

1 THE PROVINCIAL ERA

The empire comes south

After conquering the Yangtze River basin and proclaiming the Qin Empire in 221 BCE, Qin Shi Huang, “The First Emperor of China,” sent thousands of his soldiers over the mountains into the valleys and coastlands of what is now South China. He also sent convicts and women to establish a population of northerners there. After years of hard fighting against local people, Qin commanders built a city on the site of modern Guangzhou (Canton), the main seaport for trade into the southern seas. When the Qin Empire collapsed after Qin Shi Huang’s death in the year 210 BCE, this coastal outpost became the center of a regional kingdom ruled by the senior commanding officer, Zhao To.

As armies fought for control of the empire in the north, Zhao To proclaimed himself King of Nan Yue (Southern Yue). Zhao To is among the first historical figures with a role in Vietnamese history. Sometime during the first quarter of the second century BCE, he extended his authority over the people living in the Red River plain of northern Vietnam. Yue had been the name of a state on the south-central coast of China (the modern province of Zhejiang) during the sixth to fourth centuries BCE. It was appropriated by Zhao To and eventually applied to the Red River plain by ancient Chinese dynasties; in Vietnamese, it is pronounced Viet.

Zhao To was not the first conqueror to arrive in the Red River plain from the north. Armed adventurers, apparently fleeing the Qin invasion of southern China, had previously arrived and defeated the local ruler. Their leader proclaimed himself King An Duong (Pacifier of the South; An Yang in Chinese). He occupied and rebuilt an existing fortress now called Co Loa. The earliest stories about this can be found in books compiled six or seven hundred years later. They tell about King An Duong and Zhao To struggling for control of the Red River plain. Several versions of this story have been recorded through the centuries; it is a tragic romance involving the transfer of political power.

The main line of the story is as follows. During a truce in the fighting between Zhao To and King An Duong, Zhao To's son, Shi Jiang, visited King An Duong's court. There, he and King An Duong's daughter, My Chau, fell in love and were married. The young bride and groom resided at An Duong's court until Shi Jiang managed to lay his hands upon the magic crossbow that was the source of King An Duong's power. He destroyed the crossbow and fled back to his father, who thereupon attacked and vanquished King An Duong. King An Duong escaped to the sea with My Chau in tow. She surreptitiously marked their way so as to be found by her husband. Perceiving this, King An Duong slew her for her treachery, and then disappeared into the sea. Finding his wife's body, Shi Jiang leaped into a well to join her in death.

This story exists today because it was interesting to compilers at Chinese dynastic courts in the third and fourth centuries CE, and maybe it was even created by them. At least three aspects of the story would have been popular at that time and place. One aspect is the theme of romantic love leading to tragic death, which was in literary fashion then. Another aspect is that it provides an explanation for how this remote part of the world was brought into the imperial political system; Zhao To's kingdom of Nan Yue (Vietnamese Nam Viet), which eventually expanded to include northern Vietnam, finally became part of the Han Empire, and all subsequent dynasties considered themselves to be heritors of Han.

Another reason why this story was interesting to people in the empire is the dissonance between a matrilocal society in which a man becomes a member of his wife's family, for which we have evidence from ancient Vietnam, and a patrilocal society in which a woman becomes a member of her husband's family, which for several centuries had already been the rule among educated people in China. Ngo Si Lien, a fifteenth-century Vietnamese historian, even commented upon how strange and "wrong" it was that in this story Shi Jiang lived with his wife's family and that My Chau did not go to live with her husband's family. It was hard for him to think that there had been a time when people in this country did not know the patriarchal Confucian family system.

In fact, the people whom King An Duong and Zhao To encountered in the Red River plain were very strange to educated northerners at that time. Two hundred years after the time of King An Duong, around the year zero, Han imperial administrators recorded their efforts to promote agriculture, to open schools, and to introduce the institution of marriage among the inhabitants of northern Vietnam. They wanted to expand agriculture to maximize the taxable surplus; schools were a way to win the minds of intelligent young locals; marriage practices governed the social system and consequently the form of political authority that could be exercised. Yet, according to the *San Guo Zhi* (Annals

of the Three Kingdoms), an imperial administrator named Xue Zong, who two centuries later spent most of his career in northern Vietnam, wrote: “According to the records, civilizing activities have been going on for over four hundred years, but, according to what I myself have seen during many years of travel since my arrival here, the actual situation is something else ... In short, it can be said that these people are on the same level as bugs.”

Until the middle of the first century CE, outside of a few imperial outposts, local rulers limited the influence of Han officials. These local rulers can be seen riding in boats that decorate the large bronze drums that announced their authority. In their graves of boat-shaped wooden coffins, they have left their weapons, tools, jewelry, and daily life items made of wood, pottery, bronze, and iron. From such things, and from brief written descriptions by imperial officials compiled in later books, we can vaguely see the society ruled by these people. Imperial officials called them Lac (Chinese Luo) and Au (Chinese Ou), which they understood as kinds of Viet (Chinese Yue), a name applied to southern non-Han people.

The Lac people were rice growers in the Red River plain. The Au had arrived with King An Duong, who combined his entourage with the existing class of rulers to produce what was recorded as the kingdom of Au-Lac. The Lac lords had previously served the ruler dethroned by King An Duong. In later centuries, historians used the name Hung for those who ruled before King An Duong at the place where the Red River emerges from the mountains, called Me Linh in old texts. It would have been easy for this place to be in contact with other bronze-age cultures up the Red River to the northwest in what are now the Chinese provinces of Yunnan and Sichuan. King An Duong's fortress of Co Loa was in the upper plain north of the Red River, located to dominate the plain while defending it from intruders coming from the northeast, either along the coast or through the upland passes leading to Zhao To's kingdom of Nan Yue in the modern Chinese provinces of Guangdong and Guangxi.

One detail in the earliest versions of the story of King An Duong and Zhao To can be related to the archaeology of Co Loa. Cao Thong (Chinese Kao Tong), a man described in such a way as to indicate that he was from China, was the chief advisor of King An Duong as well as the inventor of the magic crossbow. As long as King An Duong retained the loyalty of Cao Thong, Zhao To could not defeat him. However, King An Duong treated Cao Thong disrespectfully, and Cao Thong abandoned him. Thereafter, King An Duong lost the magic crossbow and was defeated. The archaeology of Co Loa reveals an adaptation of engineering practices from the Warring States of ancient China to the local terrain and a range of weapons similar to contemporary armies

in China, which suggests that King An Duong's magic weapon may have been some kind of "new model army" trained and led by Cao Thong, which was no longer effective without his leadership.

After Zhao To had expelled King An Duong, he posted two legates to supervise the Au-Lac lords, one in the Red River plain, which was named Giao Chi, and one in the Ma and Ca River plains immediately to the south, which was named Cuu Chan. Some records suggest that he also invested a king at Co Loa who continued to preside over the Au-Lac lords. The legates established commercial outposts accessible by sea. Their presence was apparently unobjectionable to the Au-Lac lords, for there is no record of trouble between them. Access to stable markets with goods from the north was surely a benefit to the local rulers. For the next century and a half, no recorded information survives about this place. The local organization of society and politics apparently remained fundamentally unchanged in the transfer from Hung kings to King An Duong to the kingdom of Nan Yue. The next transfer of suzerain also did not bring any drastic change.

When the Han General Lu Bode conquered Nan Yue in 111 BCE, his army was met at the Giao Chi border by the two Nan Yue legates with cattle, wine, and tokens of submission. At that time, an Au-Lac lord received a titular reward from Han for overthrowing the king who had been invested by Nan Yue at Co Loa. Han subsequently established two new outposts as frontier garrisons, one facing northwest, up the Red River into the mountains at Me Linh where the Hung kings had supposedly ruled, and one facing the southern coast in Nhat Nam, on the plain between the Ngang and Hai Van Passes beyond Cuu Chan. The headquarters for Giao Chi and the entire region was at Luy Lau, a seaport amidst fields connected by river with the coast leading north.

Giao Chi, Cuu Chan, and Nhat Nam were given the status of prefectures in Han imperial administration. A total of twenty-two districts were organized, or at least theorized, in these prefectures, ten in Giao Chi, seven in Cuu Chan, and five in Nhat Nam. The districts were left in the hands of local lords who received imperial "seals and ribbons" as symbols of their status in return for what the lords viewed as tribute to a suzerain but which imperial officials over time began to view as taxes. Although this situation, so far as surviving evidence reveals, remained peaceful for the next century and a half, the accommodation achieved between a feudal aristocracy and the Han practice of prefecture and district administration was an expedient and would not be sustainable in the long run.

Han officials sought to maintain peaceful relations with the local population while pursuing the complex, sometimes contradictory, goals of imperial administration. These goals included patrolling the frontiers to ensure security,

monitoring the local leaders to maintain domestic tranquility, nurturing trade and agriculture to produce a taxable surplus, encouraging northern immigration to consolidate a mass of people directly responsive to imperial authority, and seeking opportunities to change local ways toward northern norms with education and social reform. The perspective of the Han officials was largely limited to their prefectural headquarters and garrisons and the security of the river routes that connected these places. They met with the lords who governed districts to receive a portion of the local surplus and to confer tokens of imperial authority and benevolence.

For their part, the lords upon whom Han officials were dependent for governing the non-Han population inhabited a world very different from Han people. Theirs was the realm of the Lac, and of the Au who during this time were probably for the most part absorbed into the Lac. People today apply the archaeological name of Dong Son to their culture. Here were communities of agriculturalists settled along riverbanks beside rice fields. The rulers sent men by boat to collect rice and other goods, armed with crossbows, spears, swords, and their distinctive bronze pediform axes. They proclaimed their arrival by beating on bronze drums to summon the people to submit what was due. Many of these drums still exist and are decorated with scenes of the boats bearing warriors with weapons, large jars to carry rice, and the drums. There are also depictions of people wearing clothing decorated with feathers. Some are pounding rice in large mortars with long wooden pestles. There are musicians and dancers, men and women copulating, and warriors holding decapitated heads. The drums also bear images of birds, deer, crocodiles, and frogs. The rulers of this society met with Han officials to exchange gifts and to gain access to markets with goods from afar, and they were buried with their weapons, wooden combs, bracelets, ceramic pillows, and Han coins.

An imperial census was taken in the year 2 CE. It recorded 143,643 households and 981,755 people in the three prefectures of Giao Chi, Cuu Chan, and Nhat Nam. It is doubtful that these enumerations came from an actual registration of the population or even that they were a compilation of estimates. It was at this time that some prefects in remote jurisdictions endeavored to become famous for claiming to have promoted agriculture and patriarchal marriage rites, activities related to the taking of a census. They typically made impressive but unverifiable claims seeking to gain a reputation that would lead to more desirable assignments nearer the imperial heartland.

