

Naming the Red River — becoming a Vietnamese river

Hieu Phung

This study of river names seeks to deepen our understanding of the pre-modern environmental history of northern Vietnam. A performative practice, naming places often reveals the transformation of a physical environment into a cultural one. By analysing the names given to antecedents of the Red River in northern Vietnam, this article argues that each historical name reflected its users' perception of their relationship with a respective river. Toponyms like Lô, Phú Lương, Nhi, and 'Great River', therefore, did not simply represent the present-day Red River — a geographical unit that dates to the French colonial period.

Originating in Yunnan, China, where it is called the Yuanjiang (元江), the Red River, or Sông Hồng, is a humble river.¹ It stretches only over 1,150 kilometres in length. Geographers have used Việt Trì, a town about 56 kilometres as the crow flies northwest of Hanoi, as a marker that divides this riverscape into its upper and lower regions. Not only have most geographical narratives focused on the section of the river that extends 550 kilometres within the Vietnamese borders, but also the ample literature on the Red River Delta has entrenched a particular visualisation of the river in the minds of the Vietnamese people. As the largest river in northern Vietnam, the Red River is often represented on modern maps as a thick line that runs from the northwestern border through Việt Trì to an estuary on the eastern coast. However, conceptualising the Red River as a national river, as well as a single flow, has obscured a rich history of the interactions between different sections of the river and the surrounding Vietnamese riparian communities. In its history, the

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1 It is unclear where and when the name 'Red River' was first recorded. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the following terms seemed to be equivalents across texts written in different languages: 'Le fleuve Rouge' in French, 'Hồng Hà' (紅河) in classical Chinese (hà, 河 means river), and 'sông Hồng Hà' in Romanised Vietnamese (*sông* means river). Since the late twentieth century, the Vietnamese have unanimously used the toponym 'sông Hồng', a direct translation of 'Hồng Hà'. As people shifted from 'Hồng Hà' to 'sông Hồng', they considered *Hông* as a proper noun that did not need translating. Today, three common English renderings of this river name include the Red River, the Sông Hồng, and the Hồng River.

so-called Red River witnessed a development similar to other major Southeast Asian rivers; that is, human settlement and interactions occurred most intensively in its middle and lower sections.² This article delves into the early history of this river by examining its name changes from around 1000 to 1500 CE.

In Vietnam, as in many Southeast Asian postcolonial regimes, replacing colonial place-names with ones that have come to mark new socio-spatial politics is a common practice. Outside the region, geographer Mark Monmonier has painstakingly shown how, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the United States, Canada, and Britain made efforts to systematise geographical names — a process that unavoidably legitimised one toponym and all of its social, political, and cultural implications over others.³ The appellation ‘Red River’ originated in the French colonial period (1887–1954), yet it curiously remains unchanged to the present. Several other names for the river existed prior to the nineteenth century, however. They included *Lô* (瀾/盧), *Phú Lương* (富良), and *Nhị* or *Nhĩ* (珥), as well as a nickname, ‘Great River’ (大江; *Đại Giang*).⁴ Note, while there are two different Vietnamese pronunciations for the third name (*Nhị* or *Nhĩ*), their meanings are not different because only one Chinese character (珥) was used to record the name. Additionally, attempts to trace the literal meaning of each of these historical names remain rather futile. Because both public and scholarly narratives often reduce these appellations to arbitrary labels attached to the physical environment, they erroneously overlook a deep history in which the river, as a material entity, transcended human–nature boundaries. The Red River is important to the Vietnamese not simply because it courses through their land.

This article seeks to tell an intertwined story. It traces how Vietnamese scholars and court historians wrote about the conceptual antecedents they held about the Red River, as well as how the materiality of the river, such as its location, shifting channels and delta, structured many episodes of Vietnamese history. It shows that none of the pre-modern names of the Red River represented the entire river system in the way that its modern version does. Not only did these pre-modern names tend to be associated with the middle section of the Red River, but its upper and lower reaches were also named discretely. This study does not claim that the changes of river names comprehensively account for the historical transformations of the Red River. However, a history of its name changes provides us with alternative, curious vestiges by which, I hope, we may derive new perspectives on the spatial units embedded in each historical toponym.

2 John K. Whitmore, ‘Ngo (Chinese) communities and montane–littoral conflict in Dai Viet, ca. 1400–1600’, *Asia Major* 27, 2 (2014): 55–6.

3 Mark Monmonier, *From Squaw Tit to Whorehouse Meadow: How maps name, claim, and inflame* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

4 The Han-Chinese character used to record the toponym *Lô* was 瀾, but its homophone, 盧, was used sometimes. Although there are etymological differences between *giang* (江) and *hà* (河), they both mean river. It is customary to refer to the *Lô* and the *Phú Lương* respectively as the *Lô Giang* (瀾/盧江) and the *Phú Lương Giang* (富良江), and to the *Nhị/Nhĩ* as the *Nhị/Nhĩ Hà* (珥河). Many rivers elsewhere in Southeast Asia have multiple names, although the subject needs more study. See, for instance, Helen L. Smith, ‘Geographical nomenclature in Siam’, *Geographical Review* 36, 2 (1946): 264–9.

Inscribing the 'Red River'

Human geographers studying place-names or toponyms have challenged the traditional approach that focuses on etymology and/or classification. Their new agenda is to explore the 'performative practice' of naming a place; that is, to analyse and unpack the conflicting socio-spatial processes underneath the seemingly objective decisions of naming and renaming a place, and hence of a particular toponym.⁵ Using this perspective, one can diverge from an emphasis on the original meaning of different historical names of the Red River. If we focus on their performative function, names such as *Lô*, *Phú Lương*, and *Nhị* reveal conceptions that are not identical to those embedded in the modern appellation, 'Red River'. Still, the former names are antecedents of the latter because the Vietnamese have conflated the various historical river references with that running past the old capital of Thăng Long (present-day Hanoi). Like their modern counterparts, successive (but not all) Vietnamese state-builders between 1000 and 1800 maintained their principal capital at this location.⁶ In this way, the Vietnamese people inscribed the various antecedents of the Red River into their cultural system.

