

# TRANSFORMATIONS OF THĂNG LONG: SPACE AND TIME, POWER AND BELIEF

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*2010 saw the millennial celebration of Thăng Long/Hà Nội as capital of an independent Vietnam, and archaeology has tended to confirm this strong sense of continuity. Yet study of written texts shows us how political power, administrative style, and religious belief have shaped the city and how a cyclical pattern in this history has appeared twice and may be in its third time. In this pattern, each cycle saw the city begin as the provincial capital of an external power before becoming capital of an independent Vietnamese state. Then a local base draws power to itself and displaces Thăng Long, eventually dismantling it, before a new external power enters and begins the cycle anew. In this way the Tang and Ming dynasties of China and the French made the site their local administrative center. Lý Công Uân, Lê Lợi, and Hồ Chí Minh in succession drove them out and established Thăng Long/Hà Nội as their capital, bringing Buddhism, Confucianism, and Socialism to it. But first the Trần and Hồ, then the Mạc, Trịnh, and Nguyễn, shared power with, and eventually displaced, the Royal City. Will it happen again?*

**Keywords:** Vietnam; Vietnamese history; Hanoi; Thăng Long; geomancy

Over the millennium since its first of several establishments as the capital of Đại Việt, Thăng Long/Hà Nội has undergone a variety of changes that strongly reflect the shifting power relations and belief systems of the land. Rooted initially in the spatial and temporal pattern of that first age, its geomancy and genealogy, the nature of Thăng Long proceeded to take different shapes as the country and the controlling power of the land changed. Within the capital, we gain a strong sense of continuity and innovation from the royal palace archaeology and excavations of the past decade.<sup>1</sup> If, on the other hand, we focus on textual study, we see how the image of the city and its parts, within the land as a whole, has shifted over the centuries.

Let us approach Thăng Long not as the essential, eternal capital of an unchanging Việt Nam, but as the central point, sometimes displaced, around which swirled ever shifting currents of power that pulled Thăng Long this way and that. Thus may we gain a sense

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Originally presented at the conference “Under Construction: Social, Political, and Commemorative Space in Vietnam,” Cambridge, Mass., May 2010. My thanks to the members of the conference, to Huê-Tâm Hồ Tai, to Victor Lieberman, and to the anonymous readers for their valuable critiques and comments.

1 Hoàng Thành Thăng Long 2004.

of the changing spatial relations within Vietnamese society, the continued tensions between this capital and power bases in the countryside. This tale is the story of Việt Nam's history. The currents affecting Thăng Long were both internal, competing regional relations, and external, invasions from the west (Nanzhao), the south (Champa, France), and the north (Song, Mongols, Ming, Qing); these currents also included styles of belief (Buddhism, Confucianism, Socialism) as well as of statecraft (aristocratic, bureaucratic). Over the centuries, all these forces came to affect the shape of Thăng Long. The fate of the city tells us something of the shifting power relations across the land itself.

I am proposing a view of Thăng Long and its past drawn from the original Hán Nôm source materials. I am not attempting a survey of the torrent of recent Vietnamese essays and scholarship produced for the millennial celebration of the longtime capital.<sup>2</sup> This is rather a modest examination of the pattern of this past and how this pattern related to the power of state government in Đại Việt, the Vietnamese realm from the eleventh century into the nineteenth. The pattern emerging from this examination is cyclic, having already occurred twice (400–500 years each) and perhaps again in the course of its third cycle. In this pattern, the site of the city begins as a provincial capital of an external power. It then becomes the capital of a new indigenous Vietnamese regime until an internal power outside the capital region draws strength away from the capital to its own local base. Finally, the power in the new base establishes it as the capital, dismantling and removing the old capital to the new site. Then a new external power defeats the new capital in turn and resurrects the old capital of Thăng Long, initiating the cycle once more. We see such beginnings in the eighth, fifteenth, and nineteenth centuries.

## FIRST CYCLE

### Placing Thăng Long in Space and Time

The site of the present Hà Nội was established as a center of Chinese administrative activity in the region during the eighth century as the Red River took its present course. A governor from the Tang regime in the far north selected the locality as the site of his provincial capital. In this administrative unit called by the Tang Annan (Pacified South), different places in the immediate area served as the center of Chinese activities on this southern border in the second half of the dynasty following the An Lushan rebellion of the 750s. Captured by Nanzhao (now Yunnan) forces from up the Red River in the 860s, the governor-general Gao Pian (V. Cao Biền, Cao Vương/King Cao) retook it and made his name in bringing order back to this distant border region and building a new government center, that of Đại La ('Great Walled [Citadel]'), in the same area.<sup>3</sup> The years thereafter saw the Tang regime disintegrate and local forces contest power in the ensuing vacuum. As Đại Việt formed during the period from the mid-tenth century to the mid-eleventh, its center of power moved out of the defensive position of Hoa Lư held first by the Đinh, then by the Lê, in the hills south of the Red River delta into the central delta itself. The new location, chosen by the new

2 See, for example, *Tổng Tập Nghìn Năm Văn Hiến Thăng Long 2007–2009* ("General Collection of the Thousand Years of Culture of Thăng Long") in four large vols., with over 10,000 pages.

3 Papin 2001, pp. 28–30, 40–46.

ruling family of the Lý (1009–1225), was in this several-century-old location of the Tang provincial administrative center of Đại La. Here the new ruler, Lý Công Uẩn (Thái-tổ, r. 1009–1028), in 1010 made the center of his realm, amidst the wet rice agriculture and Buddhist temples of the mid-river section of the delta in the core region of Vietnamese society.<sup>4</sup>

Thái-tổ's proclamation of that year, as recorded in later chronicles, stressed the geomantic fact of leaving behind the narrow confines among the hills of Hoa Lư for the broad openness of the central Red River delta. Making reference to Chinese rulers of antiquity moving their capitals, Thái-tổ declared that he was leaving behind the limited views of his Đinh and Lê predecessors to place his capital in the midst of this broad expanse where Gao Pian had set up his provincial government for the Tang dynasty almost a century and a half earlier:

Especially is it impossible for me not to move when there exists the old capital of Gao Pian at Đại La, in the region between Heaven and Earth where the coiling dragon and the crouching tiger lie, between south and north, east and west, with a favorable view of the mountains behind and the river in front, where the earth lies spacious and flat and high and clear, where the inhabitants are not oppressed by flooding, where the earth is fertile and prosperous, a location overlooking the entire land of Việt, that spot is the best place imaginable. It is where the four directions meet, the location for a capital that will last ten thousand years.<sup>5</sup>

This new capital sat on this geomantically auspicious site at the intersection of space and time, of Heaven and Earth, and the core of flourishing Vietnamese society. Spatially, the vital energy (V. *khí*/C. *qì*) flowed into this site sheltered by the mountains at its rear and the welcoming sinuous waters lying before it (like the artistic shape of the sculpted “dragons” of Đại La and the Lý). Accumulating there, the vital energy produced the ascending golden dragon that gave Thăng Long its name and that bestowed the proper recognition on Thái-tổ that he was worthy of his position as heir to the local power of King Cao.<sup>6</sup> Later geomantic descriptions placed Thăng Long first in the main vein coming from the Kun Lun Mountains (according to Yoon, “the backbone of the world”) whence the vital energy flowed (through Mt. Tản Viên?) to Thăng Long. There the energy descended and pooled, bringing forth the dragon:

... three rivers draw the vein behind, two fish-shaped hills stand in front, Mount Tản Viên defends the northwest, Mount Tam Đảo secures the northeast, thousands of peaks turn into white tigers, tens of thousands of flows coil up like pure dragons.<sup>7</sup>

4 Taylor 1983, pp. 279–96.

5 *TT*, 2, 2a–b; Taylor 1976, p. 173; Momoki 2010a, p. 128.

6 For geomantic explanation here, I have used Yoon 2006, pp. 108–09, 217–73; on the dragon of Đại La, see Papin 2001, p. 53.