Despite many problems in evaluating the accuracy of this census, it is nevertheless plausible evidence for the existence of a settled population in the lowlands of what is now northern Vietnam that was significant and substantial in the context of imperial administration in ancient China. This is apparent in comparison with

numbers in the same census recorded from the modern southern Chinese provinces of Guangxi and Guangdong, even allowing for the certainty of error and fiction: 71,805 households and 390,555 people, less than half the households and only around 40 percent of the people recorded for the prefectures in modern Vietnam.

Who were these people and what language did they speak? Han immigrants aside, we can plausibly conjecture that much of the lowland population spoke what linguists call Proto-Viet-Muong related to the Mon-Khmer language family that apparently expanded northward from the Ca River plain in modern Nghe An and Ha Tinh Provinces. The geographical connection with other Mon-Khmer languages appears to have been via the Mu Gia Pass from the middle Mekong plain to the Ca River plain. Another plausible conjecture is that the aristocracy that ruled these people, called Lac in Han texts, came from the mountains north and west of the Red River plain and spoke an ancient language related to modern Khmu, another Mon-Khmer language now spoken in the mountains of northern Vietnam and Laos. On the other hand, the Au conquerors who arrived from the northern mountains with King An Duong might be imagined to have spoken a language related to the Tai-Kadai language family that includes modern Lao and Thai. In any case, it is too early to speak of the Vietnamese language.

The Han conquest

During the years 9–23 CE, the empire was in turmoil as a so-called usurper named Wang Mang tried to supplant the Han dynasty. Uprisings spread disorder in northern China, and fighting continued until a Han prince restored the authority of his dynasty. During this time, officials in southern China remained loyal to Han. Many Han loyalists fled from the north seeking safety in what is now southern China and northern Vietnam. After the Han restoration, large numbers of the officials who had found refuge in the south returned north, but some remained and established families that would be prominent in local government for centuries after. This wave of refugees from the north strengthened Han officials in their dealings with local peoples during this short but tumultuous era and accelerated the ascendancy of imperial administration over the Lac aristocracy.

Han administrative activity in these years reflects an accumulation of immigration from the north as well as growing familiarity and experience with local conditions. Han officials began to extend the sphere of their direct authority over increasing numbers of inhabitants. Some of these were immigrants from the north settled near Han garrisons and administrative centers. Others were local

people who either lived near these places or were attracted to migrate there for economic opportunities or for the security provided by direct imperial rule. Han centers surely attracted refugees from the politics of the Lac lords and the vicissitudes of local society. By this time, Han administrators had apparently established a presence at the district level where they were in a position to intervene in relations between Lac lords and local people. Han officials endeavored to draw the Lac lords into the hierarchy of Han government, to teach them to observe the norms of Han civilization and administration. This effort was probably successful in some cases, but in other cases produced non-cooperation and resistance.

Contradictions grew between Han government and Lac lords. Han officials were appointees in an imperial administrative system; Lac lords were hereditary aristocrats in something like a feudal system. Han officials organized and registered families in a structure that governed through the responsibility of patriarchs to control their subordinates and to pay taxes; the status of Lac lords passed through the family line of one's mother and tribute was obtained from communities of agriculturalists who practiced group responsibility. For Han people, land and inheritance rights were possessed by men; in Lac society, access to land was based on communal usage rather than individual ownership and women possessed inheritance rights.

Immigrants from the north included officials, soldiers, agriculturalists, and technical experts of various kinds who married local women and obtained land. The contradiction between the Han practice of land being inherited through the male line and the Lac practice of land rights being inherited through the female line came to a head with these people. In mixed marriages, the conflicting interests of male and female offspring were aligned with the discordant regimes of Han administrators and Lac lords. At stake was control of land and access to the taxable agricultural surplus.

While in Han society men inherited wealth through their fathers, in Lac society both men and women inherited wealth through their mothers. As late as the third century CE, an imperial administrator wrote disapprovingly that levirate was still practiced in areas where Lac traditions remained strongest. This meant that childless widows had a right to bear children with men from their deceased husbands' families in order to obtain heirs. This practice ostensibly provided an heir for the mother, although some patriarchal societies used it to provide an heir for the deceased father. A woman's prerogative to bear children for her family line may lie behind an observation from that time and place that local women were difficult to control and that aspiring patriarchs attached bells to the ears of their wives to prevent them from sneaking off at night to be with other men.

According to Han historical records, in the fourth decade of the first century CE, a Lac lord was “tied up with the law” by the Han prefect of Giao Chi. This provoked an uprising led by two women, daughters of another Lac lord, who were married to the “tied up” lord. These were the famous Trung Sisters who in later centuries became heroines of Vietnamese history. The details of what happened can only be conjectured. If the “law” referred to had to do with land ownership and inheritance rights, a plausible scenario is that Han officials endeavored to restrain a man who was championing the inheritance rights of women to whom he was related by marriage against efforts by the imperial regime to assert Han ideas about land ownership. But there may have been other issues at stake as well, for the Trung Sisters were from Me Linh, the locality where the Hung kings were said to have ruled before the time of King An Duong, so they may have been infused with a venerable tradition of authority.

Han descriptions of northern Vietnam compiled three to four centuries later say that the most distinguishing feature of Me Linh was the presence of big beautiful snakes that could be captured only by covering them with women’s clothing. If this indication of female potency were imagined as a remnant of thought about there once being Hung queens rather than Hung kings in this place, it would offer an explanatory context to the fact that when Han settlements and garrisons were overrun in the spring of 40 CE the Trung Sisters then ruled as queens from Me Linh. These queens established their influence over the Han jurisdictions in northern Vietnam of Giao Chi, Cuu Chan, and Nhat Nam, and also a prefecture on the coast to the north that today is within the Chinese border.

The Trung Sisters reigned for two years until a Han expeditionary force was organized and put in motion. The only detail about their rule that remains from Han historical records is that they “adjusted taxes,” which suggests that the most inflammatory issue leading to the uprising was control of land and agricultural surplus – an important target of Han taxation. It might also refer to control of the markets and taxation of local commodities that were sought by Han merchants. These were primarily luxury goods such as rhinoceros horns, elephant tusks, tropical bird feathers, pearls, aromatic woods, and slaves. Rulers in northern China had by then already been coveting these items for centuries. Two and a half centuries earlier, Qin Shi Huang’s attention had been drawn to the south by the trade in these goods. Considerations of frontier security, revenue from a relatively large agricultural population, and access to tropical commodities all contributed to the Han determination to regain control of this region.

One climatic feature that has affected warfare in Vietnam for centuries is the monsoon rains. During the warm months when temperatures rise on the Eurasian land mass, winds from the sea bring rain, and sometimes typhoons,

beginning in May and extending into October. The land becomes waterlogged and will not sustain the movement of large armies. As temperatures fall during the cooler months, from November to April, winds blow out to sea and the land dries out making it possible for large armies to move.

In the dry season of early 42 CE, General Ma Yuan led a Han army into the Red River plain, building a road along the coast as he came. Ma Yuan established his headquarters near King An Duong's fortress of Co Loa and camped there during the soggy months of the monsoon rain season, from May to October. Around the end of the year, as the land dried out and the fighting season opened, he captured and beheaded the Trung Sisters after a series of battles in which thousands of their followers were killed, were captured, or had surrendered. He spent the next year receiving the submission of local leaders, tracking down and killing those who refused to submit, deporting hundreds of prominent clans to the north, building fortified towns from which localities could be governed, establishing garrisons, and settling his soldiers on land from which they could supply their own provisions. He also issued regulations to eliminate the contradictions between Han law and local practice, and he took oaths of loyalty from those who submitted. Having established a foundation for direct imperial governance, he returned north in 44 CE.

The expedition of Ma Yuan ended the age that historians associate with Lac lords and that archaeologists associate with Dong Son Culture. It came two and a half centuries after Qin Shi Huang's imperial armies crossed the passes into southern China, initiating recorded history in this region with the frontier perceptions of Han administrators and the legendary struggle between King An Duong and Zhao To. Local society and the people who ruled it do not appear to have experienced any major disruption as Han officials garrisoned headquarters at a few strategic locations and began to attract immigrants from the north. As years went by, however, contradictions between imperial policy and local practice grew ever more apparent and eventually led to the violence of the 40s CE.

Stories about relations between imperial administrators and the local society during this long era of coexistence were compiled in a book annotated in its present form around five centuries later entitled *Shui Jing Zhu* (Commentary on the Waterways Classic). The stories are about boundaries between the realms of human beings and animals with the humans standing for imperial civilization and animals standing for uncivilized locals. Three stories are attributed to three regions of the Red River plain. One of these is the story, mentioned above, about the big beautiful snakes at Me Linh. This is where the Hung kings or queens are thought to have ruled and also where the Trung Sisters held court. The snakes are entirely in the animal realm, and the point of the story is how to capture and kill them.

Another story is located in the region of Co Loa, where King An Duong ruled. It is about chimpanzees able to transform themselves into creatures with handsome human heads that spoke using elegant language that moved the emotions of human listeners. Humans ate the delicious flesh of these creatures in time of famine. This story of an animal able to enter the human realm with its face and speech is a metaphor for local people who learned some aspects of civilization. But that they were eaten in an emergency indicates that for civilized people they nevertheless remained animals.

The third story comes from Luy Lau, the Han administrative center established at the seaport facing the northern coast. Here a Han administrator became famous for having transformed himself into a tiger and then later returned himself back into a man. This story is about a representative of imperial civilization penetrating the animal world and taking control of it in the form of the most ferocious of beasts, then returning to the human realm.

These stories reflect perceptions of three different regions, but they also reflect three phases in a process of contact between local people and Han officials. The big snake is utterly beyond human civilization and must be killed. The talking chimpanzees assumed some civilized characteristics and were interesting but could never become members of the civilized human world. The Han tiger-man learned to enter and master the realm of savagery yet remained a civilized man and an imperial official. These stories present metaphors for three policies: extermination of the uncivilized, allowing the uncivilized to acquire some aspects of civilization, and penetrating the uncivilized realm and dominating it with imperial versions of uncivilized potency.