Whereas spatial relations unite, temporal contexts nonetheless divide. Because each toponym was used at a particular period, the water zone associated with it and its corresponding community formed a distinctive relationship. Extant written sources have referred to the river in question as the '*Lô*' from the eleventh to the fifteenth century. From around the thirteenth century, writers and court historians increasingly perceived it as a pre-eminent river in the Vietnamese landscape, which led to its prevailing nickname as the 'Great River'. Another name, '*Nhị*', became dominant from the late fifteenth century, while the name '*Phú Lương*' followed a distinct path. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, if not earlier, Chinese sources on Vietnam tended to use '*Phú Lương*' rather than '*Lô*' and '*Nhị*', and this preference remained so until later.⁷

Setting this naming process in a larger picture of early Vietnam suggests certain parallels, especially in terms of the integration between inland centres and coastal zones. Historians of Vietnam have forcefully dispelled the perception that the Vietnamese were alienated from the sea. By analysing the Thuận-Quảng region (in central Vietnam) in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Charles Wheeler has argued that its littoral served as 'a unifying thoroughfare', functioning in the same manner as inland rivers.⁸ In the case of northern Vietnam, the late John K. Whitmore and other scholars have contended that the Lý dynasty in the eleventh century established its control mainly over the mid-section of the Red River. During the next four hundred years, a distinct multifaceted culture evolved in the lower delta and the coastal region. However, by the latter part of the fifteenth century, the mid-

5 Reuben Rose-Redwood, Derek Alderman and Maoz Azaryahu, 'Geographies of toponymic inscription: New directions in critical place-name studies', *Progress in Human Geography* 34, 4 (2010): 453–70.

6 The administrative border of Hanoi expanded in 2008 to include some areas on the right bank of the Red River. Today the Red River runs through the national capital (see the shaded part of [fig. 1](#)).

7 Vietnamese literati also used *Phú Lương* as an alternative name for the *Nhị* in the late 18th and 19th centuries, although no clear explanation for this adoption has been found.

8 Charles Wheeler, 'Re-thinking the sea in Vietnamese history: Littoral society in the integration of Thuận-Quảng, seventeenth–eighteenth centuries', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies (JSEAS)* 37, 1 (2006): 123–53.

river and the downriver realms were unified into one world.⁹ Li Tana also concurs that the evolution of the lower Red River areas, which she calls the ‘Western plain’, was a later development. She traces this development to a combination of factors, including ecological degradation in the more populous eastern delta and migration from the eastern to the western delta in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.¹⁰

Chronicles and gazetteers, written in classical Chinese and dating from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century, prove most useful. These sources contain information relating to the naming practice of the historical Red River dating to the eleventh century. While I am aware of other possible sources, chronicles and gazetteers provide insights that differ from explanations given in the current literature. For example, using linguistic evidence, Trần Trí Dõi has claimed that Lô and Phú Lương are the earliest names of the Red River. His argument is that medieval writers used Chinese scripts to transcribe early Vietnamese sounds that originally meant river, resulting in names such as Lô and Phú Lương.¹¹ The main weakness therein is historical context. Setting the accuracy of linguistic evidence aside, this hypothesis does not explain why the toponym Lô dominated written sources prior to the fifteenth century, and why, while Chinese literati favoured Phú Lương, their Vietnamese counterparts turned to the name Nhị.

Before proceeding further, I will note some sources that lie outside the scope of this article. One of them involves oral tradition and folk culture. The study of folklore has long confirmed that the Red River was known as ‘Sông Cái’ (lit., ‘the main river’). To the best of my knowledge, the earliest evidence for this vernacular name is a seventeenth-century text written by a Western visitor. According to this source, the river, on the banks of which was situated the royal city, ‘is called by the natives Songkoy, or the head river’.¹² Hence, we do not know when the term Songkoy/Sông Cái came to be in use. Neither do we know if ‘the natives’ used it as a genuine toponym or a ‘characterizing phrase’, to use water expert Robert Ettema’s term.¹³ In theory, potential answers can be found in sources that contain Nôm, the old written script that recorded vernacular Vietnamese prior to the dominance of Romanised Vietnamese. Hence, studying the appellation Sông Cái would involve examining a wide range of sources, including stele inscriptions, local hagiographies, and familial genealogies.

9 John K. Whitmore, ‘The rise of the coast: Trade, state and culture in early Đại Việt’, *JSEAS* 37, 1 (2007): 104–8; Whitmore, ‘Ngo (Chinese) communities’, pp. 53–85.

10 Li Tana, ‘“The sea becomes mulberry fields and mulberry fields become the sea”: Dikes in the eastern Red River Delta, c.200 BCE to the twenty-first century CE’, in *Natural hazards and peoples in the Indian Ocean world: Bordering on danger*, ed. Greg Bankoff and Joseph Christensen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 69–70; Li Tana, ‘A historical sketch of the landscape of the Red River Delta’, *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* 4, 2 (2016): 1–13.

11 Trần Trí Dõi, ‘Tên gọi của Sông Hồng: Dấu tích biểu hiện nét đa dạng văn hoá trong lịch sử người Việt [The appellations of the Red River: Traces indicating cultural diversity in the history of the Vietnamese people]’, Paper presented at the third Conference of Vietnamese Studies, Hanoi, 4–7 Dec. 2008.

12 Samuel Baron and Christoforo Borri, *Views of seventeenth-century Vietnam: Christoforo Borri on Cochinchina and Samuel Baron on Tonkin*, introduced and annotated by Olga Dror and K.W. Taylor (Ithaca, NY: SEAP, Cornell University, 2006), p. 204.

13 Robert Ettema, ‘Rivers viewed through names and epithets’, *Journal of Hydraulic Engineering* 131, 7 (2005): 535–41.

I have not yet used texts produced by Chinese writers as my main sources either. For instance, a Chinese text dating to around the sixth century, the *Shuijing zhu* (Water classic commentaries), is well known as a source of information relating to the major rivers of northern Vietnam.¹⁴ In it, the Chinese observers described these rivers as the extensions of those originating in southern China. Instead of bearing local toponyms, they were given descriptive nomenclatures such as ‘northern’, ‘middle’, and ‘southern’ rivers. This lack of local references is in stark contrast to the Vietnamese accounts of what would later become known as the Red River.

In this study, three early Vietnamese texts serve as my main sources. The first two are dynastic chronicles, and the third one is a personal record. One of the dynastic histories is the *Đại Việt sử ký* (The historical records of Đại Việt). Confucian historian Lê Văn Hưu initially compiled it in 1272, and he wrote about the period from around 200 BCE to 1224/1225 CE. In 1455, another court historian named Phan Phu Tiên added to it the history from 1225 to 1427. This early text has not survived but we know about its contents because they have been integrated into the well-known *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* (The complete book of the historical records of Đại Việt, hereafter, *Complete book*). In 1479, historian Ngô Sĩ Liên compiled the first version of this dynastic history. The text that one often reads today is the last-known edition, dated 1697.¹⁵ While historians after 1479 did not make significant redactions to Ngô’s version, the fusions between Lê Văn Hưu’s and Phan Phu Tiên’s earlier records and that of Ngô Sĩ Liên are not easily recognisable.