7 Momoki 2010a, pp. 131–35, and 150 n. 55 (Quotation from *An Nam Cửu Long Kinh* [VHv 482], 7a); Yoon 2006, pp. 172, 219.

During the three reigns of Thái-tổ, his son (Thái-tông, r. 1028–1054), and his grandson (Thánh-tông, r. 1054–1072), there formed a royal temporal narrative of the Lý monarchy that embedded the throne and capital of Đại Việt in this intersection of time and space. At Thánh-tông's death, he was succeeded by his six-year-old son Nhân-tông (r. 1072–1127) at a time of increasing tension between Đại Việt and its northern neighbor, the Song. In these years, there appeared a Buddhist miracle-tale text, *Tales of the Extreme Reach of Retribution/Reward* (*Báo Cực Truyền*, now preserved as part of the fourteenth-century *Departed Spirits of the Việt Realm* [*Việt Điện U Linh Tập*]) that formulated the royal tradition of the Lý. In the surviving five tales, we see a “genealogy” linking through time the local power holder Shi Xie (V. Sĩ Nhiếp; Sĩ Vương/King Sĩ) of the late Han era (late second–early third century CE), Gao Pian, the Tang dynasty general and governor of the 860s, and these first three Lý rulers. As Thái-tổ explicitly noted, King Cao's capital of Đại La became the Lý capital of Thăng Long. This Lý formulation focused the sino-indigenous spiritual powers of the prior millennium in this one central location and opposed its force against those of the north (the successive Chinese dynasties) and the south (Champa).<sup>8</sup>

At the end of the eleventh century, the now adult Lý monarch Nhân-tông, strongly influenced by Vietnamese Buddhist monks, brought the meditation school of Thiền (C. Chan) thought out of his personal devotions within the royal palace into the public domain of the royal court. Strongly influenced by the contemporary Chan thought of Song China, these monks emphasized sudden enlightenment and the mind-seal passed from master to disciple. In 1096, at a vegetarian feast in the capital, the monk Thông Biện placed Thăng Long within the universal Buddhist community and its roots in India. Going back to the Buddha, this new “genealogy” linked the Vietnamese Thiền monks (and through them, the throne and capital of Đại Việt) with the generations of monks who had personally carried the message (the Dharma) out of India to China and Đại Việt over the prior millennium and a half. Inscriptions from the first quarter of the twelfth century show the extent to which Nhân-tông placed Đại Việt and Thăng Long within this broad Buddhist world, spatially and temporally.<sup>9</sup>

These Buddhist inscriptions also reflected the intellectual presence of classical Chinese thought in Đại Việt. As Lý Thái-tổ's edict had indicated, Đại Việt placed itself within the world of Chinese antiquity, of the Shang and Zhou dynasties, 1500 to 2500 years earlier. Constant allusions to the Confucian Classics infused the intellectual milieu in which the capital existed, well known to the royal family and the Buddhist monks as well as to the literati. That they also saw the capital within the broad philosophical reach of Sinic civilization can be seen in the 1159 funeral inscription for the high minister Đỗ Anh Vũ. This inscription equated this minister first with Hou Ji, minister to Shun, the legendary emperor, then to Yi Yin, minister in the Shang dynasty, and finally with the Duke of Zhou, famed minister of the Zhou dynasty. Thus, Vũ as heir to this line of great ministers also meant that his rulers of Đại Việt equaled their Chinese classical counterparts

8 Whitmore 2011, p. 111; Taylor 1986, pp. 153–55; Kelley (forthcoming).

9 Whitmore 2011, pp. 112–18; Nguyễn 1997, pp. 127–30, 225–27.

and that his capital followed theirs. Thăng Long consequently sat in the line of the great Sinic capitals of antiquity going back thousands of years.<sup>10</sup>

The eleventh- and twelfth-century conceptual framework of the Lý dynasty centered the realm in the capital in a number of ways. At the core of this framework lay the geomantic positioning of Thăng Long in the Vietnamese space. This core sat within the local sino-indigenous Buddhist spiritual “genealogy” of *Tales of the Extreme Reach of Retribution/Reward*, all wrapped up in the broad sense of Chinese antiquity that the Vietnamese continued to share with the north. This entire pattern was then capped by the Buddhist Thiên configuration established by Nhân-tông and linked to India.

The physical layout of Thăng Long within this conceptual framework of Đại Việt developed through the first reigns of the dynasty. Lý Thái-tổ had moved his capital out of Hoa Lu’ and claimed the several-century-old Tang site of Đại La for his new capital of Thăng Long, expanding it to include other of the old administrative sites. While it would appear that he utilized existing structures – particularly the old city walls of Đại La and the buildings of the Annan Du Hu Fu (V. An Nam Đô Hộ Phủ = Protectorate of Annan), he had to construct his own setting there. This the new king did quickly. The chronicles described the emergence of the new Royal City in what would be the standard pattern for the Vietnamese capital: the city at large encompassing the Royal City, which in turn contained the Inner/Forbidden City inside its walls.<sup>11</sup> This basic pattern of the Royal City formed under the succeeding Lý rulers. Facing south, new kings took their places in the Throne Room (in the Càn Nguyên [Celestial] Palace, soon renamed Thiên An [Heavenly Peace]), holding their audiences there and in front of it their public spectacles, including the blood oath, on the Dragon Courtyard (Long Trì), the central performance space of the realm. Each king seems to have constructed his own residential palace as well as one on the river to observe the boat races. The Eastern Palace outside the city walls was the residence of the Crown Prince.

Through the middle of the eleventh century, among the many Buddhist temples there emerged two of particular significance, Diên Hựu (Prayer for Longevity, 1049) to Avalokitesvara (now Chùa Một Cột, the Single Pillar Temple) and Báo Thiên (Karmic Heaven, 1057) with its tower that symbolized the growing centrality and strength of Đại Việt’s monarchy. The Lý kings also celebrated rituals of the royal cult to Brahma and Indra in two other Buddhist temples (Thiên Phúc and Thiên Thọ, Heavenly Happiness and Longevity). Shrines to the Trưng Sisters and to another spirit cult (Xuy Vưu) appeared in a quarter of the city dedicated to the late eighth-century indigenous hero Phùng Hưng. Other later elements were an altar for sacrifice to Heaven outside the south gate of the city and bathing the Buddha in one of the palaces. In the 1070s, there came the beginnings of the Chinese classical scholarly establishment in the city, outside the Royal City. Celebrating Confucius and the Duke of Zhou were the Temple of Literature (*Văn Miếu*, 1070), the first examinations (1075), the Royal Academy (*Quốc Tử Giám*, 1076), and the Hàn Lâm (C. Hanlin) Academy (1086) for scholars assisting the king. The significance of these institutions would ebb and flow depending on royal interest, occurring sporadically.

10 Taylor 1995, pp. 59–70.

11 *TT*; *VSL* 1010–28 (in the citations for these chronicles, I am presenting the years covered); Papin 2001, pp. 68–70; Momoki 2010b, p. 4 (Fig. 2).