In the same book where these stories are recorded, each of these three places is also associated with an emblematic military encounter. At Me Linh, Ma Yuan defeated and killed the Trung Sisters. Co Loa is the scene of the struggle for ascendancy between King An Duong and Zhao To, two aspiring monarchs on the imperial frontier. The battle recorded for Luy Lau is an event that took place in the year 411 when a rebel army fleeing from imperial forces in southern China entered northern Vietnam and attempted to seize control of it; the loyal imperial governor rallied the frontier province against the invading rebel and defeated him. These episodes show a shift of perspective on northern Vietnam from a place of disorder where uncivilized people were slain to a place where semi-civilized kingdoms competed for dominance on the edge of the civilized world to a loyal civilized province that overcame rebellious forces emanating from the imperial heartland.

For nine hundred years following the expedition of Ma Yuan, the southernmost province of successive dynastic empires was in northern Vietnam. During this time, every aspect of society and culture was transformed by education in the

Confucian and Daoist classics, by the arrival of Buddhism and its synthesis with local religious practices, by waves of immigrants, by imperial ideals of political organization and social behavior, and by a transformation of languages, both Annamese Middle Chinese that developed among the Chinese speakers and Proto-Viet-Muong spoken by the non-Chinese population, in a context of centuries of bilingualism. The series of acculturating episodes during this time progressively turned the lives and aspirations of people inhabiting this place toward the civilization in the north.

There was no further mention of the name Lac. Instead, the people here were recorded as Viet (Chinese Yue). As a name, Viet had a relatively prominent imperial pedigree. Although it was a designation for southern non-Han peoples, it nevertheless indicated a kind of uncivilized people that were redeemable. A kingdom named Yue/Viet was one of the “warring states” of ancient China in the sixth to fourth centuries BCE, on the southern coast of the civilized world near the mouth of the Yangtze River. Its most famous ruler, King Goujian (fifth century BCE), claimed descent from a sage-king in antiquity. His people, originally considered civilized, had assumed uncivilized aspects through long residence among uncivilized peoples. Consequently, the Yue/Viet were thought of as a kind of uncivilized people predisposed toward the civilizing process. This was a name for people on the threshold of civilization who had the options of going over the threshold, of turning away, or of looking both ways.

Shi Xie and the rise of the great families

For fifty years after Ma Yuan’s expedition, Han power was at its peak. Very little information about the southern frontier during this time was recorded by imperial historians, which may be taken as an indication that, in the wake of Ma Yuan’s frontier sojourn, the situation was relatively calm. When events began to be recorded, in the second century, they were about invasions, rebellions, and political turmoil. Ma Yuan left most of his army in Giao Chi, Cuu Chan, and Nhat Nam to form the core of what became a frontier garrison. Large numbers of Han soldiers, administrators, merchants, craftspeople, agriculturalists, and adventurers came and went. Many of these people remained to take advantage of opportunities on the new frontier.

Ma Yuan’s expedition is the pivot for a dramatic shift in archaeological evidence. Han-style brick tombs replace Dong Son graves. These tombs are nearly identical with tombs found throughout the Han Empire, being underground chambers covered by mounds of earth and containing coins, jewelry, lamps, figurines, utensils, mirrors, ceramics, weapons, and other miscellaneous

items, all typical of Han culture. Among the artifacts found in these tombs are clay models of agricultural compounds with wells, ovens, granaries, pens for animals, residential quarters, and walls with towers for defense. Such clay models are found in Han tombs everywhere and indicate the basic composition of Han society in the first and second centuries CE, a social structure that continued in various forms until the sixth century in southern China and northern Vietnam.

Historians of China refer to this as the age of “great family dominance,” meaning that “great families,” or agglomerations of people and property under the authority of kin groups, whether actual or fictive, constituted government at the local and provincial levels and dominated imperial administration outside of the capital region and of strategically located garrisons. These were similar to the *latifundia* in the Roman Empire and the *hacienda* of colonial Latin America, which emerged from contexts of imperial conquest and appropriation of land, manpower, and other resources. As economic units, they were typically based on control of large tracts of agricultural land worked by peasants and herders in various forms of servitude or dependency, but they could also include craftsmen with specialized skills, for example in ceramics, bronze and iron ware, wood-working, fishing and pearl diving, salt making, ivory carving, precious stones and metals, and the production of incense from aromatic wood. There would also have been scholars, scribes, teachers, medical doctors, priests, monks, soldiers, spies, assassins, alchemists, and magicians, all of whom were employed to serve the interests of the group of people composing the “great family,” constituted by birth, adoption, marriage, or some other expedient.

The “great families” were economic and social units that brought together local people and immigrants or sojourners from the north. They were arenas with potential for upward social mobility for local people having skills, aptitudes, and attributes in demand by those in power. They were also places where northerners could find opportunities for employment and possible advancement. The people who presided at the very top of these “great families” were buried in the vaulted brick tombs. They were either northerners and their descendents or local people who had assimilated into the imperial governing class. The tombs indicate a fundamental regional stability of imperial society despite the vicissitudes of dynastic politics during the five hundred years following Ma Yuan’s expedition.

During the first to sixth centuries, thousands of these tombs were built in the rice lands of Giao Chi, Cuu Chan, and Nhat Nam. They are today found as far south as the region of modern Quang Trach (Ba Don) in Quang Binh Province, on the Gianh River just south of Ngang pass. It is not coincidental that at this place the distribution of the brick tombs reached its southernmost extent. After the fall of Han, Ngang Pass became the southern border of the provincial

jurisdictions inhabited by the ancestors of modern Vietnamese. The Han jurisdiction of Nhat Nam had its northern border at Ngang Pass and it became a contested frontier zone between Sino-Vietnamese, later Vietnamese, and other peoples generally called Cham. Not until the fifteenth century did Vietnamese armies decisively conquer this area and open the southern coast to Vietnamese immigrants.

By the beginning of the seventeenth century, Vietnamese along this southern coast had established their own separate political system, and for two centuries the Gianh River was the border between northern and southern Vietnamese kingdoms. Decades of warfare ensued. Thirty kilometers south, at Dong Hoi, the southerners built a system of defensive walls from the mountains to the sea to block northern invasions. Seventy kilometers south of Dong Hoi is the Ben Hai River at the seventeenth parallel, the border between warring northern and southern Vietnamese states for twenty years in the mid twentieth century.

This region was the southern extremity of the Han Empire at its greatest extent, and thereafter it remained a border zone of one kind or another. There are at least four reasons for this: geography, climate, political history, and human activity in response to these factors. North of Ngang Pass, the plains of the Red, Ma, and Ca Rivers form a coherent geographical space of rice lands amidst large rivers and mountainous terrain with possibilities for defense against external threats. Major rivers all lead west-northwest into the highlands of southwest China and northern Laos. These plains are at the southern edge of the temperate climatic zone, having four seasons with cold, if brief, winters. Wrestling an agricultural life from flooding rivers and the salty sea instilled a disciplined lifestyle. Internalizing the social organization and cultural ideals acquired from centuries of participation in an imperial world added new forms of discipline. Communal responsibility and deference to authority remain strong among northern Vietnamese.

The southern border of the Han jurisdiction of Nhat Nam was Hai Van Pass, located between the modern cities of Hue and Da Nang. South from Hai Van Pass, one enters the tropics and a coastal environment with greater exposure to the outside world of seafaring and maritime trade routes than is possible on the more northerly coasts facing Hainan Island. Here the Cham peoples, and later the southern Vietnamese, found scope for a more diversified economic, social, and cultural life than was possible further north. The mountainous hinterland communicates with the central Mekong and territories inhabited by ancient Khmer speakers and, more recently, by Tai speakers.

The coastal plain between Ngang Pass and Hai Van Pass is a transitional zone that includes both temperate and tropical climatic features. Han-era Nhat Nam was anchored in its north with a society in the plain of the Gianh River and its tributaries that produced the Han-style brick tombs. Here was sited the

headquarters for commanders of garrisons and patrols that maintained watch as far south as Hai Van Pass. In the second century, as Han power began to decline, frontier disorders in Nhat Nam began to multiply, leading by the end of that century to abandonment of the entire jurisdiction. During that time, the people of Giao Chi and Cuu Chan repeatedly mobilized in response to these disorders and came to understand that with the ebbing of Han power their security increasingly depended upon their taking for themselves the responsibility of regional leadership. The story of how this happened is about the first inkling of local political initiative after the shock of Ma Yuan's conquest, which had been followed by several generations of immigration, intermarriage, and acculturation in the context of the "great family" estates.

At the center of this story is a family that traced its ancestry to refugees from Shandong Province in northeastern China that had fled into the south during the Wang Mang disorders at the beginning of the first century CE. This family settled at the headquarters commanding the frontier jurisdiction comprised of southern China and northern Vietnam, located at Cangwu (modern Wuzhou) on the present border of Guangdong and Guangxi Provinces in southern China. Here a main route over the mountains from the north met the West River, about 420 kilometers northeast of the modern Sino-Vietnamese border. During the years from the late 140s to the late 160s, the leader of this family, Shi Si, served as the chief administrative officer of Nhat Nam. These were critical years in the unraveling of the southern Han frontier, and Shi Si served there at a time when especially talented and trusted men were assigned to rule by force of personality in lieu of reliance upon military force only.

During the previous decade, in 137 and again in 144, Han outposts and settlements in Nhat Nam were overrun by uprisings originating in the southernmost part of the jurisdiction, provoking turmoil and the breakdown of Han authority in Cuu Chan as well. A disorder similar to these had been put down by force in the year 100, subsequent to which there were several episodes of local peoples immigrating into the areas of Han administration and submitting to Han authority. Since this was also the time when Han power began to decline, Han administration was apparently unequal to the task of carrying out its civilizing mandate among these new subjects or of keeping them at peace. When Nhat Nam erupted in 137 and 144, Han was no longer capable of sending large numbers of soldiers so far south. Consequently, a policy was implemented in which men were selected for their prior experience and success in dealing with non-Han peoples on the frontier and were sent to calm the situation through persuasion and charisma. Shi Si was such a person. In 160, when disorders once more broke out in Nhat Nam and Cuu Chan, Han officials again negotiated peace without resort to arms.

The progressive ebbing of Han power, however, continued to offer new opportunities for frontier adventurers. Nhat Nam was temporarily stabilized, but in the 160s uprisings began to break out further north in what is now southern China. The 170s were a time of contention among Han officials in southern China and northern Vietnam, where loyalty to the distant Han court was increasingly eroded by personal ambition. By the 180s, imperial appointments to prominent local men recognized an emerging arrangement of regional autonomy.