Another extant dynastic history is often known as the *Việt sử lược* (Concise summary of the Vietnamese historical records, hereafter, *Concise summary*).¹⁶ The authors and the precise date of this text remain unclear. Many scholars believe that the *Concise summary* came after Lê Văn Hưu’s work, suggesting that it was compiled between 1277 and 1388.¹⁷ In any case, both the *Concise summary* and Lê Văn Hưu’s account present to us invaluable information on Vietnamese history to 1225.

The third source, a personal record, was written by a nobleman of the Trần dynasty named Lê Trắc (also pronounced as Lê Tắc). This book reveals a local perspective on the Vietnamese landscape in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Its title is *An Nam chí lược* (Brief records of Annam, hereafter, *Brief records*), and the fact that Lê Trắc did not refer to his homeland as Đại Việt but Annam (a name first given by the

14 Li Daoyuan (?–527 CE), *Shuijing zhu* 水經注 [Water classic commentaries]. For a discussion of the information in the *Shuijing zhu* that relates to the Red River, see: Đào Duy Anh, *Đất nước Việt Nam qua các đời: Nghiên cứu địa lý lịch sử Việt Nam* [Vietnam throughout history: A study of Vietnamese geographical history] (Hanoi: Văn Hoá Thông Tin, 2005[1964]): 37–48.

15 Lê Văn Hưu, Phan Phu Tiên, Ngô Sĩ Liên, et al., *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* 大越史記全書 [The complete book of the historical records of Đại Việt], Paris.SA.PD.2310, prelims, Bản kỷ 5, 33 a–b, Bản kỷ 11, 90a, Bản kỷ 13, 17a. The 1697 version covers Vietnamese history until 1675.

16 *Việt sử lược* 越史略 [Concise summary of the Vietnamese historical records], reproduced in the online version of the *Siku quanshu* [The complete library of four treasuries] in the Kanseki Repository, Kyoto University’s online database of premodern Chinese texts, <http://www.kanripo.org/text/KR2i0023/> (accessed 22 Feb. 2020). This version is divided into three volumes and an appendix. I use consecutive numbers to refer to these volumes, instead of their original references as the upper (上), the middle (中), and the lower (下) volumes.

17 Recent studies have suggested its original title as *Đại Việt sử lược* 大越史略 [Concise summary of the historical records of Đại Việt]. See Cheng Sijia, ‘Xiancun zuizao de Yuenan gudai shiji: Dayue shilue ruogan wenti de zai tantao’, *Zhongguo dianji yu wenhua* 3 (2017): 26–36.

Chinese in the eleventh century and mostly used only in connection with historical China) somewhat concealed the predicaments behind the compilation of this text. According to Lê Trắc's autobiography, when the Mongol/Yuan army attacked Annam in 1284, he was serving as an attendant to a member of the Trần dynasty. The very next year, he followed his lord in surrendering to the Mongols, and in 1288, fled his homeland and remained in exile at the Yuan court.¹⁸ Lê Trắc must have drafted most of the *Brief records* during this time. No one knows when he began writing this text, but by 1307, a certain scholar of the Yuan dynasty (Cheng Jufu, 1249–1318) had already read and written a preface to it.¹⁹ Between 1307 and 1340, Lê Trắc apparently continued revising and editing his work.²⁰ Unlike dynastic histories, Lê Trắc's account embraced a personal cause. In recounting the grandeur of his homeland, Lê Trắc seemed to have found a way, by writing, to articulate his identity as a man from Annam in the Yuan court.

A river of the capital city: The Lô

In 1010, the Lý rulers set up their capital in Thăng Long, situated in present-day Hanoi. Shortly after, they constructed many new buildings, including the Hàm Quang ('Retention of Radiance') basilica, which was built at the Eastern Pier of the Lô River in 1011.²¹ This is the earliest written evidence that identifies the Red River as the Lô. We can surmise that local people had been using this toponym by that time. Although this name persists in sources dated to several subsequent centuries, there is enough evidence to indicate its gradual disappearance during the mid-fifteenth century. More than just recording the river's name, these sources point to important markers that people living at that time most likely used to locate the Lô River. In particular, they all reveal a robust relationship between the river and Thăng Long, the capital city of almost all northern Vietnamese dynasties up to the eighteenth century. At the core of this relationship was the perennial strategic location: the Eastern Pier. The Eastern Pier was likely located in the vicinity of the present-day Hoè Nhai temple (fig. 1).²² In written sources, the pier was known by several different titles, including Đông Bộ (東步), Triều Đông Bộ (朝東步), Đông Bộ Đầu (東步頭), or Đông Tân (東津).

18 Lê Trắc, *An Nam chí lược* 安南志略 [Brief records of Annam], reproduced in the online version of the *Siku quanshu* [The complete library of four treasures] in the Kanseki Repository, Kyoto University's online database of premodern Chinese texts, <http://www.kanripō.org/text/KR2i0020/> (accessed 22 Feb. 2020), 20, 4a–6a. All quotes of the *Brief records* in this article are from this version. Notes will be provided when a different version is cited.

19 Lê Trắc, *An Nam chí lược*, ed. Trần Kinh Hoà (Hue city: Viện Đại học Huế - Ủy ban Phiên dịch sử liệu Việt Nam, 1961), Appendix, p. 4.

20 *Ibid.*, pp. vii–xii.

21 *Concise summary*, 2, 4a; *Complete book*, Bản kỷ 2, 5a. The *Concise summary* and the *Complete book* slightly differ from one another in their descriptions of the location of the Hàm Quang basilica. Hàm Quang basilica is situated at the 'Lô Eastern Pier' (瀟東步; Lô Đông Bộ) in the former, and only as 'the Pier [or a pier] of the Lô River' (盧江步頭; Lô Giang bộ đầu) in the latter. Despite the fact that all other references to the Pier in the *Complete book* consistently use the term 瀟, its homophone, 盧, was used in this case. On the translation of 殿 (殿) as basilica, see: Victor Cunrui Xiong, *Sui-Tang Chang'an: A study in the urban history of late medieval China* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 2000), p. xiii.

22 Trần Quốc Vương and Vũ Tuấn Sán, 'Xác định địa điểm Đông Bộ Đầu' [Identifying the location of the Eastern Pier], *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử* 77, 8 (1965): 56–9.