The Protectorate building was used as a law court and jail and the outer city wall (Đại La) moved back and rebuilt at the East Court Gate to avoid the river's water. Song officials' reports of the 1170s spoke disparagingly of such palaces and presented the Protectorate building as a major government institution, handling Sino-Vietnamese relations.<sup>12</sup> Early in the thirteenth century, serious intra-regional warfare severely damaged the Royal City. Numerous palaces went up in flames during the fighting, reducing the royal family to dwelling in "thatch palaces" outside the Royal City (then called the Old Capital) and holding court there. Still, they were able to return to the Throne Room and the Dragon Courtyard for necessary public occasions.<sup>13</sup>

## Vicissitudes

Over the next two centuries, from the 1220s to the 1420s, the Royal City of Thăng Long gradually came to be de-emphasized, displaced, and ultimately dismantled as internal rivalries and external challenges assailed Đại Việt. The new power that controlled the damaged capital was the Trần (1225–1400) whose base of Tức Mặc in what became Sơn Nam province in the fifteenth century lay to the east, low in the Red River delta near the coast. The strongman in this family of coastal Chinese descent was Trần Thủ Độ (1194–1264) who placed his young nephew (son of his elder brother) on the throne in Thăng Long (as Thái-tông, r. 1225–1277). There the child king was joined by his father Thừa (the Senior Ruler, 1184–1234) who initially lived in the Front Palace of the Royal City.<sup>14</sup>

Unlike the detailed coverage on the palaces and temples of the Royal City in the Lý section of the chronicles, the later edition reflected the new dynasty's de-emphasis of Thăng Long and provided little description of the Trần rebuilding the capital. The chronicle simply stated that the new dynasty reconstructed the Royal City with one palace for the child king on the left and another for his father as Senior Ruler on the right. Eventually, the new palace complex came to lie within the Phoenix Wall of the Inner Palace and the Dragon Wall of the Royal City itself. The Trần did retain the old Throne Room, but the Dragon Courtyard was little used to all appearances. Instead, the blood oath, scheduled for the fourth day of the fourth month, returned to its original site of the Shrine of the Spirit of the Mountain of the Bronze Drum, now located just outside the West Gate of the city. The Eastern Palace continued as the residence of the Crown Prince, while the Northern Palace became the residence of the Senior Ruler when he was in the city. The outer city wall was still that of Đại La, and the Diên Hựu Temple and the Báo Thiên Tower retained their special status within the belief system of the capital, as did the royal cults to Brahma and Indra. Members of the royal clan received noble titles and undoubtedly had homes in the city.<sup>15</sup>

12 These details are drawn from *VSL; TT* throughout the Lý dynasty; Whitmore 1986, pp. 122–23.

13 *VSL; TT*, 1203–25; Momoki 2010b, p. 29.

14 *TT*, 1225–26; *HĐBĐ* 19–20 (6F). When giving the reign years of the Trần kings, I include those years when each king served as Senior Ruler. Thus, the reign periods of successive kings often overlap.

15 *TT*, 1225–58.

What the Trần did do in their first years controlling the throne was to re-organize the city itself. They divided the sixty-one quarters (*phường*) of the prior age into Left and Right sections. The urban population now began to flow outside the Đại La city walls and their four gates, requiring a degree of control. The Trần also started to establish the literati class on a more permanent basis in the city. Examinations reappeared sporadically, and the Royal Academy along with the Confucian Temple received greater attention.<sup>16</sup>

Inside the capital, at the beginning the young king's father Thừa helped handle matters until his death in 1234. But the main power of the new regime lay outside Thăng Long in the hands of Trần Thủ Độ, founder and strongman of the dynasty. Although the chronicle maintained the idea of the throne and the capital as central in Đại Việt, the Trần base to the east developed strongly and became the focal point of the power structure of the land. Where the young king continued the Lý ritual in Thăng Long (at one point trying to escape it), Thủ Độ kept Tức Mặc as the base of family operations. Thái-tông visited his family home to perform ritual at his ancestral shrine and to celebrate and reward the local chiefs. For the first four decades of Trần rule, until his death in 1264, Thủ Độ undoubtedly dominated the scene from this base. In the process, Tức Mặc had a royal compound of palaces and gates constructed within it. The dominant position of Trần Thủ Độ in Đại Việt may be seen in his order to have geomancers sweep the land to detect and block any competing sources of kingly energy (*V. vuong khí/C. wang qi*). Eventually, they renamed Tức Mặc Thiên Trường (apparently Heavenly Capital, analogous to Chang'an, capital of the Tang). When Thái-tông became Senior Ruler in 1258 he (and each Senior Ruler thereafter) made Thiên Trường his home, with a separate palace next to his for the young king visiting from Thăng Long.<sup>17</sup>

Increasingly, it would appear, the power of the Trần royal clan moved away from Thăng Long. The princes established a network of estates across the lower delta, anchored in the royal base at Thiên Trường. While having residences in Thăng Long, these princes probably spent the majority of their time tending to their estates. Thus, even as literati became higher officials in the capital, including in the Crown Prince's Eastern Palace, power decentralized to the princely bases in the countryside. In Thăng Long, the king performed the ritual, received northern envoys (Chinese and Mongols), and cared for the city (as when fire hit); outside the capital, his father the Senior Ruler and his close kin the princes maintained control of the countryside. In the years when there was no Senior Ruler (less than a quarter of the time), the king continued to move back and forth between Thăng Long and Thiên Trường. Even a literati school was founded in the latter, though members of the military were banned from attending it. This dispersal of power away from the capital served the country well during (and was enhanced by) the Mongol assault on Đại Việt in the 1280s. Though Thăng Long was the rallying point for the Vietnamese in this fighting, the princes fell back from it to their bases in the countryside to wage guerrilla (asymmetric) warfare against the invaders. The two kings, father and son (Thánh-tông, r. 1258–1290, and Nhân-tông, r. 1279–1308) rallied their troops to victory. The palaces in the Royal City burned, and the Trần rebuilt in the same pattern. The Báo Thiên Tower survived.<sup>18</sup>

16 *TT*, 1230–53.

17 *TT*, 1226–64; Whitmore 2008, pp. 158–61; Momoki 2010a, pp. 128, 137, 141.

18 *TT*, 1265–89; Whitmore 2006a, pp. 114–19.

The victory over the Mongols consolidated the local power of the princes even more, continuing to pull power away from Thăng Long. The king increasingly worked with scholars in the capital, occasionally being visited there and called to account by his father the Senior Ruler or called by the latter down to Thiên Trường. Simultaneously, over the first third of the fourteenth century, the Senior Rulers developed the new Bamboo Grove (Trúc Lâm) School of Thiên Buddhism, bringing it from the coast into the capital. By the 1320s, the king Ming-tông (r. 1314–1357) in the midst of increasing socio-economic decentralization utilized this school of thought as he tried to integrate the realm of Đại Việt. In the process, there appeared two works, Lý Tế Xuyên's *Departed Spirits of the Việt Realm* (*Việt Điện U Linh Tập*, 1329) and *Eminent Monks of the Thiên Community* (*Thiên Uyển Tập Anh*, 1337), that carried on *Tales of the Extreme Reach of Retribution/Reward* and the Thiên construct of the late eleventh century. Joining this earlier thought with more recent spirit cults and famed monks in support of this new royal ideology, Minh-tông moved to re-center the realm of Đại Việt on Thăng Long.<sup>19</sup>

Yet the socio-economic stresses and strains across the Vietnamese landscape continued to pull the realm apart, especially as the families of the princes increasingly controlled their localities. Minh-tông, now Senior Ruler, in the 1330s switched from the Buddhist Thiên ideology to that of the classical scholars and brought the renowned teacher Chu Văn An into the capital. The Senior Ruler had An instruct the Crown Prince and placed An in charge of the Royal Academy where he remained for the next quarter century, into the 1360s. Setting the intellectual tone with his emphasis on Chinese classical thought, An established the stage for the emergence of other scholar officials, including his students and at least one member of the royal family, Trần Nguyên Đán (maternal grandfather of Nguyễn Trãi). Until his death in 1357, Minh-tông continued to work to re-establish Thăng Long in its central place. He acted to strengthen the literati official presence in the capital, setting up the Royal Study Hall, and thereby to reinvigorate the central control of the government. Recalling Taizong of the Tang dynasty, Minh-tông focused on the Censorate (*Ngự Sử Đãi*), renovating its offices. Proceeding in his efforts to control the countryside, he even placed central officials directly into Thiên Trường. Minh-tông had the young king sit in the old Throne Room and review the Palace Guard in the Dragon Courtyard.<sup>20</sup>

The action by Minh-tông and his literati officials to return royal power to Thăng Long may be seen in a poem by one of Chu Văn An's students who became a powerful figure in the mid-fourteenth-century Trần administration. Phạm Sư Mạnh recorded his (and undoubtedly their) sense of the Báo Thiên Tower as the pivot of their world, in the process describing his own king:

On the Báo Thiên Tower

Warding off evil east and west, it shores up the royal domain.