At that time, Shi Si's eldest son, Shi Xie, was appointed to govern Giao Chi. For the next forty years, Shi Xie kept Giao Chi and Cuu Chan in peace, while all around swirled the consequences of Han collapse. One of these consequences in the early 190s was the appearance of the kingdom of Lin Yi in southern Nhat Nam. The people of Lin Yi included groups from both the coast and the adjacent uplands along with Han renegades. Lin Yi must also have had some contact, if not connection, with Cham peoples led by kings in the region beyond Nhat Nam's border, south of Hai Van Pass. As portrayed in later Chinese records, the logic for the existence of this kingdom was to exploit opportunities for probing, plundering, and appropriating territories in imperial frontier jurisdictions. For much of the next four centuries, Lin Yi would be a chronic adversary for those who governed the Red River plain. It nevertheless appears that Shi Xie managed to maintain a *modus vivendi* with this nascent power.

In his youth, Shi Xie had been sent north to study with a famous scholar. He subsequently served as a secretary at the Han court, then returned south to mourn for his father, and thereafter served as an administrator in Sichuan in western China before being appointed to govern Giao Chi. This appointment was based upon both his personal qualities and his position as head of the Shi family, which had become prominent on the southern frontier. In the 190s, the lapse of imperial control in the south enabled Shi Xie to appoint three of his brothers to govern Cuu Chan and the coastal regions of modern Guangxi and Guangdong in southern China. Shi Xie governed from Luy Lau, about thirty kilometers east of modern Hanoi, where his tomb can be seen to this day.

Around a hundred scholars fleeing the collapse of Han found refuge with Shi Xie. Shi Xie was remembered among later generations of Vietnamese as the father of education in their land. He reportedly built schools and encouraged lively debates among the intellectuals who gathered around him, including Confucianists, Daoists, and Buddhists. Centuries later, he was credited with compiling a dictionary explaining classical terms in vernacular Vietnamese for use in schools. He surrounded himself with Buddhist monks, and the building of the earliest known Vietnamese Buddhist temples is attributed to him. The story about how Buddhism originated among the Vietnamese connects him to the first

appearance of a Buddha in this land, a Mother Buddha who miraculously gave birth to a daughter who, via a tale entwined with the worship of trees and rocks, became embodied in images of four sister Buddhas with rain-making powers. One of these, the Dharma Cloud Buddha, was particularly worshipped by imperial governors and also by Vietnamese kings as late as the eighteenth century. Shi Xie's posthumous cult also credited him with Daoist powers of immortality. In short, Shi Xie is associated with the introduction of every major aspect of what came to define Vietnamese culture. This is why in his study of Shi Xie, Stephen O'Harrow called him "the first Vietnamese."

Giao Province

Shi Xie was termed a "king" in Vietnamese writings of later centuries, but during his lifetime he posed as a loyal official of the Han court until this was no longer plausible, at which point he shifted his allegiance to the rising Wu dynasty in southeastern China, one of the three kingdoms that partitioned the Han Empire in the early third century. After Shi Xie's death in 226, the Wu moved quickly to exterminate the Shi family and to gain control of northern Vietnam. Cut off from the Silk Road across Central Asia to northern China, the Wu wanted direct access to the maritime route to India and the Mediterranean Sea, for which northern Vietnam had become a terminus during the rule of Shi Xie. Wu exactions and resort to harsh expedients provoked resistance, and in 248 the leader of Lin Yi took advantage of this to seize northern Nhat Nam, inspiring local leaders in Cuu Chan and Giao Chi to rebel against the Wu regime. The Wu calmed the situation with conciliation, resorting to force only to suppress resistance in southern Cuu Chan led by a woman remembered in Vietnamese texts as Lady Trieu. Despite these successes, the Wu made no effort to re-enter Nhat Nam.

The Wu kingdom, locked in continual war with its rivals in northern and western China, treated Giao Chi and Cuu Chan primarily as sources of wealth, which was not a popular policy among the people who lived there. In the 260s, the Wei of northern China conquered the Shu Han dynasty of western China in Sichuan and thereafter became the Jin dynasty, thereby reducing the Three Kingdoms to two. Local leaders in Giao Chi sent envoys to Sichuan to offer their allegiance to the Jin, Wu's remaining enemy. In response, the Jin sent a governor with seven military commanders and their men to establish an anti-Wu regime in northern Vietnam. There followed three years of fighting between Wu forces attempting to regain control of the Red River plain and Jin forces endeavoring to prevent this. Local forces were initially allied with Jin. However,

when Tao Huang, an astute Wu commander, sent treasure that he had seized from the Jin contingent to a prominent local leader, thousands of local troops shifted their allegiance to Wu. The Jin soldiers were soon besieged and forced to surrender.

Tao Huang thereafter governed northern Vietnam, now known as Giao Province, for around twenty-five years, until near the end of the third century; the exact year is unknown. Just as had been the case with Shi Xie, he governed during a time of dynastic change in the north. In 280, Jin conquered Wu. Based far away in northern China, Jin was content to confirm Tao Huang's appointment as governor of Giao, where he continued to serve until his death. Tao Huang was known as a patron of Buddhism. He also established an administrative structure for Giao Province that lasted through several dynastic regimes. A salient feature of this structure was the formation of three new frontier jurisdictions. Two of these were in Giao Chi facing the mountains to the north and to the west; one was in southern Cuu Chan facing the old Nhat Nam border. Tao Huang endeavored to re-establish some semblance of authority in Nhat Nam, proclaiming an economic embargo against markets in Nhat Nam and garrisoning soldiers on the frontier, but there is no evidence that he achieved more than a temporary stabilization of the border. On the contrary, his efforts appear to have done little more than elicit attacks by Lin Yi.

During the first two decades of the fourth century, warring princes tore the Jin dynasty apart and various groups of non-Han peoples conquered northern China, sending a great wave of refugees into southern China, where a Jin prince reassembled the dynasty from his base on the lower Yangtze. During this time, Giao Province was left to its own devices with a regime over which local leaders invited prominent members of old Wu families to preside as governors.

In the 320s, the newly constituted Jin court in southern China was strong enough to begin sending soldiers to Giao in efforts to gain control of the government there. As in the previous century when Wu attempted to gain ascendancy and local powers turned to the Jin in Sichuan, local powers in Giao now resisted Jin, inspired by the Cheng Han dynasty that had arisen in Sichuan in opposition to Jin. Meanwhile, Jin immigrants were seeking their fortunes in the south by pushing aside the old Wu families that had come to the fore in the late third century; Giao Province was the last place of refuge for these families.

The Jin dynasty finally established its authority in Giao in the 330s, after Jin troops had cut communications between Sichuan and northern Vietnam; within a decade, Jin gained control of Sichuan and removed that option entirely. Jin forces were concerned to get a grip on the southern frontier because the turmoil of the preceding years had attracted the unwelcome attention of Lin Yi. In the 340s, Lin Yi armies, commanded by a king of Han ancestry who had traveled

extensively in China as a merchant and knew of conditions in China at first hand, began a series of raids into Giao, culminating in a full-scale invasion in 347. Jin mobilized soldiers from Giao and the province of Guang (modern Guangdong and Guangxi in southern China) for a major effort against Lin Yi. In 349, the Jin army advanced as far as the Gianh River, the former headquarters of Han-era Nhat Nam, where it was defeated and forced to withdraw. The Lin Yi king was mortally wounded in this battle, but his son continued the policy of attacking Giao until defeated by another Jin expedition in 359.

The mobilizations of men and resources for the expeditions of 349 and 359 bore heavily upon Giao and even provoked some dissension among provincial officials. But after Lin Yi had been quieted, Jin interest in Giao rapidly faded as the imperial court became preoccupied with other threats. In the late 370s, the governorship fell vacant and the prefect of Cuu Chan, the leader of a prominent local family named Li Xun, seized control of provincial affairs.

In 380, the Jin court sent Teng Dunzhi to be governor and Li Xun, perceiving that imperial power was weakening, opted to resist him. However, the head of another leading Giao family, Du Yuan, then serving as the prefect of Giao Chi, took the opportunity to further his ambitions by killing Li Xun and welcoming Teng Dunzhi. The Du family then stood at the head of provincial affairs for the next forty-seven years. Teng Dunzhi remained in Giao as governor for nineteen years, during which the Du family enjoyed preeminence in provincial administration.

Du Yuan's grandfather was originally from Chang'an (Xi'an) in northern China and had been assigned to a post in modern Guangxi near the Giao border early in the fourth century before the fall of northern China in 311. He subsequently settled in Giao during the time when Jin authority was being established there, apparently participating in that process. The family was prominent in Giao throughout the century of Jin rule.

Shortly after Teng Dunzhi's departure in 399, Giao was surprised by a Lin Yi invasion that succeeded in placing the provincial capital under siege. Du Yuan mobilized provincial forces and counterattacked, rapidly pushing the invaders back across the border. Shortly thereafter, the Jin court appointed him governor. When he died in 410, his son Du Huidu succeeded to the governorship. When Du Huidu died in 423, his son Du Hongwen succeeded to the governorship, which he occupied until 427 when he received an appointment at the imperial court.

The Du family left in Giao a reputation for good government, reportedly using benevolence and strictness as circumstances dictated. It was a time of dynastic change as the Jin court declined and was replaced in 420 by the Liu Song dynasty, which was content to confirm Du Huidu as governor of Giao. During these years, Giao faced a threat from its northern as well as from its southern border.

In 410, Lu Xun, the governor of Guang, the province in southern China adjacent to Giao, aimed to benefit from the feebleness of the Jin court by rebelling. When defeated by a Jin general in 411, Lu Xun led his army into Giao. There he lost his life when defeated in battle by Du Huidu, who thereby protected both his family's ascendancy in Giao and its reputation for loyalty to the imperial court.

The more constant threat to Giao was in the south, where fighting with Lin Yi became chronic, with serious episodes of warfare breaking out in 405–407, 413, 415, and 424. In each case, Lin Yi attacks were repulsed, but to eliminate the problem would take more resources than Giao Province by itself could provide. Although the ascendancy of the Liu Song dynasty in Giao was brief (for less than half a century), yet because of the need to respond to Lin Yi and because of major social, cultural, and economic developments during that time, important changes occurred in Giao. Unlike the expeditions organized in the fourth century by Jin against Lin Yi that relied heavily upon local resources, the Liu Song expedition came after several years of preparation that energized Giao with a prosperous imperial economy.

During the fourth century, Jin military leadership had been relatively diffuse, exercised by prominent émigrés who fled into the south after the loss of northern China in 311. These émigrés and their heirs continued to command the armies, keeping the emperors in a position of weakness. This changed when, in 420, the founder of the Liu Song dynasty concentrated control of the military in his own hands. The Liu Song era in the mid fifth century saw a major shift in the structure of politics and society with significant economic effects. Rather than martial prowess, the élite class of émigrés was encouraged to display literary accomplishments at court, where their status relations were carefully monitored. Those uninterested in this turned to trade and business, aiming their ambitions at the accumulation of wealth. The southernmost provinces, including Giao, attracted the attention of these people as a frontier of opportunity, a place to exercise their entrepreneurial and literary skills. This became an era of accelerating commercial activity and great prosperity.