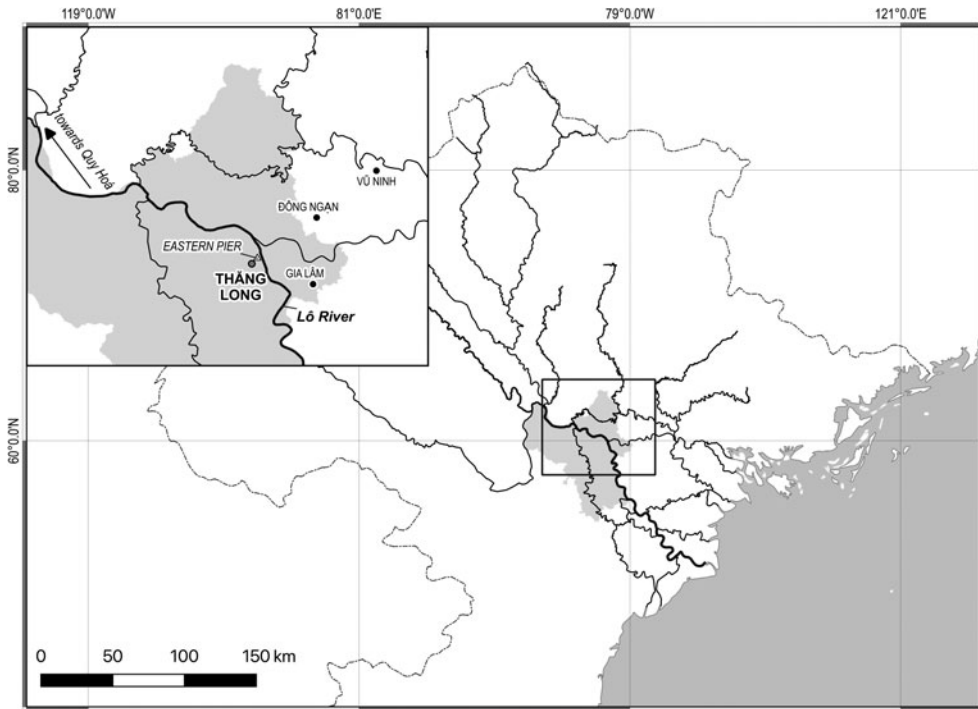


Figure 1. The Lô River, c.11th–13th century

The differences among these names, except Triều Đông Bộ ('Facing-East Pier'), are due to which Chinese term for 'pier' was in use, 'bộ', 'bộ đầu', or 'tân'.

Although the Eastern Pier was just one of several ports on the rivers surrounding Thăng Long, contemporary authorities used it extensively for water-related ceremonies and public spectacles. In 1012, the year after the Hàm Quang basilica was constructed at the Eastern Pier, the reigning king, King Thái Tổ (r. 1010–28), visited this place 'in order to watch boat racing'.²³ Subsequently, all four ceremonial boat races (in 1012, 1013, 1037, and 1038) recorded by the authors of the *Complete book* were observed at that same basilica. In fact, the Lý authorities, as well as their Trần counterparts, should have organised these ceremonies more frequently because, in 1119, 'it was decided that royal banquets and boat racing be held every eighth lunar month'.²⁴ While ceremonial boat races could be organised at different places, the most significant ones were those held at the Eastern Pier, that is, on the Lô River. Despite insufficient information on the early history of Hàm Quang, it is clear that the authorities maintained certain royal constructions at the Eastern Pier through the next few centuries. In 1237, for instance, the Trần court renovated a basilica called

23 '帝御含光殿觀競舟.' *Complete book*, Bản kỷ 2, 5a. Although there is evidence that Vietnamese rulers adopted titles such as 'đế' (帝) or 'hoàng đế' (皇帝) (both translatable as 'emperor') since the late 10th century, whether their rule was imperial is an open question, particularly prior to the 15th century. I will generally refer to these early Vietnamese rulers as 'kings', instead of 'emperors'.

24 '此後每歲八月競舟設宴, 以為常.' *Ibid.*, Bản kỷ 3, 19b.

Linh Quang (Numinous Radiance). The renovation project involved relocating the basilica to the Eastern Pier, as well as assigning it with a particular function.

The Linh Quang basilica was relocated and renovated [into a new basilica] at the Eastern Pier. [The renovated basilica] was titled Phong Thủy. Whenever a royal carriage was on a tour, it would stop by here and court officials would salute His majesty. They were required to offer him betel nuts and tea. For that reason, people called this basilica by a nickname of ‘Tea Basilica’.²⁵

Even though its original location remains unknown, the Linh Quang basilica seems to have replaced the Hàm Quang as an important venue for ceremonial boat races. The *Concise summary* reports that the Linh Quang was first built in 1058.²⁶ Combining the evidence in the *Concise summary* and the *Complete book*, boat race ceremonies were subsequently observed at the Linh Quang basilica in 1079, 1118, 1119, 1122, 1123, and 1130. Furthermore, an Eastern Pier boat race was reported in 1296. If the Linh Quang basilica still existed by that time, the Trần court must have watched this boat race ceremony from there.²⁷

The Eastern Pier of the Lô River also strategically connected the capital city with its outer territories by water thoroughfares, hence military campaigns provide another lens into the significance of the pier and its river location. The *Concise summary* has an account of an excursion led by King Thánh Tông of the Lý dynasty (r. 1054–72) into Champa in 1069. The reference to the Eastern Pier in this account demonstrates that waterways served as the main routes of the military expedition. Moreover, the Lý authorities used this pier for public demonstrations of its power. In this campaign, the Lý army ravaged a Cham polity (in south-central Vietnam) and captured its ruler. The leader of this Cham polity was known in Vietnamese sources as Ché Củ or Đệ Củ; although his native name is conventionally believed to be Rudravarman III, recent studies have debunked this notion.²⁸ The campaign was dramatic, such that the authors of the *Concise summary* recalled the triumphant return of King Thánh Tông in great detail. They described this spectacle as it proceeded at the Eastern Pier.

Having returned from Chiêm Thành [Champa], our king arrived at the Eastern Pier. He commanded that all officers display their squadrons and armaments with solemnity. The king then rode his splendid carriage as his entourage rode horses to lead the way. The Cham king, Đệ Củ, wore a *ma cút* hat and a white garment made of the *diệp* cloth. He also had a piece of stiff silk around his waist. Five soldiers of the Hung Vũ squadron were in charge of leading him, and his attendants were bound up and taken all together.²⁹

25 ‘移造靈光殿於東步頭，號風水殿。凡車駕所幸，駐蹕於此，百官迎送，必獻檳榔及茶，故俗呼茶殿。’ *Ibid.*, Bản kỷ 5, 11a. The literal meaning of Phong Thủy is ‘wind and water’.