Standing alone, this single solitary tower is most imposing!

Among the mountains and the rivers, they do not shake this pillar holding up the sky.

19 TT 1288–1337; Whitmore 1985, pp. 1–8.

20 TT, 1338–70; Whitmore 1996, pp. 52–58.



Today, as of old, while difficulties grind us, there sits this awl of the earth.  
 The wind moves and cherishes its bells, and the times reply.  
 Like stars moving across the sky and lanterns lighting up, in the evening, it glints  
 brightly.  
 I come and desire to address clearly this wondrous work.  
 Controlling the spring torrents, I apply my brush to the ink slab.<sup>21</sup>

This effort to refocus power in Thăng Long failed after Minh-tông's death, as Chu Văn An left the capital in protest at the new king's behavior. After chaos in the capital, longtime tensions with Champa exploded. Over the next two decades, Thăng Long was threatened by Champa invasions, falling to them twice. The first attack, in 1371, took the capital and burned the palaces, after stripping them bare. The Trần quickly rebuilt Thăng Long in a simple fashion, employing officials and the royal family in the effort. The new Senior Ruler (Nghệ-tông, r. 1370–1394) continued to live in Thiên Trường. Following attacks (1378, 1383, 1390) subsequently drove the Senior Ruler out of both Thiên Trường and Thăng Long as he and the young king took refuge in the hills across the Red River north of the capital for four years (1383–1387). In 1389, a rebel Buddhist monk again forced the two rulers to flee across the river, and in the following year Thăng Long was saved from Champa's wrath only by the Champa king's death.<sup>22</sup>

All this chaos led to the emergence of a powerful figure from the south, Lê (Hò) Quý Ly. Through the 1380s and 1390s, Quý Ly and his family intermarried with the Trần and consolidated control of Thăng Long before taking the throne (1400–1407). As he did so, Quý Ly acted to shift the Royal City to his own base in Thanh Hóa province, becoming the Western Capital (Tây Đô). Thăng Long was relegated to being the Eastern Capital (Đông Đô) and eventually had some of its palaces dismantled and removed to the new center of the realm (other of its buildings would later be taken apart and evacuated into the mountains prior to the Ming invasion). All major royal rituals, including the blood oath, were transferred to the new capital. An official's protest against this move, calling to mind Lý Thái-tổ's initial proclamation of 1010, went unheeded. Where Thăng Long sat in its broad open space (able to gather in the flow of vital energy), the official declared, the new site was restricted and narrow (hence unable to do so). And indeed the Ming did conquer the Hò and their new capital in a massive campaign during 1406–1407, marked by the collapse of the top of the Báo Thiên Tower.<sup>23</sup>

## THE SECOND CYCLE

### The Bureaucratic Capital

With the Ming conquest and occupation (1407–1427), Thăng Long became Đông Quan, the administrative center of the new Chinese province of Jiaozhi. The occupying Ming shut down the Vietnamese ritual centers and undoubtedly stripped the city of any remaining

21 *Thơ Văn Lý Trần*, v. 3, 115–16; Wolters 2008, pp. 211–24.

22 *TT*, 1357–90; Whitmore 1985, pp. 8–31.

23 *TT*, 1370–1407; Whitmore 1985, pp. 12–76.

royal pretenses as the land returned to its former status within the Chinese empire. This completed the long decline of the Royal City of Đại Việt from its shared status with Thiên Trường under the Trần, its destruction by Mongols and Chams, and its displacement and dismantling by the Hồ. Thăng Long no longer marked the center of Vietnamese civilization. Its geomantic energy had dispersed.<sup>24</sup>

After these centuries had led to its virtual demise, the Royal City of Thăng Long greatly needed a new power to come in and bring new life to it. At the same time, the power that had risen in the borderlands of Lam Sơn to the southwest to defeat and drive out the Ming needed a base of its own in the Red River delta in which to establish itself and through which to gain authority and legitimacy. Unlike the preceding Trần and Hồ clans, the Lê (1428–1527) had no such base of operations in the lowlands that competed with Thăng Long. Their home of Lam Sơn in a mountain valley of western Thanh Hóa province would serve as a family ritual center, and later as a political refuge, but not as a well-endowed power base.<sup>25</sup>

In 1427, Lê Lợi (Thái-tổ r. 1428–1433) declared his *Great Proclamation on the Victory over the Ngô (Ming) (Bình Ngô Đại Cáo)*, composed by Nguyễn Trãi, stating,

Successive victories over extensive territory and Tây Kinh [Đô] became ours. Our elite vanguard pushed through to Đông Đô [Thăng Long] and regained our old territory.<sup>26</sup>

Moving into the liberated city, the new king made it his capital and rebuilt it on the foundations of the old Royal City, expanding it, while also linking it to the famed Tang capital of Chang'an. The basic pattern that would remain throughout the dynasty to the end of the eighteenth century was the Forbidden City within the Royal City. At the front of the former sat the Throne Room (now in the Kính Thiên [Revering Heaven] Palace) for interacting with the outside world (examinations, receiving letters from the Ming); inside the Forbidden City were a palace for ritual and sacrifice along with a number of residential palaces. Thăng Long now became known as the Eastern Capital (Đông Kinh) as opposed to the new Western Capital (Tây Kinh) of Lam Sơn/Lam Kinh. The new king of Đại Việt, Lê Thái-tổ, together with his minister Nguyễn Trãi, had approached the walls of Đại La in their campaign and put them under siege, with the Báo Thiên Tower as their beacon. Now, within those walls, the two re-established the Vietnamese monarchy and enthroned Thái-tổ as its ruler. Vietnamese versions of the geomantic texts of the land, said to have been composed by Gao Pian of the Tang Protectorate and most recently by Huang Fu of the Ming occupation, stressed the failure of these northern expert geomancers to block the emergence of the Vietnamese royal power that so worried the Chinese emperors. In the process, the Vietnamese absorbed and went beyond the magic and power of Gao and Huang. Thus did these texts legitimate Đại Việt's, and Thăng Long's, existence.<sup>27</sup>

24 *TT*, 1407–1418; Whitmore 1985, pp. 77–128; 2008, pp. 161–63.

25 Whitmore 2008, pp. 163–68.

26 *TT*, 10, 47b–52a (quotation 49b–50a).

27 *TT*, 1426–32; Momoki 2010a, pp. 131–40; 2010b, p. 11 (Fig. 5).

The new ruler and his government built the new Royal City and recorded the quarters of the city itself, again divided into East and West. Nguyễn Trãi, in his *Geography* (*Dư Địa Chí*) of 1435, noted that there were now thirty six of these quarters (eighteen in each of the two districts) and listed the specific products of nine of the quarters. The Chinese (“Tang people”) quarter, for example, was inhabited by merchants from Guangxi and Guangdong who sold the northern style of clothes. In these quarters, the king settled his new aristocracy from the mountains. The latter space included both residences and required gardens, as, unlike in Trần times, the princes and nobles would have spent more of their time in the capital than in their home base of Lam Sơn in the mountains.<sup>28</sup>

The two institutions in Thăng Long most emphasized in the early years of the new dynasty indicate the bifurcation therein, aristocratic and scholarly. More than the prior dynasties, the Lê focused, on the one hand, on their Ancestral Shrine (*Thái Miếu*) and, on the other, on the Royal Academy. The former lay within the Royal City, the latter in the city at large. This dichotomy reflected the alliance of Lê Lợi and Nguyễn Trãi, the ideological void into which the Lê stepped, and the parochial nature of the new aristocracy. After Thái-tổ’s death in 1433, this tension came increasingly to the fore as very young kings succeeded the founder.