As the élite émigré class shifted its attention away from military affairs to become a class of landed scholar gentry and urbanizing merchants, new wealth gained from agriculture and commerce opened possibilities for luxury, for taxation, for religion, and for investment. In Giao, this came after a century of stable government under the Jin and Liu Song dynasties and the administration of the Du family. In the 440s, borders with the dynasties in northern China were calm and did not distract merchants and adventurers from prospects in the far south, and a famously successful expedition against Lin Yi accelerated prosperity by destroying trading rivals on the southern coast and by infusing Giao with a great store of booty.

In 443, Tan Hezhi, the governor of Giao, was instructed to recruit soldiers and assemble supplies. He spent three years on this task, recruiting a formidable and well-trained military force, preparing a fleet to transport it, and gathering sufficient supplies for an extended campaign. He also enlisted the services of two commanders famous for their battlefield successes on the northern borders of the empire. In 446, the army advanced down the coast into the old territory of Nhat Nam. Defeating the Lin Yi king in several encounters, the expedition first sacked the seaport on the Gianh River where the headquarters of Nhat Nam had once been, then continued south to sack the citadel and palaces of the Lin Yi king near modern Hue, in what had been the southernmost part of old Nhat Nam. The expedition returned to Giao loaded with plunder. The Lin Yi that had contested the frontier during the preceding two and a half centuries had been thoroughly destroyed and the frontier was thereafter quiet for many years. What subsequently came to be called Lin Yi was from then based beyond the Hai Van Pass in the region of modern Da Nang, a major center of culture and kingship for Chams, who were ethno-linguistically related to the Malay peoples.

In Giao, the mid fifth century was a prosperous time. New lands were opened for agriculture south of the Red River in the region of modern Hanoi, resulting in the formation of a new prefecture there, an indication that the rural economy was expanding. Governors sent to Giao by the imperial court in the late fifth century had reputations for scholarly interests. They spent much time reading books; one was famed for his calligraphy and another discussed philosophical questions in a series of letters with two local Buddhist monks. Giao was a desirable assignment for some men at court because of opportunities there for making money. One man obtained appointment as governor in Giao after paying a large sum; he then sold prefecture appointments to others, a percentage of the profits from which he was obliged to pay to the court. These men believed that such investments would be easily recovered, with profit added, by taking posts in Giao. Giao was known as a place where private fortunes could be made.

The weak imperial court lost touch with distant provinces as government service gave way to opportunities for personal ambition. In 468, a local official prevented a newly appointed governor from entering the province and subsequently obtained for himself the appointment as governor. In the 470s, after this man died, his nephew successively turned away at the provincial border three men sent to be governor by the imperial court. Not until 485, after a new dynasty, the Qi, had restored some order to the empire, did an imperial army escort a new governor into the province, prompting the local strongman to go begging for mercy at the imperial court. But the potency of the Qi dynasty was brief and only five years later a local official took advantage of a bookish governor who neglected his duties to place him in confinement and report that

he was mentally incompetent; the court simply appointed the reporting official as governor, acknowledging the existing situation. Provincial leaders in Giao had learned to govern their own affairs while posing as imperial officials. During the next century, as imperial power ebbed, Giao politics was primarily about contests for dominance among local strongmen.

Imperial weakness and local heroes

When the Liang dynasty replaced the Qi at the beginning of the sixth century, provincial leaders fell into factions that either resisted or favored the new dynasty. The pro-Liang group gained ascendancy and ruled the province for two decades, until a new system of imperial rule designed by Liang was extended to Giao in the 520s. During this time, unknown numbers of men from Giao traveled to the imperial court seeking advancement.

Since the Jin dynasty's loss of northern China in the early fourth century, the court was located at modern Nanjing, around 2,200 kilometers by land and 2,700 kilometers by sea from the Giao provincial capital. This distance is one reason why, during the preceding two centuries, leaders in Giao were sensitive to shifting dynastic fortunes at the imperial capital and developed habits of handling local affairs in their own way when it was necessary or possible to do so. Nevertheless, politically active people in Giao, despite their relative remoteness from the imperial center, were definitely educated and socialized to value their place in the empire, for ambitious men from Giao did not shrink from taking the long road to the imperial capital to advance their careers.

We know of two such men in the early sixth century, Ly Bi and Tinh Thieu, because they were prominent in a rebellion that in 541 drove Liang officials from Giao. Ly Bi's ancestors were reportedly among those who had fled into the south from northern China during the Wang Mang disorders of the early first century CE. For several generations, his lineage had been prominent in the military affairs of Giao Province, and what is known of his career places him among officers assigned to patrol the frontiers. He traveled to the Liang capital seeking a court appointment, but his ambitions were thwarted for unknown reasons, and he returned to Giao. He was joined in his frustration by Tinh Thieu, known as a scholar, who had also gone to the Liang capital in hopes of advancement. Tinh Thieu was chagrined to be disregarded because his family was unknown at court; his literary aspirations were disdained and he felt himself to be insulted by being assigned to oversee one of the gates in the city wall. Ly Bi and Tinh Thieu eventually returned to Giao together. No others are mentioned in the records, but there may very well have been a significant group of disappointed office

seekers from Giao at the Liang capital who gathered around Ly Bi and Tinh Thieu. The subsequent rebellion led by them may have grown from the network of personal relationships established among members of such a group.

In 541, Ly Bi mobilized “heroes from several provinces” to attack Liang officials. These “heroes” are likely to have had unhappy imperial careers analogous to his and Tinh Thieu’s. A time of relative imperial weakness encouraged an exuberance of ambition among those who were imaginative and daring. The “several provinces” is a reference to the Liang experiment in local administration implemented in the 520s, around the time that Ly Bi and Tinh Thieu returned to Giao. It was an effort to harness the ambitions of such “heroes” to imperial authority.

By this time, provincial government throughout the empire had, to a large extent, devolved into the hands of powerful local families, to the point that the imperial court aimed no further than to accept and regulate this state of affairs. The court appointed prominent local figures to be governors of newly organized small provinces while appointing members of the imperial family to be governors of larger, more strategic provinces. Military commands were established to oversee relations among the governors. Although Giao was divided into six provinces, the Red River plain remained intact; it was the dominant province in the region and was assigned to a nephew of the emperor. Ly Bi was appointed as military overseer of a province in the plain of the Ca River, on the southern frontier. From there, he mobilized an army that marched north. Reaching the Red River, he joined forces with a prominent local clan leader in the Red River plain named Trieu Tuc. In 541, the Liang governor paid a bribe to be allowed to escape north.

It took the Liang court four years, amidst several false starts, to organize an expedition against Ly Bi. During this time, while successfully resisting attacks both from Liang in the north and from Chams in the south, Ly Bi proclaimed himself an emperor and set about organizing an imperial court, directly challenging Liang’s dynastic claim to the empire. It is no coincidence that the man who led an army against Ly Bi in 545, Chen Baxian, had imperial ambitions of his own and eventually supplanted the Liang by founding his own dynasty. Chen Baxian was among the best military commanders of his generation. Within a year he had driven Ly Bi into the mountains where he was killed by uplanders seeking to ingratiate themselves with the Liang army. Thereafter, Chen Baxian returned north where he was absorbed in the wars that eventually led to his proclaiming the Chen dynasty in 557.

Meanwhile, Liang forces remaining in Giao were sidelined by a struggle between the Ly clan, led by a kinsman of Ly Bi named Ly Phat Tu, who marshaled his forces in the southern provinces and along the upland frontier,

and the Trieu clan, led by a son of Trieu Tuc named Trieu Quang Phuc, based in the lowlands of the Red River plain. In 557, when the Liang dynasty fell, the Ly and the Trieu, after many battles, made a truce, each recognizing the other's control in their respective territories. This truce was arranged with an eye on the new Chen dynasty, whose emperor had direct personal experience of Giao, having vanquished Ly Bi a decade earlier.

In 570, after stabilizing imperial control over the provinces just north of Giao, Chen Baxian sent an expedition to Giao, the main effect of which appears to have been the establishment of trading relations and the demise of Trieu Quang Phuc. This was the end of the brief moment of Chen power on the southern frontier and subsequently for three decades Ly Phat Tu governed Giao while watching the new imperial regime of Sui rise in northern China. By the 590s, Sui armies were operating in southern China near the Giao border and Ly Phat Tu found it expedient to formally acknowledge the authority of Sui officials headquartered there.

In the sixth century, the Ly clan found scope for its ambition as imperial power ebbed from Giao. The Ly took on the trappings of an imperial court and, in the turmoil of the time, may have nurtured visions of glory beyond Giao's northern border. Less is known about the Trieu, but Trieu Quang Phuc's rise and fall were recorded in temples dedicated to his memory with a version of the story recorded in imperial texts about the rise and fall of King An Duong in antiquity, described earlier in this chapter. This sixth-century version explains how Ly Phat Tu defeated Trieu Quang Phuc. It associates these men with Sinic lore about frontier heroes that celebrated loyalty to one's father over romantic attachment to a spouse. It is a clichéd tale that had been recycled through the writings of imperial literati, and it shaped how these sixth-century heroes were remembered through the writing brushes of aspiring local scholars such as Tinh Thieu.

The rule of Ly Phat Tu, literally "The Son of Buddha with the Ly Surname," was congenial to the prosperity of Buddhism. The first Sui emperor reportedly asked about Buddhism in Giao and was informed by a prominent monk that in the provincial capital of Giao there were twenty Buddhist temples and five hundred ordained monks. Sutras had been translated there and prominent monks were teaching. The first Thien (Chinese Chan; Japanese Zen; Korean Seon) master was considered to have arrived in Giao at this time, initiating a lineage of patriarchs in the School of Dhyana (meditation), which was beginning to flourish at that time.

As Sui inaugurated a new imperial era in the north, a residue of resisters and adventurers from the old order of the Southern Dynasties crowded into Giao, and Ly Phat Tu presided over the last outpost of a passing age. After years of equivocating with Sui officials, he was unprepared to resist when, in 602, a Sui

army, under the able leadership of an energetic commander named Liu Fang, unexpectedly emerged from the northern mountains. Ly Phat Tu surrendered and was taken prisoner to the Sui capital in northern China. Liu Fang took the submission of local clans while tracking down and executing the few recalcitrants. To punctuate Sui dominance on the frontier, he then led his army down the coast to a Cham royal center at Tra Kieu, near modern Da Nang, which he put to the torch. Loaded with plunder, Liu Fang and his army encountered an epidemic en route back north and reportedly perished to the last man.