26 *Concise summary*, 2, 16a.

27 *Complete book*, Bản kỷ 6, 4a–b.

28 Michael Vickery, ‘Champa revised’, *The Cham of Vietnam: History, society and art*, ed. Tran Ky Phuong and Bruce Lockhart (Singapore: NUS Press, 2011), pp. 389–94.

29 ‘王至自占城，次朝東津。詔有司肅軍容盛陳儀衛。上御寶車，羣臣皆騎馬導引。占城王第矩戴麻骨冠，著白氎衣，以絹繫腰。令興武都五人牽之，繫其黨屬以從。’ *Concise summary*, 2, 20b. I am unable to decipher what a *ma cút* hat is; *diệp* is likely a fine cotton-like cloth.

The Eastern Pier and the Lô River witnessed not only victories but also attacks against the capital city. A series of assaults by powerful locals at the Eastern Pier in the first two decades of the thirteenth century presaged the decline of the Lý dynasty at Thăng Long. Despite the fact that neither the *Concise summary* nor the *Complete book* included a comprehensive account of this period, these texts together recorded military clashes at the Eastern Pier in 1209, 1211, 1212 and 1214. Yet, the Eastern Pier has become an iconic landmark mostly because of its significance in what modern historians have conventionally regarded as the Đại Việt–Yuan/Mongol wars in the second half of the thirteenth century.

During these wars, the Eastern Pier and the Lô River were undeniably critical to gaining control of the capital city. The first Mongol invasion in 1257–58 saw the Trần leaders retreat from their capital to a lower section of the Lô. In early 1258, as King Thái Tông of the Trần dynasty (r. 1225–58) and his eldest son, Prince Hoảng (who later became King Thánh Tông, r. 1258–78), led a countermove, their target was precisely the Eastern Pier. During this strike, the Yuan-Mongol troops were forced to retreat to Quy Hoá, a northwestern fort (寨; trại) up the Lô River.³⁰ In another war that broke out two decades later, the Eastern Pier also served as a marker that participants used to make sense of the outcomes of their battles over Thăng Long. In 1285, the Mongols initially crushed the Trần troops therein. Reporting on this event, the authors of the *Complete book* wrote:

On the twelfth day [of the first lunar month in 1285], the enemy [i.e., the Mongols] attacked Gia Lâm, Vũ Ninh, and Đông Ngạn, and captured many of our fighters. Having found out that these fighters all had ink tattoos on their arms, saying ‘Kill the Tartars’, the Mongols burned with indignation and killed many of them. The Mongols then proceeded to the Eastern Pier where they erected a large banner.³¹

The siege of the Eastern Pier meant that Thăng Long was lost to the Mongols (fig. 1). When a Trần unit retook their capital city five months later, the retreat of the Mongols was marked by their crossing of the Lô River. Here was what the Trần king was informed on the tenth day of the fifth lunar month in 1285:

The Supreme councillor by the name of Quang Khải, the Hoài Văn marquis by the name of Quốc Toản, together with Trần Thông, Nguyễn Khả Lạp, and his brother Nguyễn Truyên, led local men and fighters [in battle with the Mongols] at the capital city and Chương Dương. They defeated the enemy there. The Mongol troops were crumbling. Prince Toghôn and the privy counsellor named Arigh Qaya all fled across the Lô River.³²

Although the *Complete book* included an extensive account of the war in 1287–88, its authors mentioned neither the capital city nor the Eastern Pier. Such a narrative indicates the imperfect nature of the sources: the dynastic chronicles do not provide us with a comprehensive account of the war. It could also be argued that the hardest

30 *Complete book*, Bản kỷ 5, 22a–23a.

31 ‘十二日，賊犯嘉林，武寧，東岸。獲我軍，皆墨刺殺韃二字於臂。大怒，殺之甚眾。遂至東步頭建大旗。’ Ibid., Bản kỷ 5, 45b.

32 ‘上相光啓，懷文侯國瓚，及陳聰，阮可臘，與弟阮傳，率諸路民兵敗賊於京城，章陽等處。賊軍大潰。太子脫驩，平章阿刺等奔過瀟江。’ Ibid., Bản kỷ 5, 48b–49a. Chương Dương, a port on the Red River, was located near Thăng Long.

battles in this warring period did not take place in Thăng Long and on the Lô River. The most strategically important battles, as conventionally recognised, occurred instead on the Bạch Đằng River (northeast of Thăng Long) where Trần troops tactically struck at the Mongol supply fleet.

Having surrendered to the Mongols in 1284, Lê Trắc had a different perspective on these wars. Although his *Brief records* provided no reports on the Eastern Pier, the Lô was a critical point of conflict in his visualisation of this militarised landscape. Having reported on the same event in the first lunar month of 1285, Lê Trắc focused on the tug of war over the Lô River. He wrote,

On the thirteenth day, a *bính tuất* day, Prince [Hoảng of the Trần dynasty] held out at the Lô River. But his troops were crushed again. He bolted. Prince Zhennan [Toghôn] crossed the river and opened a banquet at the Trần's royal palace. There, he had the prisoners presented and accepted the severed heads [of the Trần fighters].³³

Similarly, Lê Trắc rendered Prince Toghôn's withdrawal on the fifth lunar month with an act of crossing the Lô River. Although he differed from the authors of the *Complete book* in claiming that the Mongols had defeated the Trần at their capital, his narrative similarly underscored the connection between the Lô River and Thăng Long.³⁴

In short, there is a consensus across written sources of the eleventh and twelfth centuries that the most important characteristic of the Lô River was its intimate connection with the capital, Thăng Long. In the following two centuries, a subtle change slowly emerged; the 'Vietnamese' activities involved with the Lô River were increasingly perceived within a larger waterscape. This new visualisation is evidenced by the frequent reference to the Lô as the Great River, as well as by a more solid narrative of the relationship among the waterways linked to Thăng Long.

The rise of a 'Great River'

As an epithet, the Chinese term 'great river' (大河) generically referred to any river considered as the largest one in a particular area. However, the use of the title 'Great River' for the Lô only seems to have become commonplace since the thirteenth century. A record of early 1212, for instance, suggests that not only was the Great River the Lô, but also the expanse of its waterscape extended beyond what people understood to be the Lô. The following excerpt reported on a situation in 1212, at a time when fighting frequently occurred at the Eastern Pier. While the *Complete book* passed over this incident, the authors of the *Concise summary* wrote of it in detail.