Esta Ungar, in her 1983 doctoral dissertation, has pointed out how the fierce warriors of the western mountains brought the royal dragon spirit back out of their steep hills to Thăng Long. From these same hills, the Lê also carried a strong sense of the spiritual power of their immediate ancestors. These Lê rulers all took as their title Mountain Chief (*Động Chủ*). Their ancestors had a very strong hold on the early kings as can be seen in the constant royal communications at the Ancestral Shrine, as these rulers sought aid from these ancestors for significant affairs of state. Such matters included presenting the seals of the realm, the ancestral tablets of the late king and queen, the succession of the new king, the proper honorifics for the ancestors, relations with the Ming, and battlefield victories. The status of the Royal Academy outside the Royal City signified the rise of the scholar in the new state, as it drew students into the capital and produced an increasing number of literati officials. These young officials proceeded to charge the new aristocracy to act properly and joined with the young rulers (or their mothers) against the lords. In addition, the royal court established the regular performance of ritual for “the First Teacher,” Confucius, and the Royal Study Hall for the princes. Ultimately, the Temple of Literature reappeared.<sup>29</sup>

As the scholarly apparatus developed, other religious activities continued in Thăng Long. In 1434, the new young ruler (Thái-tông, r. 1434–1442) went out into an open field to watch sacrifices to Heaven and Earth and to the spirits of the land. There the officials took the blood oath (the sacrifice of a white horse). The Báo Thiên Tower retained its significance, particularly in times of drought when the Buddha of Pháp Vân was brought into the capital and deposited there for the king to worship. The Diên Hựu Temple too continued as a special site, and the new aristocracy supported a variety of other Buddhist temples as well.<sup>30</sup>

28 Nguyễn 1969, pp. 193–94.

29 *TT*, 1433–59; Ungar 1983, pp. 82–88.

30 *TT*, 1434–59.

The transformation of the government of Đại Việt in the 1460s changed the capital as well, much as the New Deal and World War II did for Washington, D.C. First, the new young Confucian-trained and unexpected king Lê Thánh-tông (r. 1460–1497) rebuilt the royal complex (after two coups) and placed limits on Buddhist and other temples. Then he established the new central ritual of the regime, the Nam Giao (Southern Suburb Sacrifice to Heaven and Earth) and placed it south of the Royal City. (The ritual of the blood oath ceased.) Next came the regular triennial Confucian examinations, culminating in the Capital and Palace examinations. This required permanent examination grounds. Later (in 1484) came the stelae marking each examination placed in the Temple of Literature.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, in the mid-1460s, the young king and his literati advisors brought in the contemporary Ming bureaucratic model for the state administration. This required a whole new set of buildings. At its hub sat the Communications Office, controlling the greatly increased flow of paperwork among all the central and provincial offices. The core of this new bureaucratic government consisted of the six Ministries (*Bộ*; Civil Service, Finance, Rites, War, Punishment, and Public Works, in the order listed by the chronicle). These were joined, in Vietnamese innovation, by the six Departments (*Khoa*) and the six Courts (*Tự*). To control this new structure there was the Censorate. The top positions in these offices were staffed by examination graduates. Immediately adjacent to the throne were the Hàn Lâm Academy and the Eastern Pavilion, occupied by top graduates and directly assisting their ruler. While some of these offices and agencies had existed earlier, they had not been structured and controlled as tightly as in the new system. Their office buildings would have reflected this new system in the capital.<sup>32</sup>

The Royal Academy continued to educate the top students, the Royal Study Hall functioned well, and in the Eastern Palace the Crown Prince resided and was educated. The Ancestral Shrine retained its significance for the Lê, as the king continued to report great events to his predecessors and implored them for supernatural aid. These reports covered the royal seals, royal designations, prayers for rain, and the great campaign against Champa (announcing it, then celebrating the victory). At one point, Thánh-tông first performed the early spring ritual of Reporting to the Spirits in the Ancestral Shrine, presenting silk and not the customary burnt offerings. He then shifted the subsequent ritual of Celebrating Longevity from there into a royal palace.<sup>33</sup>

At the time of the Champa war (1470–1471), officials performed sacrifices not only at the shrines of the local spirits, but also to that of Đinh the Foremost Ruler (Đinh Bộ Lĩnh of the tenth century). The Báo Thiên Tower appeared in the Chronicle only as a collecting point for village registers. The other collecting point was the Hội Đồng Shrine, where visiting foreign envoys gathered before proceeding to the royal court. The new literati regime thus removed Buddhism from official activities. Yet the aristocracy (and the Queen Mother) still visited Buddhist temples to pray for such matters as producing the Crown Prince.<sup>34</sup>

31 *TT*, 1460–83; Whitmore (forthcoming).

32 *TT*, 1460–1504; Whitmore 2010, pp. 104–25.

33 *TT*, 1460–1504.

34 *TT*, 1460–1504; Whitmore 2005, pp. 43–49.

The Hồng Đức map of 1490 provides our first clear visual image of Thăng Long as the Royal City of Đại Việt. Lying south of the West Lake, to the west of the midcourse of the Red River, the boot-shaped Royal City (Dragon) walls lay within the broader Đại La city walls and within itself held the rectangular Forbidden City (Phoenix) walls on its eastern side. Within the Forbidden City were the residential palaces in the standard Sinic north–south orientation, with the Throne Room in the Kinh Thiên Palace on the south. The Ancestral Shrine sat in its southeast corner. In the western part of the Royal City lay the examination grounds, the military establishment of Giảng Vũ, a shrine to the spirit of an eleventh-century Lý prince, and a Buddhist temple (for the Queen Mother?). Within the city itself, south of the Royal City, lay the Royal Academy with the Temple of Literature and its stelae inside it, as well as the Nam Giao site. Off to the southeast near Return Sword Lake sat the Báo Thiên Tower. Outside the East Gate of the Royal City were shrines to the cults of the White Horse and, further north, of Trần Vũ, the God of War. This mapping perhaps also involved an upgrading and more detailed local study of the geomantic landscape, reflecting Thăng Long’s high status therein.<sup>35</sup>

Following the death of Thánh-tông’s son Hiến-tông (r. 1498–1504), there came a quarter-century of chaos, aristocratic infighting, and rebellion. Thăng Long was caught and damaged in the fighting. After several attempts to restore Lê Thánh-tông’s heritage and his capital, Mạc Đăng Dung succeeded in doing so, as nearly as we can tell. Since the Lê returned from their Lam Sơn refuge to defeat the Mạc (1528–1592) and erase their record, we have very little surviving description of the Mạc activities. Given that the literati compiled the chronicle and examination inscriptions survive, we know that the new dynasty restarted the examination system within the capital and set up new inscriptions in the Temple of Literature. They also rebuilt the Royal Academy and re-established the Royal Study Hall, while undoubtedly performing the Nam Giao sacrifice to Heaven. The Eastern Palace remained the residence of the Crown Prince, but no detail exists for the Royal City. The government seems to have continued Lê Thánh-tông’s bureaucratic model – the Ministries, the Censorate, and the Eastern Pavilion. It also redefined the geomantic landscape, once more inheriting and declaring victory over the Chinese powers of Gao Pian and Huang Fu. In this way, the Mạc dislodged their negotiations and difficulties with the Ming in the 1530s and 1540s. At the same time, Mạc Đăng Dung became Senior Ruler and built up his clan’s coastal base of Cổ Trai (near present Hải Phòng) in a manner similar to that of the Trần. Basically, Đông Kinh (Thăng Long) and Tây Kinh (Lam Sơn) served as bases of rival factions and battled through most of the sixteenth century. In the meantime, the Báo Thiên Tower collapsed.<sup>36</sup>

## Home of the Trịnh Lord

As the Lê and their aristocratic allies, the Trịnh and the Nguyễn, closed in on Thăng Long from their refuge in Lam Sơn during the 1580s, the Mạc built fortifications outside the Đại La wall, higher than those of the Royal City. The effort failed to halt the Restoration forces,

35 *ĐNNCT*, 8–9; *Đại Nam Nhất Thống Chí*, II, 207, 210–11, 218–20; Taylor 1976, p. 180; Momoki 2010a, pp. 135–36, 138, 140.