Despite this disaster, Sui officials easily established their rule in Giao. They brought a new way of organizing society, economy, and government as well as cultural and educational fashions that superseded the imperial ebbs and flows that had characterized the preceding four centuries of belonging to the Southern Dynasties. The Sui inaugurated an imperial age that brought fundamental change to Giao.

The Protectorate of An Nam

Less than two decades after having extended its southern frontier to Giao, the Sui dynasty collapsed in 618 and was superseded by the Tang. This transition was peaceful in Giao as Sui officials transferred their allegiance to the new dynasty. The Sui and Tang dynasties established a regime based on the success of prior Northern Dynasties in centralizing their authority against the great families that had dominated the empire since Han times. The basis of this regime was the so-called “equal field” system of land distribution that limited the amount of land any one person could own and instituted a periodic redistribution of farmland to individual taxpayers organized into military units. This ensured a stable source of tax revenue and of soldiers for the imperial armies. It was most effective in areas that were newly opened up for agriculture and that did not already have powerful local families. Accordingly, in the seventh century, for the first time, the imperial headquarters for Giao was shifted south of the Red River, to the site of modern Hanoi. This was adjacent to lands in the southern and western parts of the plain that were prone to flooding from the Red River and where, beginning in the fifth century, the building of dikes had been making large-scale agriculture increasingly feasible. The appearance in the seventh century of an administrative center at what is now Hanoi was related to the organization of peasant-soldier communities south of the Red River as the foundation of Tang power in the region.

This was a time of peace and prosperity. Giao was a major stop on the land and sea routes between the Tang Empire and lands beyond. The sea route to India was well traveled by merchants and by Buddhist monks on pilgrimage. Fortunes were made from trade in tropical luxury goods. Imperial administrators

garrisoned the upland frontiers and kept an eye on the peoples and markets there, under orders to enforce an embargo on trade in weapons. Information from Giao during the first three-quarters of the seventh century includes much detail about changes in administrative jurisdictions, culminating in 679 with the formation of the Protectorate of An Nam (“pacified south”), a kind of Tang jurisdiction that combined civil and military authority in the hands of a protector general that was considered appropriate for an exposed border region.

Tang records reveal concern about building walls and ramparts in the Hanoi area. During the three centuries of Tang rule these walls were repeatedly repaired, rebuilt, and expanded, and the place was known by several different names, most of them referring to particular kinds of wall. When the city was rebuilt near the end of the eighth century after a destructive war, it became known as Dai La, “big wall,” the name that will be used in this chapter for the sake of convenience. This was where administrators organized a peasant militia based on the “equal field” system.

There is only one report of political violence in the seventh century, and it reveals the presence of a large peasant militia in the Dai La area. In 687, a new and inexperienced protector general endeavored to double the rate of the harvest tax, provoking an uprising that besieged him within the walls of Dai La. Before Tang forces could be effectively mobilized from the north, the walls were breached and the protector general was killed. This episode shows that the peasants affected by harvest taxes also held the balance of military force and were capable of successfully besieging the seat of government. It would be a mistake to imagine that these rebels represented some kind of non-Chinese resistance to Tang authority. The rank and file included many local people, but the hierarchy of command and the specialized skills necessary to organize a siege of the protectorate headquarters required officers, engineers, and other experts that included men from the Tang heartland. The issue was not resistance to imperial government but rather to an inept governor general. The 687 uprising was focused on the administrative center and limited to the region south of the Red River that the Tang peasant militia had brought under cultivation during the preceding decades. This is the only recorded domestic unrest during the first two centuries of Tang rule, and it came from within the Tang system of government itself, not from supposedly indigenous anti-Tang forces seeking to expel the imperial regime altogether. For the most part, people in the lowlands accepted Tang government.

North of the Red River, in the region where the great families of the Han and the Southern Dynasties had been based, a different socio-economic situation developed as powerful local families transformed their private estates into temple estates. Some of their sons entered officialdom and others entered the monastic

communities that presided over the temples. The Buddhist temples across the river north and east from Dai La flourished during Tang times. The earliest people to be cited in later works as prominent Buddhist patriarchs date from this time. In addition to the prominence of Buddhist relics and miracles, which date from the time of Shi Xie at the turn of the third century, there are indications of a new emphasis on erudition and the study of sutra texts among Buddhist monks in An Nam. Also, popular religious cults developed in Tang times to worship local spirits that protected imperial government.

Some historical events appear with such little context that it is impossible to evaluate what exactly happened or what significance they might be imagined to have had. One such event is the great spasm of violence that broke into the southern Tang frontier in 722 under the leadership of a man remembered in Tang records as the Black Emperor, presumably because he was black. He came from a coastal village at the extreme southern frontier of the Tang Empire, in modern Ha Tinh Province, near Ngang Pass at the Hoanh Son massif. This was not only on the border of Tang with peoples on the southern coast; it was also near the terminus of the main route from the middle part of the Mekong over the mountains through Mu Gia Pass to the coast. According to Tang records, the Black Emperor assembled a host of four hundred thousand, comprised of a multitude of peoples from the mountains, the coasts, and the seas beyond the Tang frontier. What led to this breakdown of Tang frontier vigilance is as mysterious as what may have elicited and enabled the Black Emperor's leadership. The Black Emperor and his followers marched north and, surprising the fleeing Tang authorities, soon had the entire Protectorate of An Nam under their plundering regime. Tang forces in the north immediately mobilized, marched back into the Protectorate, and slaughtered the Black Emperor and his horde.

Forty-five years later, in 767, a somewhat similar episode occurred when people identified in Tang records with terms generally applied to the islands of what is now Indonesia invaded from the sea and briefly overran the Protectorate of An Nam until armies mobilized in the north arrived to expel them. As in the case of the Black Emperor, our knowledge of events in Southeast Asia during that time is insufficient to allow any sense of clarity about what may have provoked or elicited this event. What bears consideration, however, is that the Protectorate of An Nam was organized to prevent such threats from materializing or to respond to them when they did. The fact that during the course of two centuries there occurred only two such episodes of frontier security being breached, and that in each case a successful Tang response was organized with alacrity, shows the stability of Tang authority during that time.

During the last half of the eighth century, the Tang Empire was greatly weakened by a series of rebellions led by commanders of the peasant-soldier

armies that had been the basis for the rise of the dynasty. These rebellions came on the heels of serious defeats in the early 750s suffered by Tang armies in Yunnan, in Central Asia, and in Manchuria. In the late 750s and 760s, military units were withdrawn from An Nam to fight against the rebellious generals in northern China. News of this may have encouraged the 767 seaborne invasion mentioned above.

By the 770s and 780s, Tang government in An Nam gave way to military commanders vying for ascendancy. Some of these men were of local origin. Tang records identified one of them, named Phung Hung, as a “frontier garrison indigenous leader.” He came from the region of old Me Linh, associated with the Trung Sisters and pre-Han traditions. According to local lore, he was from a prominent family and claimed an indigenous rather than an imperial title.

Phung Hung gained control of An Nam sometime in the mid 780s as Tang authority faded from the southern frontier amidst the fighting among contenders in northern China. It is recorded that he peacefully entered Dai La after the death of a protector general. When Phung Hung died in 789 there was a struggle in the Phung family between partisans of his brother and of his son. Those in favor of his son prevailed. Phung Hung’s son reportedly honored him with a posthumous title that contains the earliest known use of what became the Vietnamese word for king (*vua*), which is generally considered to be related to another Vietnamese word for father (*bo*), and which some have also conjectured to be related to a word in the Tai languages of Southeast Asia that means chieftain.

By this time, the rebellions in the north had been put down and the Tang Empire was regaining a measure of stability. In 791 a newly appointed protector general appeared and the Phung family submitted peacefully. The brief ascendancy of the Phung family was a local response to a temporary withering away of imperial government in An Nam, an effort by local powers to maintain a semblance of political order in a time of dynastic emergency in the north. Tang government in An Nam was fundamentally stable. This is evident considering that it held together for thirty years after the outbreak of rebellions in the north, and when it was reconstituted in the 790s the local people readily acknowledged it without resistance.

The Nan Zhao War

The reconstituted Tang Empire that emerged in the late eighth century was based on a social and economic foundation that once again facilitated the rise of great families. The “equal field” system was abandoned and restrictions on land ownership were abolished. Taxation was shifted from a per capita enumeration

to calculations based on cultivated land. Wealthy local families came to occupy prominent administrative positions. Over the course of several decades, this led to increasing dissension within An Nam between leaders from Giao in the Red River plain who supported Tang authority and leaders from peripheral upland areas and in the southern provinces who were driven by other ambitions. What gave momentum to this developing confrontation was not only the rise of contending local powers but also the progressive weakening of Tang central government during the course of the ninth century. This was accompanied by the rise of new threats from beyond the frontiers. The peoples in the mountains were being stirred by the rise of the Nan Zhao kingdom in Yunnan, and on the southern coast the Chams were resurgent.

After the Phung Hung episode, Tang government in An Nam benefited from a series of astute protector generals who cultivated popular support for rebuilding government in the protectorate. The first of these, Zhao Chang, wrote a book about An Nam and earned a good reputation among the people in the Red River plain. He was in An Nam from 791 to 802 and was sent back a second time from 804 to 806. His protégé, Zhang Zhou, succeeded him from 806 to 810 and during that time organized an army to beat back the Chams who, during the time Zhao Chang had been absent from the protectorate, had seized the southern coastal provinces in alliance with local leaders there.

However, the situation turned grim in 820 when a military commander, whose ancestors had been administrators on the Cham frontier since the early eighth century, managed to seize Dai La and to kill the protector general along with a thousand members of his entourage. For the next sixteen years, the protectorate was rent with disorders; imperial officials struggled with local strongmen and frontier threats. The situation eased somewhat in the late 830s with the leadership of some capable protector generals, only to worsen again in the late 840s and early 850s as protectorate politics were superseded by the ascendance of Nan Zhao and its mobilization of peoples in the mountains for a policy of raiding and plundering the lowlands of An Nam.

Despite the chronic raiding, trade in horses and salt continued between people in the uplands and lowlands. In 854, a seemingly inept protector general's effort to gain control of this trade led to its breakdown and an escalation of hostilities. Do Ton Thanh, the governor of the Ma River plain, whose family had been prominent in the region since the fifth century, allied with Nan Zhao, whether in resistance to the protector general or in response to spreading disorder is unclear; he was seized and executed by the protector general, which stiffened resistance to Tang authority in the southern parts of the protectorate. Then, the protector general neglected, whether by bungling, by the manipulations of local officials, or by lack of resources is unclear, to reinforce the garrison at the head of the Red

River plain during the dry season when raiders habitually burst from the mountains. The commander of the garrison, caught in a hopeless situation, shifted his allegiance to Nan Zhao.