The Thuận Lưu [Earl] Trần Tự Khánh, who held the title of Minh Tự, and Nguyễn Tự gathered at the Facing-East Pier. They vowed that they would maintain their loyalty to each other even at the cost of self-sacrifice, that they both would devote themselves to defend the kingdom [of the Lý dynasty], and that they would unite together in order to quell all turmoil. Hence, they demarcated their occupied zones along the two banks of the Great River. The strand along Bắc Giang circuit [i.e., a province-like territorial administrative

33 '十三日, 丙戌, 世子守瀘江, 又潰, 走. 鎮南王渡江, 宴其宮庭, 獻俘受馘.' *Brief records*, 4, 2b.

34 *Ibid.*, 4, 3b.

unit] from Thổ Khôi to Na Ngạn, as well as all fiefs and villages situated on the overland routes across this region would go under Trần Tự Khánh's control, while Nguyễn Tự would take over the riverbank stretching from the capital city up to Ô Diên. They then prepared to attack the people at the Hồng region on the third lunar month [in 1212].³⁵

Marked by the Eastern Pier, as well as the capital city, the Great River here was certainly the Lô. However, compared to earlier references to the Lô, the term Great River encompassed a slightly larger geopolitical meaning. The fact that Thổ Khôi and Na Ngạn were situated north of the Lô, while Thăng Long and Ô Diên lay on its southern bank, explained why the Great River, not simply the Lô, drew a boundary line between the zones occupied by Trần Tự Khánh and Nguyễn Tự (fig. 2). One needs to keep in mind that Trần Tự Khánh and Nguyễn Tự did not simply pledge loyalty to Thăng Long. Trần Tự Khánh was a member of the Trần clan. This clan, hailing from a township (鄉; hương) on the lower Red River and near the eastern coast called Túc Mạc, would soon overthrow the Lý in order to declare a new dynasty in their name. During the 1210s, Trần Tự Khánh had been moving back and forth between his hometown and Thăng Long. As Trần's ally, Nguyễn Tự had just come to occupy Quốc Oai, an area along the southern border of Thăng Long, and open to the southwestern mountains of today's Hoà Bình province.

Trần Tự Khánh and Nguyễn Tự's defensive front on a north-south axis across the Lô was highly strategic. The period that saw the decline of the Lý ruling house was marked by its rulers' repeated attempts to rely on different local powers, including that of the Hồng region.³⁶ Although the Hồng region was not immediately adjacent to the Lô River, it was a significant power east of Thăng Long, and well connected to the capital city and the eastern Red River Delta through waterways. Hence, with their occupied zones divided by the Great River, Trần Tự Khánh's troops were able to cut through critical waterways linking Thăng Long and the Hồng region, while Nguyễn Tự's troops would have blocked any attempt to depart south or up the Lô from the capital.

It appears that 'Great River' became an increasingly popular name for the Lô during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Given that the *Concise summary* ends with the Lý dynasty in 1225, the references to the Great River in the *Complete book* are suggestive. If Phan Phu Tiên wrote (and/or compiled) the section of the *Complete book* that recorded the history from 1226 to 1427 (discussed above), the references to the Lô as 'Great River' mainly appeared in these chronicles. This textual trace suggests that the title 'Great River' most likely became common during this

35 '順流明字陳嗣慶與阮字會於朝東步，誓為刎頸交，盡忠報國，共平禍亂。乃分大江之兩岸，各自統率。自土塊至那岸沿北江道，及陸路鄉邑，屬於嗣慶。自京岸至烏鶯，屬於字。期以三月會攻烘人。' *Concise summary*, 3, 35a. The title of Minh Tự was awarded for those held as an exemplar. The Facing-East Pier was another name of the Eastern Pier. Bắc Giang was a province-like unit north of Thăng Long. Instead of directly referring to the royal capital, this quote mentions a place called 'kinh ngạn' (京岸). This term is probably not a toponym but a characterising phrase referring to the riverbank where the royal capital was situated.

36 Texts such as *Concise summary* and *Brief records* record the Hồng region as 'Hồng lộ' (烘路); *lộ* (circuit) was a late-10th-century administrative jurisdiction originating in Song China. By contrast, the *Complete book* records the area as 'Hồng châu' (洪州); *châu* can be translated as region or prefecture, depending on historical contexts. These texts also differ in their use of the Chinese term for Hồng. Here, I opt to use 'region' as a neutral term for a territorial jurisdiction.