36 *TT*, 1505–88; Whitmore 1995, pp. 116–30; 2008, pp. 168–70; Momoki 2010a, pp. 135–36, 141; Baldanza 2010.

as they re-entered the burned out and ruined Royal City and re-established the Lê on the throne of Đại Việt (1592–1788). They quickly rebuilt the capital in the same pattern as in the fifteenth century. Though the first matter the new government took care of on entering the capital was to carry out the Confucian examinations (for legitimation purposes), the literati played a small role in this new regime. The emphasis was on the aristocracy and maintaining the true line of the Lê kings going back to Lê Lợi (ignoring Lê Thánh-tông and his government reforms). Hence the first major structure rebuilt was the Ancestral Temple with its tablets of Thái-tổ and the succeeding kings. This Restoration was an aristocratic one, not a bureaucratic effort, and the new space of Thăng Long reflected this. Almost immediately the Trịnh lord's compound was set up to the left within the South Gate of the city, outside the Royal City. The lord then held the newly re-instituted ceremony of the blood oath near the Trịnh compound, the new center of power in Thăng Long. In addition, the Trịnh established a shrine for Trịnh Kiểm, founder of the Restoration and of their clan. Living in the rebuilt main palace, the Lê king's duties became strictly ceremonial, such as performing the ritual to the spirits of the land to ensure good weather (the Nam Giao having been put aside). Indeed, praying for rain became one of the monarch's main functions.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, through the seventeenth century, the Inner Precinct within the compound of the Trịnh lord was the central focus of power in Thăng Long as the Royal City with its Forbidden City served as the enclosure for the Lê royal family. The seventeenth-century version of the fifteenth-century Hồng Đức map showed the location of the Trịnh compound southeast of the Royal City near the west bank of Return Sword Lake south of the Báo Thiên Tower, its size on the map directly inverse to its power relationship with the Royal City. (Later maps would reverse this in true fashion.) Tensions flared episodically between these two sites over the following two centuries. Thus did the powerful Trịnh clan, intermarried with the Lê, reshape the spatial relations of Thăng Long. The bureaucratic government of Lê Thánh-tông and the Mạc shrunk greatly as the aristocratic power base of the Trịnh lord expanded. Increasingly, the Trịnh presence overshadowed that of the royal Lê. Though the Trịnh did consider establishing their own capital apart from Thăng Long, in the end they remained in their compound in the city. In the meantime, the chronicle reported that the well of the Báo Thiên Tower had become mysteriously fouled.<sup>38</sup>

What happened within the Trịnh compound sent vibrations through the Royal City and its Inner Palace area, as the royal wives of the Trịnh clan, their children (raised by the Trịnh), and their Lê in-laws all felt its tremors. The Royal Way running south out of the Royal City, connecting with the Trịnh compound, would have felt the tensions reverberating between the two. Meanwhile, from the 1620s, the major goal of the Trịnh lords was to bring the separationist southern territory of the rival aristocratic Nguyễn clan back under the control of Thăng Long and thereby to complete the Restoration and the unity of Đại Việt. But the northern campaigns against the Đàng Hối wall protecting the southern region all failed, and in the late 1650s the Nguyễn forces were able to launch a

37 *TT*, 1588–99; Whitmore 1995, pp. 130–35.

38 *TT*, 1600–26; Taylor 1987, pp. 1–7; *HDBĐ*, 8–9 (3E); Papin 2001, pp. 148–50; Momoki 2010a, p. 129; Whitmore 2008, p. 170.

strong counterattack. Concurrently, one Trịnh clan member, Tạc, had begun to utilize displaced scholars in his entourage. While the Capital and Palace examinations, visited by the Lê king, had continued on a triennial basis, their products played little role in major government operations. This was the aristocratic prerogative. By mid-century it began to change. As in the mid-fifteenth century, first the Nam Giao sacrifice to Heaven was reinstated and rebuilt. Then twenty-five stelae for the previous one hundred years of examinations were erected in the Temple of Literature, and the Royal Academy picked up its operations. With Tạc's support, scholars began to be charged with more significant tasks.<sup>39</sup>

The failure to reunify the land led to the return of Lê Thánh-tông's bureaucratic model to the capital, if not to the power of his descendants. Trịnh Tạc, now lord, took control of the government and reorganized it. Once again, we see the full bureaucratic complement and with it the well-laid-out buildings. The Nam Giao altar was renovated, this time with much brilliance. Now, however, the ultimate authority was the Trịnh compound, not the Royal City. The six Ministries, the Censorate, and the Eastern Pavilion, while officially linked to the throne, reported to the Trịnh and disregarded the Lê, except in major ritual matters. Even there, the royal processions and ceremony diminished before the growing grandeur of the Trịnh lords. It would appear that the Trịnh not only emasculated the power of the monarchy, but shrunk its ritual presence within Thăng Long.<sup>40</sup>

Another part of the city undergoing change through the seventeenth century was the riverfront. For the first time, the capital became the major port of Đại Việt. Where prior to the sixteenth century this port lay along the coast or among nearby islands, now foreign seagoing commerce moved up the Red River directly to Thăng Long. A map drawn by an Englishman in this century shows buildings of the city lying along the river bank, east of the Royal City and outside the Đại La wall (as also does a European illustration of the waterfront).<sup>41</sup> Called simply People of the Market (Cacho/V. Kẻ Chợ), this part of the city became known to a variety of Europeans pursuing local silk to trade for Japanese silver. Dutch records described the brick factories located there, staffed by Europeans. Local Vietnamese served and facilitated the trade, especially in the summer months. City merchants (including women) formed links with local producers in surrounding villages, and government officials hindered or facilitated the trade. The Europeans also took part in local festivities and the royal court's grand ceremonies.<sup>42</sup>

A good description of Thăng Long in the 1680s comes to us from Samuel Baron, son of a Dutch merchant and his Vietnamese wife. The market took place on new and full moon days, bringing crowds from the countryside pouring into the broad boulevards. Each commodity had its own street that was fed by a specific village on the outskirts of the city. The palaces of the nobles and the government buildings constructed of wood sat on large grounds. The city and Royal City walls were most impressive with great gates. The Royal City was spacious, and Baron was quite impressed by "its former pomp and glory," eclipsed as it was by the Trịnh who essentially imprisoned the Lê therein. Baron showed the Trịnh

39 *TT*, 1627–58; Taylor 1987, pp. 7–12; Whitmore 1995, p. 130; Rhodes 1966, pp. 56–57; *HDBD*, 140–41.

40 *TT*, 1659–75; Taylor 1987, pp. 12–16, 19, 21; Whitmore 2006b.

41 Hoàng 2007, pp. xxxiii, 38; Baron 2006, p. 203.

42 Hoàng 2007, pp. 189–94, 197–98, 204–07.

court in his illustrations as much grander than the Lê court. Only on ceremonial occasions did the Lê king leave the Royal City. Baron went on to describe the Nam Giao as well as the examination grounds. In addition, there was the sacrifice to the banner performed before the Trịnh lord (in which the king did not appear) by the river.<sup>43</sup>

Through the eighteenth century, the Trịnh lords increased their hold over Thăng Long and remodeled its government once again as they continued to diminish the royal Lê role. Within the Trịnh compound, there now sat the Grand Council and the six Offices (*Phiên*). This Council overshadowed the King's Council in the Royal City, and the Offices dominated the six Ministries linked bureaucratically to the throne. Under the direction of these Offices, there existed the six Treasuries (*Cung*).<sup>44</sup> The Trịnh establishment thereby filled out the southern portion of the city.