Such are the main events cited in historical records for the outbreak of a war that devastated An Nam during the next decade. Imperial historiography assigned blame for this war to the hapless protector general at that time, a shadowy figure named Li Zhuo, of whom virtually no information has survived. While a more capable man may have been able to master the situation, this war was about much more than one man's mistakes. It had been brewing for decades. Not simply a problem of frontier security, it had to do with local politics in the protectorate and how to respond to the decline in Tang power.

The people of An Nam experienced imperial rule differently, depending upon terrain and upon proximity to centers of government. Agriculturalists in the Red River plain were most directly affected by Sinic civilization. They understood themselves as members of the civilized world that relied upon the Tang shield for protection against the barbaric forces of disorder that threatened them. The inhabitants of provinces in the southern plains of the Ma and Ca Rivers were vulnerable to and less hostile toward neighboring peoples in the mountains and on the southern coast who lived beyond the imperial order; they could relate to these peoples as potential allies in times when northern dynastic power was too weak to maintain order in their lands.

The rising prestige of Nan Zhao, combined with the ebbing of Tang strength on the southern frontier, posed a problem for leaders in the southern provinces. They considered that it was time to take affairs into their own hands. Nan Zhao was breaking Tang's grip on the region, but they aspired to be the ones who would benefit by eventually extending their power over the population of the Red River plain. Nan Zhao, with its center far away through the mountains in Yunnan, could plunder the lowlands and destabilize the imperial regime, but it was not capable of governing the agriculturalists of An Nam, which was the ambition of leaders in the southern provinces. Thus, we see in this war a theme that would reappear more than once during the course of later Vietnamese history: competition for dominance between the provinces in the Red River plain and the provinces in the plains of the Ma and Ca Rivers.

After the collapse of the Red River border garrison in 854, Tang armies were mobilized into An Nam, but turmoil in neighboring jurisdictions to the north distracted Tang attention. By 858, a local military commander, of whom nothing is known, had pushed aside the protector general. But shortly after, a competent general from the north arrived with Tang reinforcements, and, for two years, until his departure, he built new fortifications to protect Dai La, prevented Nan Zhao forces from entering the lowlands, and restored stable administration

among the agriculturalists in the Red River plain. However, in 861, within a year of his departure, the family of Do Ton Thanh, the southern governor whom Li Zhuo had executed in 854 for negotiating with Nan Zhao, mobilized an army in league with Nan Zhao and captured Dai La while Tang forces were tied down in the mountains further north. Tang reinforcements soon arrived and restored a semblance of order as imperial officials endeavored to calm the protectorate by placating the Do family with apologies for Do Ton Thanh's death.

This policy of conciliation failed, however, as the Tang weakness it was meant to conceal was unmasked by a full-scale Nan Zhao invasion in early 862. Tang armies fought until early 863, when Dai La fell and large numbers of Tang soldiers drowned trying to escape across the Red River. Tang forces in An Nam were utterly defeated. Nan Zhao plundered the Red River plain without hindrance as a multitude of refugees fled north and tens of thousands of perished soldiers were mourned in the towns and villages of central China where they had been recruited, provoking one Mencian scholar at the Tang court to write a song blaming the disaster on bad government and criticizing the empire's waste of human life, thereby knowingly ruining his own career in officialdom.

It took two years for Tang to organize a military response to the defeat of 863. The population of An Nam was scattered by marauding bands from the mountains, and a large refugee population accumulated just over the northern border where Tang armies assembled. Men from the southern provinces of the protectorate occupied the administrative center at Dai Lai and allied with Nan Zhao, preparing to resist the expected Tang reaction. The Tang court considered the situation sufficiently dire as to require the skills of Gao Pian, one of the most famous generals in the empire, who had made his reputation fighting Turks on the northern frontier. In 865, after months of training and preparing his troops, he advanced into the protectorate, chased Nan Zhao contingents into the mountains, and besieged recalcitrant forces at Dai La, which he took by the end of the year, reportedly executing some thirty thousand men captured there.

The Tang Empire's remarkable effort to recover An Nam at a time when imperial authority was moving rapidly toward a general collapse is an indication not only of the primacy of frontier security but also of how An Nam was considered an integral part of the dynastic inheritance. Young men from An Nam took the official examinations and served in officialdom all over the empire. One of them rose to be prime minister in the late eighth century and two of his essays have been preserved. Another wrote a poem that was collected by Tang anthologists. One governor general of An Nam, despite being forced to flee the protectorate by a mutiny in the 840s, felt so at home there that he later retired to a village east of Hanoi, thereby establishing a family that in later centuries produced many famous scholars at Vietnamese royal courts.

Gao Pian was himself quite taken with An Nam. He spent three years there before being called north to deal with more urgent problems. During that time, he supervised emergency shipments of food for the population. He rebuilt Dai La, restored and extended dikes and canals, and constructed roads, bridges, and public inns. He also removed rocks that impeded coastal shipping, researched geomantic features of the terrain, investigated existing popular spirit cults, patronized shrines and temples, and instigated the worship of new deities to buttress An Nam's connection to the imperial supernatural realm. Furthermore, he wrote poems about An Nam propounding Confucian and Daoist ideas. Later Vietnamese scholars credited him with authoring the first book on local geography and several maps and geographical texts were subsequently attributed to him. Popular tales of his deeds entered Vietnamese lore and Vietnamese literati sang his praises into the nineteenth century. He was the hero of the people in the Red River plain, for he had restored to them their membership of the civilized world. In the early eleventh century, a ruler from the Red River plain explicitly cited his legacy for inspirational authority after wresting power from a regime based in the southern provinces.

When Gao Pian departed An Nam in 868, he left in charge one of his grandsons, Kao Xun, of whom nothing is known. In the 870s, Zeng Gun replaced Kao Xun. Zeng Gun had been Gao Pian's most trusted assistant during the Nan Zhao War and remained in An Nam for fifteen years. He wrote a book about the Red River plain that no longer exists but was cited by Vietnamese scholars in later centuries. In 880, he left when the last Tang garrisons were withdrawn amidst spreading anarchy in the north. Thereafter, the people of the Red River plain were left to their own devices as a host of warlords began to carve up the empire. For the next half-century, a relatively stable and peaceful regime was led by the Khuc family. As for the southern provinces, Gao Pian had halted their separate political trajectory and subordinated them to the structure of power based in the Red River plain.

A lesser empire

The Khuc were a prominent family from the old heartland of Giao Province, east of Hanoi. When the Tang dynasty was officially replaced by the Later Liang dynasty in 907, the leader of this family was Khuc Thua My. He transferred his allegiance from Tang to Later Liang and claimed legitimacy as a loyal imperial official. The Later Liang exerted little influence beyond northern China, but, as late as 918, Khuc Thua My continued to send envoys with tribute to Later Liang to maintain the benefit of whatever moral support could be obtained from

imperial appointments. In central and southern China, adventurers were striving to expand their authority with dreams of founding their own dynasties. In 917, one such aspirant proclaimed the Southern Han dynasty in Guangdong and Guangxi, on the northern border of Giao. When Later Liang fell in 923, the powers contending for northern China gave no more thought to affairs in the south, and Southern Han began to nurture designs on An Nam.

The Khuc did not follow the model of other regional powers in China by founding a dynasty. They continued to pose as officials of an empire that no longer existed, ostensibly waiting for a new imperial house to re-establish order in the north. Unlike other parts of the empire that since the late ninth century had been ravaged by the uprisings and turmoil of Tang's long decline, An Nam rested quietly with the legacy of fifteen years of stable government led by Gao Pian, by his grandson, and by Zeng Gun. The men who inherited this legacy shrank from the anarchic violence they observed in the north. Claiming to be more than imperial servants would simply attract unwanted attention and stoke the ambitions of their Southern Han neighbor. For several years, they had an alliance with the Min kingdom of Fujian, located on the northeastern border of Southern Han, which discouraged Southern Han from launching an attack on either of them. However, when Min fell apart into civil war in 930, Southern Han immediately took the opportunity to attack An Nam.

There is no record of any resistance being offered by Khuc Thua My. It appears that he and his advisors considered it best to submit. After all, their sense of identity was with the empire, and the Southern Han were claimants to the imperial throne. Khuc Thua My was taken into custody and removed to the north where he spent the rest of his life. The Southern Han army could not resist the temptation to march down the coast to sack the Cham capital at Tra Kieu. After that, Southern Han was content to appoint a governor of Giao Province with responsibility for the Red River plain.

The southern provinces, in the Ma and Ca River plains, were left in the hands of a subordinate of Khuc Thua My, a man native to that region named Duong Dinh Nghe. While the people in the Red River plain may have been relatively phlegmatic about Southern Han rule, Duong Dinh Nghe and the people who assembled around him had their own ambitions. In 931, Duong Dinh Nghe marched his soldiers north to Dai La, expelled the Southern Han officials with their garrison, and attacked the Southern Han army that was sent as reinforcement, killing its general in battle. He then proclaimed himself to be the governor, and Southern Han, stinging from defeat and unprepared for further fighting, recognized him as such.

Duong Dinh Nghe's mobilization of the southern provinces was the first indication after the Nan Zhao War that these territories were prepared to re-enter the competition for control of the Red River plain. There were two main

political centers in the plain, Giao in the agricultural heartland with Da Lai at its center and Phong, formerly Me Linh, at the head of the plain where the Red River emerges from the mountains. For centuries, the headquarters for patrolling the upland hinterland had been located in Phong. Duong Dinh Nghe endeavored to rule from Da Lai, but, in 937, Kieu Cong Tien, a leader of Phong, killed him and called on Southern Han for assistance against the southern provinces. In response, Southern Han mobilized a fleet of warships, commanded by the crown prince, to bring an army to the aid of its would-be ally in Phong.

Meanwhile, Duong Dinh Nghe's son-in-law, Ngo Quyen, also from Phong but in command of the southern provinces, marched north and killed Kieu Cong Tien. He then stationed his men at the estuary of the Bach Dang River where the sea routes entered the plain and where he prepared to receive the Southern Han fleet with iron-tipped poles planted in the bed of the river. When the Southern Han fleet arrived in late 938, it was trapped on the poles as the tide fell and was annihilated; the heir to the Southern Han throne perished, and that was the end of Southern Han ambitions in An Nam.