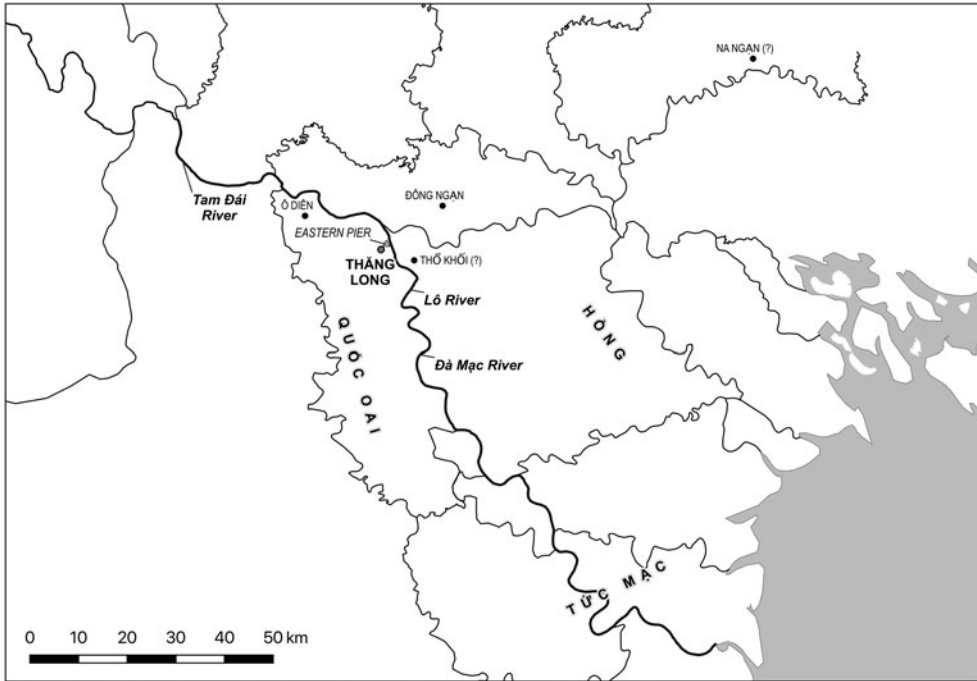


Figure 2. The Lō-Great River, c.14th century

period. For instance, Phan Phu Tiên’s account of a conflict in 1237 clearly indicated the application of ‘Great River’ as a nickname of the Lō. This dispute stemmed from a typical conflict in many royal families. To assure an heir apparent for the monarch (King Thái Tông of the Trần dynasty), a court faction forced a pregnant wife of his brother (Trần Liễu) to be remarried to him. As a result, the furious Trần Liễu gathered his troops and seized control of the Great River, while the anxious monarch fled his palace.³⁷ Even though this account does not contain many specific place-names that could help us identify their locations with certainty, it is clear that Trần Liễu’s annexation of the Great River posed a threat to Thăng Long. On balance, the expansion of the Great River beyond the notion that defined the Lō was in process.

The evolving notion about the Great River also seems to have corresponded with how contemporary people perceived the relationship between the Lō and other nearby waterways. Lê Trắc’s *Brief records* provides some useful information. Lê Trắc followed the conventions of his time in highlighting the connection between the Lō and Thăng Long. However, he also included the upstream and downstream waterscapes of this river: ‘The waterflow of the Lō River comes from the Tam Đái River; it is called Lō when it reaches La Thành [‘Reticulated Citadel’, the name of the outer wall of Thăng Long]. [The waterflow of the Lō] is then streamlined towards the sea.’³⁸ As

37 *Complete book*, Bản kỷ 5, 9b–10a.

38 My suggestion for reconstructing this sentence is ‘瀟江水自三帶江，至羅城曰瀟，又通于海.’ My translation reflects this reconstruction. Thus far, there are three versions of this passage, and they all contain certain textual omissions. 1. ‘瀟江：水曰三帶江至羅城，白瀟又通于海.’ (*Brief records*, 1, 8b); 2. ‘瀟

the source of the Lô River, the Tam Đái (‘Three Streams’) was the confluence of three other upstream rivers, including the Quy Hoá, the Tuyên Hoá, and the Đà, and for that matter, Lê Trắc noted, ‘it is called so’.³⁹ Notably, while he easily identified features of the upstream waterscape of the Lô, he did not provide details of its lower reaches. From his late thirteenth to mid-fourteenth century perspective, Lê Trắc did not name even one significant stream on the lower reaches. Past La Thành/Thăng Long, the flow of the Lô River was diverted into so many channels that no one seemed to be able to identify the mainstream. ‘At [the location between] La Thành and Đông Ngạn,’ Lê Trắc wrote, ‘the streamflow of the Lô River branches out in order to flow into the sea. There are ten bridges over this river; they are all magnificent.’⁴⁰ Hence, he did highlight that there was not one single channel, but a number of streams in the downstream waterscape of the Lô.

His contemporaries indeed registered a strong connection between the Lô and various rivers in what would become the lower Red River. One of the best examples is a river called ‘Đà Mạc’ (拖幕), or ‘Thiên Mạc’ (天幕). The historians who recorded the chronicle of the year 1208 observed that, during a rebellion against Thăng Long, ‘the people in Quốc Oai prefecture gathered together and took over Tây Kết, while the people from Văn Lôi fort occupied the Đà Mạc River’. ‘Since then,’ they commented, ‘all routes were blocked, and no boats could sail through [the region’s waterways]’.⁴¹ This was a vista from Thăng Long. That the rebel forces occupied Tây Kết and the Đà Mạc meant that they controlled both overland and water routes connecting Thăng Long to the coast. In some later battles such as those in 1214, 1258, and 1285, the Đà Mạc/ Thiên Mạc similarly functioned as a strategic foothold on the thoroughfare up the Lô and to Thăng Long.⁴² The specific locations of places such as Tây Kết and Đà Mạc/ Thiên Mạc in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries remain unclear. So does the location of the border between the Lô and the Đà Mạc. However, it is safe to suppose that the latter was downstream of the former, and that both were only one part of what would become known as the Red River (fig. 2).

Like the Đà Mạc/ Thiên Mạc, the Hải Triều (海潮) and the Hoàng (黃) rivers both belonged to the lower Red River waterscape.⁴³ Scholars today believe Hải Triều to have been a part of the present-day Luộc River, represented by the section that immediately diverges from the Red River at Tiên Lữ district in Hưng Yên province. Likewise, they identify the Hoàng as a lower section of the Red River that flowed past the present-day Lý Nhân district in Hà Nam province (fig. 2). That being said,

江水: 三帶江至羅城, 自瀘又通于海.’ (Lê Trắc, *An Nam chí lược*, ed. Trần Kinh Hoà, Appendix, 24); and 3. ‘瀘江水曰三帶江. 至羅城曰瀘, 又通於海.’ (*Annan zhilue* [i.e., *An Nam chí lược*], ed. Wu Shangqing (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2000), pp. 27–8).

39 ‘三帶江: 歸化江水自雲南, 宣化江水自特磨道, 陀江水自撞龍, 因名焉.’ *Brief records*, 1, 9a.

40 ‘北江路: 在羅城東岸, 瀘江水分, 通于海. 江有十橋, 皆傑麗.’ Lê Trắc, *An Nam chí lược*, ed. Trần Kinh Hoà, Appendix, p. 19. The *Siku quanshu* version excludes the word ‘水’ (*thuỷ*, meaning water); see: *Brief records*, 1, 2b.

41 ‘而國威人亦率其徒屯於西結, 文雷寨人屯於拖幕江. 自此道路阻絕, 舟船不通.’ *Concise summary*, 3, 27a.

42 *Concise summary*, 3, 38a; *Complete book*, Bản kỷ 5, 22a–b and 49a.

43 The Hoàng River is sometimes translated as the Hoàng Giang River. Some later sources referred to it as the Đại Hoàng (lit., Great Hoàng) River.

one should not readily impose the modern layout of rivers on the historical landscape. While a modern map traces the shapes of the physical environment, the people in the thirteenth and fourteen centuries followed the navigable watercourses. Hence, the written evidence prevents us from identifying the locations of a vast number of streams down the Lô. What it better informs us is that there was a strong connection between the Hải Triều, the Hoàng and the Lô.