A Catholic priest in the middle of the century described the religious practices in Đại Việt and gave a sense of the continuation of the ritual practices within Thăng Long. By this time, it would appear that the Trịnh had essentially shut the Lê king away in the Royal City. The king held the Sacrifice to Heaven in a plain shrine within the palace of the Throne Room, as he alone communed with Thượng Đế (C. Shangdi, the Supreme Emperor). This ceremony was followed by seasonally performed rituals to the great rulers of antiquity, east of the Nam Giao to start the spring, south to start the summer, west to bring in the autumn, and north for the winter. At the end of the year, the Trịnh lord alone presided over the blood oath ceremony, now of chicken and bull blood, drunk and sworn before the three ranks of the spirits and altars to both the royal ancestors and those of the lord. The Trịnh lord's golden sword stood at the center. The lord also continued to oversee the ritual of his banner, held in the second month. As in the previous century, this latter ceremony was located by the river bank and involved altars for both prior rulers and earlier military leaders as well as the highest of the three ranks of the spirits.<sup>45</sup>

The literati, besides assisting the king in the sacrifices to Heaven and to the ancient rulers, focused their ritual on Confucius and his chief disciples. Twice a year, in the second and eighth months, the scholars performed the ceremony in the Temple of Literature, as teachers led their students through this ritual in their local schools. The participants presented their offerings to the Sage, honored his teachings, and announced their individual presence before the altars, all bowing. While the Catholic priest mentioned the Báo Thiên Tower in an historical context, he made no mention of any famous Buddhist temples in Thăng Long during his own time.<sup>46</sup>

Though the Lê royal family chafed under Trịnh control, leading to the revolt of the three princes in the 1730s, the city as a whole flourished. Teeming and thriving, with a population of upwards of 200,000 and increasing economic specialization, the urban area filled in the space lying among the rivers – the Red River on the north and east, the Tô Lịch on the west, the smaller Kim Ngưu on the south. Artisans serviced public,

43 Baron 2006, pp. 202–04, 229–32, 237, 240–43, 248–55, 259–64; see also Papin 2001, pp. 171–78.

44 Đặng 1969, pp. 63–4, 68–73, 119–20.

45 St. Thecla 2002, pp. 104–06, 118–23, 129–34.

46 St. Thecla 2002, pp. 107–16, 208–10.



private, and religious establishments. Among the large public buildings, the mansions, and the public spaces ran the paved boulevards. For population, fire, and economic control, the government divided the city into eight sectors, encompassing the thirty-six neighborhoods, and established eight central markets. The Trịnh only rebuilt the outer walls, destroyed during the fighting of the late sixteenth century, in 1749 with eight large gates to gain protection in times of increasing troubles. The neighborhoods, each with its own product specialty, prospered, as did the river commerce within the broader regional economic network. The northern edge of the city in particular filled out with such activities.<sup>47</sup>

Through the second half of the eighteenth century, politics and warfare tore apart the entire expanded land of Đại Việt and the Royal City was engulfed in the wars and subjected to increased pressures. Problems inside the Trịnh compound, continued tensions between the compound and the Royal City, the Tây Sơn victories in the north, the Qing invasion, and the flight of the last Lê king – all these left Thăng Long and its centuries-long legacy with its geomantic energy and its golden dragon once more dispersed.

## Bắc Thành and Hà Nội

The Tây Sơn, in their few years in power (1788–1802), destroyed the Trịnh compound and built their own base on its location. They had already begun to think of a new capital in Nghệ An province to the south and to call Thăng Long the Northern City (Bắc Thành).<sup>48</sup> When Nguyễn Ánh moved up from the far south to defeat the Tây Sơn in the north, establishing his dynasty (1802–1945), as the Gia Long emperor (r. 1802–1819) he made his family's old home base the new capital Huế and transferred the major ritual sites of the realm (as the Nam Giao and the Royal Academy) down there. Downgrading the old capital and beginning to build a series of Bellamarto/Errand-style citadels in the major centers from south to north, the new king transformed Thăng Long from a national to a regional center. The construction of the new citadel demolished the old Royal City. For a decade and a half, the Northern City remained the center of the northern region under the Viceroy Nguyễn Văn Thành. Thành's fall and the rise of the second Nguyễn ruler, the Minh Mạng emperor (r. 1820–1840), meant that the north was administratively integrated into the central government. In 1831, Thăng Long became merely (the City) Within the River (Hà Nội).<sup>49</sup> Where it, and the region surrounding it, had once been the heartland of the realm, the point where the four directions met (as Lý Thái-tổ had originally described it), the past capital was now a backwater. The power and centrality, the geomantic energy, that once was its had shifted south to the base of a competing aristocratic clan, the Nguyễn. Thăng Long had become a political nullity.

Two northern poets of the early nineteenth century, one male, one female, plainly expressed the deep sadness of their literati colleagues about the loss of their capital, their centrality, to the south and the vacancy that they felt:

47 Reid 1988–1993, II, pp. 70–80; Nguyễn 1970, pp. 114–17, 126–32, 136–37, 142–46.

48 Dutton 2006, pp. 109–10; Papin 2001, p. 197.

49 Woodside 1971/1988, pp. 102–03, 126–27, 133–37, 182, 187; Papin 2001, pp. 197–204; Tessier 2009, pp. 134–35.

Nguyễn Du, The City of the Soaring Dragon

They last year after year, both [Mt.] Tản and the Lô [River].  
 Gray-haired, you're back to see the Soaring Dragon [Thăng Long]  
 Old mansions buried under fresh-laid roads.  
 New city rising on dismantled towers.  
 Fair maidens? Mothers cuddling babes in arms.  
 Gay fops? Grave townsmen holding posts and ranks.  
 All night, with heavy heart, you cannot sleep.  
 A flute, immersed in moonlight, sighs and sings

On this new city shines the same old moon.  
 It used to be the capital of kings.  
 Streets crisscross alleys, blurring ancient tracks.  
 Flutes mingle with guitars to play strange tunes.  
 A thousand years they've fought and warred for power.  
 Your friends of long ago have died by half.  
 The world will rise and fall – stop mourning it.  
 The hair on your head is flecked with gray.

Lady Thanh Quan, Remembering the Past in Thăng Long City

Why did the Maker stage such drama here?  
 Since then, how many stars have spun and fled?  
 Old horse and carriage paths – faint autumn grass.  
 Once splendid towers and mansions – setting sun.  
 Rocks stand stock-still, unawed by time and change.  
 Waters lie rippling, grieved at ebb and flow.  
 From age to age, a mirror of things past:  
 The scene on view can break the viewer's heart.<sup>50</sup>

This nullity can particularly be seen in the magnum opus of the northern scholar Phan Huy Chú, descendant of the two major literati clans of the prior century, the Phan Huy and the Ngô Thì. Chú presented the work, *Institutions of the Successive Dynasties* (*Lịch Triều Hiến Chương Loại Chí*), to the Minh Mạng emperor in the early 1820s. It was a summation of the statecraft wisdom accumulated by these northern scholars over the prior four hundred years. Minh Mạng's lack of interest in Chú's monumental work reflected the new southern regime's disregard for the northern literati tradition of Đại Việt, as the emperor formed his new land of Đại Nam (Great South), modeled on the Qing regime of the north. And where was Thăng Long in this work? The old Royal City had ceased to exist, not in any explicit way, but in its general absence. In the first of his ten sections, that on geography, Chú had no part on its territory. All that can be found are a few scattered historical references under

50 Huynh 1979, pp. 177–78 (nos. 391, 394); see also Papin 2001, pp. 204–07.

its varied names.<sup>51</sup> Thăng Long had become an empty place in both space and time. No longer did a sufficient accumulation of geomantic energy (or golden dragon) exist there. This vacancy at the core of the old elite world is remarkably similar to that in Java in the same decade. Nancy K. Florida has shown that there was a hole, an absence, in the world of the Javanese elite during the 1820s. At the time of the Java War (1825–1830), a desperate need existed for what was, in essence, the missing Javanese monarchy, as Dutch colonial pressure grew. In her words, “the most conspicuous absence (and hence presence)” defined the elite sense of things,<sup>52</sup> and so it was with Thăng Long within the sensibility of the northern literati, formerly of Đại Việt. The invisible became irresistably visible and not forgotten. Thăng Long and its monarchy remained in the northern hearts, so that its very absence summoned it up so intensely that it could not be faced or placed.