What was left of the empire was now divided up among several regional kingdoms and it was no longer plausible to maintain the fiction of posing as an administrator-in-waiting for some new dynasty to restore the imperial peace. Ngo Quyen accordingly rode the momentum of his battlefield victory at the Bach Dang estuary and took the step of entering the realm of jostling post-Tang states by claiming royal status and proposing to found a dynasty of his own. He organized a court with titles, ritual etiquette, and dress code modeled on imitations of imperial practice then current at the various regional capitals in the north. Furthermore, he set his capital north of the Red River at the ancient site of Co Loa, the fortress supposedly built by King An Duong over a millennium before, located in the heartland of old pre-Tang Giao where the Chinese-speaking population was concentrated.

Ngo Quyen's adoption of the forms of imperial authority at a site north of the Red River shows that, although he had avenged his father-in-law by killing the leader of Phong, he had also come to terms with the people of Giao. Preparing for the Battle of Bach Dang had required the active assistance of these people, for the Bach Dang estuary was in eastern Giao. Despite his career in Duong Dinh Nghe's entourage and his command of the southern provinces, he was as noted earlier originally from Phong, the same district that had produced Phung Hung in the eighth century, whose posthumous cult he patronized. He achieved an alliance between the southern provinces and the Red River plain. The court at Co Loa was designed to elicit the loyalty of prominent people who believed in maintaining membership in the northern political realm, whatever form that might take.

When Ngo Quyen died in 944, Duong Tam Kha, his brother-in-law and a son of Duong Dinh Nghe, proclaimed himself king. The eldest of Ngo Quyen's sons, not yet an adult, fled and was protected by a powerful family in eastern Giao. Duong Tam Kha brought people from the southern provinces into the court and pushed aside the men of Giao. In 950, leaders in Giao rallied behind Ngo Quyen's second son, who had remained under Duong Tam Kha's tutelage, and deposed Duong Tam Kha, banishing him south of the Red River. At this point, men from the southern provinces were pushed out of the royal court and the powerful families of Giao stood behind Ngo Quyen's two eldest sons, who presided over a weak two-headed monarchy. When the eldest brother died in 954, the younger brother announced himself as a vassal of Southern Han, but this was of no help to him. Enmity between the Kieu and Ngo families produced chronic fighting between Phong and Giao, and in 963 the Ngo king was killed in an ambush while campaigning on the Giao-Phong border. His successor, very likely a younger brother, was unable to resist a new leader emerging from the southern provinces named Dinh Bo Linh, who forced him and the Ngo family into his entourage with multiple marriage alliances.

Dinh Bo Linh's father had been in command on the Cham border in the far south under Duong Dinh Nghe and Ngo Quyen. Dinh Bo Linh was based at Hoa Lu, a natural redoubt among the rocky outcroppings of the southeastern edge of the Red River plain in modern Ninh Binh province. Hoa Lu commanded the main land route from the plain to the southern provinces. It was also an outpost of the southern provinces looking out upon the Red River plain. From there, Dinh Bo Linh built up his forces, allied with neighboring strongmen along the lower Red River, and attacked those in the upper plain who resisted him, the most valiant of whom were three brothers, sons of a Chinese merchant and a local woman. He subdued all his opponents by 965 when he sent envoys to the Southern Han court. At this time the empire was being reconstituted by the Song dynasty, which conquered Southern Han in 971. In 973 and again in 975, Dinh Bo Linh sent envoys to establish and then to expand relations with the Song court in northern China, which, being occupied with urgent problems elsewhere, provisionally acknowledged the Dinh family's authority in An Nam.

In terms of geographical extent and military power, the Song dynasty did not compare with the Han and the Tang. The reason for this was that the warrior aristocracy that for centuries had founded dynasties and ruled the empire had, beginning in the last half of Tang, been superseded by a class of scholars and administrators who advanced their careers through a system of academic examinations and were distrustful of military men. Armies were organized with multiple chains of command to prevent any single person from gaining control of soldiers. Military campaigns were bureaucratized with pre-set itineraries and

the need for cooperation among men chosen for their personal animosity toward each other. Consequently, the Song dynasty did not expand to the north, the northwest, and the northeast to the extent that previous major dynasties had, but instead was blocked by other powers along these borders. As for the southern frontier, the Song court waited for an opportunity to reclaim the legacy of Han and Tang. This opportunity came in 980 with news that Dinh Bo Linh had been assassinated and that his followers were fighting among themselves. This came at a time of relative quiet on the northern frontiers and an expedition was quickly organized to reclaim the far south.

A courtier who reportedly had visions of grandeur stabbed Dinh Bo Linh and his eldest son to death in their sleep. A brief struggle for power was quickly resolved in favor of Le Hoan, a native of the province south of Hoa Lu, now called Thanh Hoa, who was commander of an army that had been recruited by Dinh Bo Linh in the Red River plain. Le Hoan prepared to resist the Song expedition, which was en route both by land and by sea. The leaders of the Song forces were unimaginative and confounded by strict instructions from the imperial court. The land force arrived on the northern edge of the Red River plain and spent over two months in camp waiting for the arrival of the fleet, which was held up by fighting with Le Hoan's forces at the Bach Dang estuary. When the fleet arrived, the Song officers argued about what to do next, dismayed by the loss of time and the approach of the monsoon rain season when warfare was impracticable. One senior official, believing that Le Hoan was about to submit, embarked part of the army and advanced by river toward Hoa Lu, but he was ambushed and killed. News of this led the other senior officers to abandon the campaign and return north, where they were executed for incompetence.

This war exemplified how the situation had changed from that in previous centuries. In the past, new dynasties had no problem establishing their control over the plains of the Red, Ma, and Ca Rivers. The generals who led imperial armies adapted to circumstances and improvised their strategies, taking calculated risks, being confident of victory. In 980, the Song army came with a committee of arguing officers constrained by their instructions and fearful of defeat. This was a new kind of empire led by a different kind of people. It lacked the martial prowess and strategic vision of the old Han-Tang aristocracy. Rather, it was focused on civil administration, bureaucratic procedure, the management of wealth, and literary excellence.

In the wake of the Song expedition's withdrawal in 981, Le Hoan moved quickly to establish relations with the northern empire. Hoa Lu diplomacy had initiated a precedent during the previous ten years. After the Song conquest of southern China in 971, Dinh Lien, Dinh Bo Linh's son, had traveled to the Song court and obtained an imperial appointment as governor; during the 970s,

envoys from Hoa Lu bearing rich tribute repeatedly went to the Song court and Song envoys arrived at Hoa Lu to confer additional honorary titles on both Dinh Lien and Dinh Bo Linh. After the uproar of 980–981, Le Hoan initially conducted diplomacy with Song in the name of the last Dinh king, an infant son of Dinh Bo Linh whom he had deposed and adopted when taking the throne. When it became clear that Song was uninterested in further warfare and, moreover, was open to conciliation, Le Hoan stepped from the shadows and informed Song that he had supplanted the Dinh. The Song court responded in 986 by recognizing him as the local ruler and conferring on him titles of vassalage. Throughout Le Hoan's reign, envoys from Hoa Lu regularly carried tribute to the Song court and Song envoys arrived to bestow further titles on Le Hoan. One Song envoy, Li Jiao, became famous for exchanging poetry with the Buddhist monks assigned to greet and entertain him. In modern times, the verse produced in these exchanges has been anthologized as the first poems in what is imagined to be the history of Vietnamese literature.

In the mid 990s, when Le Hoan was beginning to enforce his ascendancy in areas adjacent to the Song border, the emperor accused him of plundering Song settlements both by land and by sea. Le Hoan replied that the depredations were the work of rebels and bandits whom he was endeavoring to suppress. The Song court, determined on a pacifist policy, accepted his explanation and amicable relations were soon restored. Many men at the Song court began to understand that the imperial inheritance on the southern frontier, as on the northern frontier, was beyond their capacity to reclaim. Le Hoan understood that the Song would leave him alone so long as he observed the protocol of vassalage and displayed a respectful attitude.

The millennium of belonging to the empire ended because of fundamental changes in the outlook of the rulers of the empire and in how imperial government was organized. What for centuries had been Giao Province or the Protectorate of An Nam was now beyond the reach of imperial armies because, in comparison with earlier times, military commanders were kept on a short bureaucratic leash. But this was also more than just an administrative matter. Song rulers were less cosmopolitan than those of Han and Tang; their relative weakness in relation to neighboring powers produced a more embattled perception of the civilized world, narrower and less confident of being able to accommodate cultural diversity. While earlier dynasties had no problem accepting the people of Giao/An Nam as more or less legitimate members of the empire, Song rulers viewed them as beyond the edge of civilization. This was revealed in the imperial edict published in 980 announcing the reasons for the expedition against Hoa Lu. The rhetoric of disdain for and outrage at the uncivilized behavior of Le Hoan and the people he ruled was unprecedented in the long history of official

imperial relations with this part of the world. Beyond giving lip service to the historical task of reclaiming a part of the imperial inheritance, this edict dilated upon the task of eradicating savagery, indicating a more constricted mental world than that of previous generations of imperial officials who had lived, worked, and permanently settled in Giao/An Nam.

The Song attitude effectively redefined this place as outside the realm of civilization. Le Hoan was able to go his separate way not only because Song was not strong enough to subdue him but also because Song no longer considered him and the people he ruled sufficiently civilized to be deemed proper subjects of the empire. Song's diminished martial prowess was closely related to this more demanding, less inclusive, view of the civilized world because men in government were now products of literary education and civil administration more than of military training and battlefield experience. One effect of this fundamental change in Chinese government was that the people in the Red River plain began a new trajectory of cultural and political autonomy.

Every aspect of Vietnamese culture is deeply imprinted by contact with China. To assume that these aspects have been either imposed by imperial oppressors or freely borrowed by indigenous people requires a clear demarcation between what is called Chinese and what is called Vietnamese. Such a demarcation did not exist during the time we have discussed in this chapter. In the tenth century, the people of what is now northern Vietnam were an amalgam of settlers from the north and indigenous peoples; for centuries they had lived together, intermarried, developed bilingual habits of speech, and formed a regional perspective on imperial civilization.

By the end of the tenth century, as described in the Introduction, the version of the Chinese language spoken in northern Vietnam, which we can call Annamese Middle Chinese, was cut off from regular contact with the north and from fresh infusions of Chinese speakers. It nevertheless remained the prestige language even as it became more isolated in the region surrounding Hanoi and began a process of merging with and shifting into the prestige version of Proto-Viet-Muong, a process that produced what we can recognize as the Vietnamese language.