unprivileged peasantry mobilized against the notables, landlords, and officials of their own villages.

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- BNLT* *Bản Triều Bạt Nghịch Liệt Truyện* (Biographies of Rebels in the Nguyễn Dynasty)  
*DB* *Quốc Sử Dị Biên* (A Transmitted Compilation of the History of the Dynasty)  
*NTC* *Đại Nam Nhất Thống Chí* (Gazetteer of Imperial Vietnam, with Geographical Descriptions of Provinces)  
*NCLS* *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử* (Historical Studies, Hanoi)  
 N.X.B. Nhà Xuất Bản (publishing house)  
*TL* *Đại Nam Thực Lục Chính Biên Đệ Nhị Kỳ* (Primary Compilation of the Veritable Records of the Second Reign of Imperial Vietnam)

40) Gourou [1936: 213–223] concludes that emigration from villages in the Tonkin delta was relatively small in scale.

41) Rambo's argument is consistent with our hypothesis: 'Once an environment free of the threat of armed conflict was established by the French, the always present latent internal conflicts within village society could come into the open without threatening the security of the villages. Such conflicts may also have been exacerbated by the tremendously increased competition between villagers for access to resources which resulted from the rapid growth of the rural population made possible in part by the cessation of warfare' [RAMBO 1973: 256].

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