This absence in the north enabled the new capital of Huế to fulfill its desired full connection with the Qing court in China. By the 1860s, the Nguyễn realm of Đại Nam, now under the Tự Đức emperor (r. 1848–1883), was facing the French invaders in the far south. The new geomantic situation had shifted, and a text of 1862 honored Gao Pian for preparing the opening between south and north, Vietnam and China. Where Thăng Long had stood against the north and had blocked such a Sinic connection, Huế and the south now truly welcomed this opening, allowing (in K. W. Taylor’s words) “the full dissemination of civilized patterns.” By removing Thăng Long (and making it Hà Nội), the Nguyễn completed Gao’s opening. The geomantic barrier in the north no longer existed.<sup>53</sup>

In the meantime, the emperor worked for a conceptual integration of his realm (even as the French had begun to dismantle it physically). Thăng Long (as Hà Nội) reappeared within this domain in the official geography of the land, *Record of the Unity of the Great South* (*Đại Nam Nhất Thống Chí*).<sup>54</sup> In standard geographic fashion, this work provided the many details of each province. Hà Nội was now one of the thirty-some provinces of Đại Nam, its history given and many details about its present existence offered. Thăng Long was merely one of the many appellations applied to the old capital area and, with all its detail of the past, the former Royal City faded into antiquarian absence within the broad delineation of the land. A member of the Nguyễn royal family rebuilt the Báo Thiên Tower as an ancient curiosity. In the following decade, Trương Vĩnh Ký, a Vietnamese visitor from the south, now the French colony of Cochinchina, described the Hà Nội that he found, much of it based on the official Nguyễn geography. Ký gave no real sense of the city’s long royal past, only recounting various legends and the present condition of a number of local sights. Very little remained of the old Royal City, and Ký gained little sense of the power that had once resided there.<sup>55</sup>

51 Phan 1992, I, pp. 23–172.

52 Florida 1995, pp. 278 (quotation), 310, 400–01.

53 Taylor 1999, pp. 241–58 (quotation 246).

54 ĐNNTC, III, 159–235 (Báo Thiên Tower, 218).

55 Trương-Vĩnh-Ký 1982, pp. 63–94.

## A THIRD CYCLE?

The French conquest of Đại Nam in the 1880s led to a quick political and physical transformation of Hà Nội. Within a decade, they had changed the citadel and the Nguyễn configuration of the city into one of their own making. As the conquerors formed their colonial construct of l'Indochine française, Hà Nội served as the site of a three-level administration: mayor of the city, Resident Superieur of the Protectorate of Tonkin (Đông Kinh), and Governor-General of Indochina. The city, once again, became the local capital of an external conquest, a situation that would last seventy years. Demolishing the Nguyễn citadel (as the Nguyễn had demolished the Lê Royal City), the French rapidly expanded their control throughout the city, continuing for two decades. In the process, they tore down major Vietnamese buildings and replaced them with grand monuments of their power. A prime example of this was the destruction of the Báo Thiên Tower and its replacement by the Cathedral of St. Joseph.<sup>56</sup>

Then, during the Second World War, like Lê Lợi in the fifteenth century, Hồ Chí Minh and his Việt Minh forces formed in the highlands (here the Việt Bắc) far enough away from the foreign conquerors (French and Japanese) to survive and await good opportunity to attack their enemies. This came with the collapse of Japanese control and the August Revolution of 1945. On the nineteenth of that month, Việt Minh troops entered the welcoming city of Hà Nội. Two weeks later, Hồ stood in the square in the center of the city, renamed Ba Đình, and proclaimed the Declaration of Independence and the new regime:

They have set up three distinct regimes in the North, the Center, and the South of Việt-Nam in order to wreck our national unity and prevent our people from being united... After the Japanese surrender to the Allies, our whole people rose to regain our national sovereignty and to found the Democratic Republic of Việt-Nam.<sup>57</sup>

Emphasizing “the entire people” of his land and continuing not Đại Nam but Đại Việt, Hồ stood in the middle of his new (and renewed) capital to state the “oneness” of this land in space and time, as he had been expressing over the previous three years.<sup>58</sup> Though it would take another decade of sustained battle, Hà Nội would become the capital of the northern Democratic Republic of Việt Nam, as well as another two before it was the capital of the united Socialist Republic of Việt Nam. Taking over the French colonial city, Hồ Chí Minh, like Lý Công Uẩn and Lê Lợi before him, again turned it into the capital of the Vietnamese state. The new regime established Socialism as the ideology in its land, as the Lý had Buddhism and the Lê Confucianism. All three belief systems then have had to contend

56 Papin 2001, pp. 221–29, 232, 234–43; Masson 1983, pp. 48–52; Tessier 2009, pp. 137–53. In recent years there has been tension over the land where the Báo Thiên Tower had stood between Catholics and state, sectarian, and “national culture” interests; Keith 2011.

57 Hồ 1967, pp. 143–45; Marr 1995, pp. 221–31.

58 Brocheux 2007, pp. 49, 74–75, 128.

with the natural Vietnamese inclination to accommodate, accumulate, and practice many varied elements of the supernatural.

The new government moved into the monumental French buildings and made them their own, for example, the Governor-General's residence becoming the Presidential Palace. Ba Đình Square forms the major performance space (like the Dragon Courtyard of the Lý) for the city and the nation. Around it lie major buildings of the new regime. On Hồ's death in 1969 (twenty-four years to the day after his Declaration in the Square), the grand funeral was held there. In it, Lê Duân called on the people to swear to advance the cause, to which they responded, "We swear!" The major changes to the French configuration around the Square came after the end of the war in 1975, first the monumental Socialist mausoleum for Hồ, then in the 1990s the museum for Hồ and the large monument commemorating those who had died in the wars for the state.<sup>59</sup>

So began the third cycle in the long history of Thăng Long. As political power shifted hands, as different patterns of administration formed, as beliefs and ideology changed, the capital took different shapes. First located there for its prime position in the midst of the developing Vietnamese society, later centuries saw it returned there for its legitimacy and authority. Each cycle of the city's past began as a provincial center of a larger empire (Tang, Ming, French) before seeing regional powers come out of the mountains to make this location the center of their power and control over the land of the Việt (Lý, Lê, Democratic Republic of Việt Nam). Each founder (Lý Công Uẩn, Lê Lợi, and Hồ Chí Minh) began with his statement of centrality and unity (Edict on Moving the Capital; Great Proclamation on Victory over the Ming; Declaration of Independence) and created a state aligned with a particular belief system (Buddhist, Confucian, Socialist). Next, at least in the first two cycles, regional powers (Trần/Hồ, Mạc/Trịnh/Nguyễn) established themselves in their own local bases and shifted operations there before ultimately dismantling the capital itself and replacing it elsewhere (Tây Đô, Huế). In this third cycle, Hà Nội as capital of the Democratic/Socialist Republic of Việt Nam has proclaimed itself the essential center of Vietnamese civilization and power with its long history of glorious battles,<sup>60</sup> celebrating its millennial anniversary and making the capital once again the symbol of Vietnam's unity in time and space. Yet there remains the dialectic of Thăng Long and regional powers continuing, with tensions that have roiled the land for a thousand years and more.

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59 Tai 1995, pp. 272–88; Malarney 2001, pp. 67–68.

60 Pelley 2002, pp. 210–33; Whitmore 2012, pp. 15–23.

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