A marching route followed by a general of the Trần court named Trần Khát Chân in 1389–90 provides a vivid illustration of these connections. Earlier in that year, the Trần army suffered a heavy loss in their southern border due to Cham attacks. In a sluggish response, the Trần court finally dispatched Trần Khát Chân from Thăng Long. On the eleventh lunar month in 1389, Trần Khát Chân and his troops set off down the Lô. The dynastic chroniclers recounted that, ‘As they entered the Hoàng River, they soon encountered the enemy [i.e., the Cham]. Having realised that this place was not advantageous to his troops, Trần Khát Chân [commanded them] to retreat to the Hải Triều River.’⁴⁴ More than a month later, the battle on the Hải Triều River concluded. The powerful Cham leader, Po Binasor (known as Ché Bông Nga in Vietnamese), was killed when Trần Khát Chân’s fighters attacked his boat with their hand cannons.⁴⁵ In this river war, Trần Khát Chân must have planned to block the advance of the Cham force at a seaport. However, he had to retreat from the Hoàng to the Hải Triều. This navigational route indicates that the stream that linked the Lô and the Hoàng flowed past the Hải Triều. In other words, the Hải Triều must have diverged at some point from the Lô–Hoàng watercourse.

There are clear correlations between the Lô and the so-called ‘Great River’, as well as between these historical rivers and the present-day Red River. Nevertheless, they are not the same. The recurring reference to the Lô as the Great River afforded a visualisation of a new landscape, one in which Thăng Long and the Lô became more organically connected with their surrounding waterscapes and landscapes. At the turn of the fifteenth century, the Hồ-led overthrow of the Trần throne resulted in the demotion of Thăng Long. The Hồ rulers chose a site in Thanh Hoá (about 110 kilometres as the crow flies south of Thăng Long) for their principal capital. They renamed Thăng Long as Đông Đô (lit., ‘Eastern Capital’). The principal capital was moved, but the Lô River remained as the most important river. During the first decade of the fifteenth century, as the Vietnamese struggled with the Ming invasion, the river that went past Đông Đô maintained its role as the pre-eminent backbone of the land. In this context, what the dynastic chroniclers recalled was not just the Lô but the Great River.

Naming the Great River: The Phú Lương vs the Nhi

The first few years of the fifteenth century saw a growing menace to the security of the incipient Hồ regime. Anxiety about the so-called ‘northern invaders’ runs through the dynastic chronicle of these years. The year 1405, for instance, saw the Hồ authorities approve a massive plan of defence, with the Great River at its core.

44 ‘軍發瀟江，至黃江已遇賊矣。渴真觀無可戰之地，退守海潮江.’ *Complete book*, Bản kỷ 8, 16a.

45 *Ibid.*, Bản kỷ 8, 17a–b.

To guard against [the threat of] the northern invaders, Hán Thương [i.e., the contemporary ruler of the Hồ dynasty, r. 1401–07] commanded that [all leaders in] headstream areas be required to offer logs and that [the people in] Vũ Ninh prefecture be allowed to attain the *ô mễ* wood at [the region of] the Cỗ Pháp mausoleum. The logs were to be sent to the appropriate military units so that they would be erected at seaports and strategic points on the Great River.⁴⁶

In mid-1406, the Hồ rulers continued building defensive constructions on principal water routes, erecting log fences along the southern bank of the Great River. The Great River went beyond the limits of the Lô because the Hồ's defensive front did not simply focus on Đông Đô. It stretched along the southern flank of the Great River from Đa Bang (多邦) — a strategic citadel that the Hồ had recently constructed on the upper reaches of the Lô — to a place called Lỗ Giang (魯江).⁴⁷ Despite the lack of information, the toponym 'Lỗ Giang' referred to either a river or a territorial jurisdiction (fig. 3). From the perspective of Thanh Hoá, the Great River meant an extended water zone that could hinder the advance of the Ming troops into the Hồ's southern territories. And the river did divide the Ming–Hồ battle into two fronts. Towards the end of 1406, the Hồ focused their forces on the Great River's southern bank, while the Ming troops quickly occupied the northern bank. The war soon came to an end when the Ming sacked Đa Bang citadel. Shortly after, the southern bank was also lost to the Ming. Đông Đô fell at the turn of 1407.⁴⁸

Hence, the nickname 'Great River' in the early fifteenth century did not merely indicate the very important connection between the river and the old royal capital. In the context of a war with Ming China, the Hồ leaders perceived the Lô as the front-line; any intrusion beyond this natural border would not only mean the loss of Đông Đô but also pose a lethal threat to the survival of their entire regime. After the loss of Đông Đô and the Great River, the Hồ forces were pushed back further south and were forced to surrender four months later.

To impose their rule over the newly integrated territory, the Ming authorities became seriously invested in collecting local knowledge. The *Annan zhi* (Vietnamese: *An Nam chí*), or *Records of Annam*, was written as part of this process.⁴⁹ This text dates to the 1410s. Like their Vietnamese counterparts, the Chinese authors of the *Records of Annam* continued speaking of the Lô River. However, they asserted that the Lô was also known as the Phú Lương, regardless of the absence of a similar

46 '漢蒼令各鎮源頭納樁木，武寧州許取古法陵烏米木送各軍植諸海口及大江要處，以防北寇.' Ibid., Bản kỷ 8, 48a. The *ô mễ* wood probably refers to the Chinese sweet gum species.

47 Ibid., Bản kỷ 8, 52a–b. 'Lô Giang' is a curious name. The Han-Chinese character used to record Lỗ in this record was a variant of 魯. However, it was probably a Nôm term; that is, it was used *only* to record a 'Vietnamese' sound. Meanwhile, the *Complete book* mentions a place named Lỗ Giang several times, albeit using a different Han-Chinese character, 魯 (Lỗ). Plus, it is not clear if these records referred to a river or a territory. The *Records of Annam* also speaks of a certain Lỗ Giang. There must be some connection between these places, if they were not the same. Hence, these toponyms deserve further research.

48 Ibid., Bản kỷ 8, 52b–54a.

49 Some 20th-century scholars mistook the title of this source as *An Nam chí nguyên*. Zhang Xiumin argued that the original title of the *Records of Annam* should have been *Jiaozhi zongzhi* 交趾總志 (Vietnamese: *Giao chỉ tổng chí*) [Comprehensive gazetteer of Jiaozhi]. See: Zhang Xiumin, 'Yongle *Jiaozhi zongzhi* de faxian [The discovery of the Jiaozhi gazetteer in the Yongle era]', *Lanzhou Daxue Xuebao* 1 (1981): 53–5.

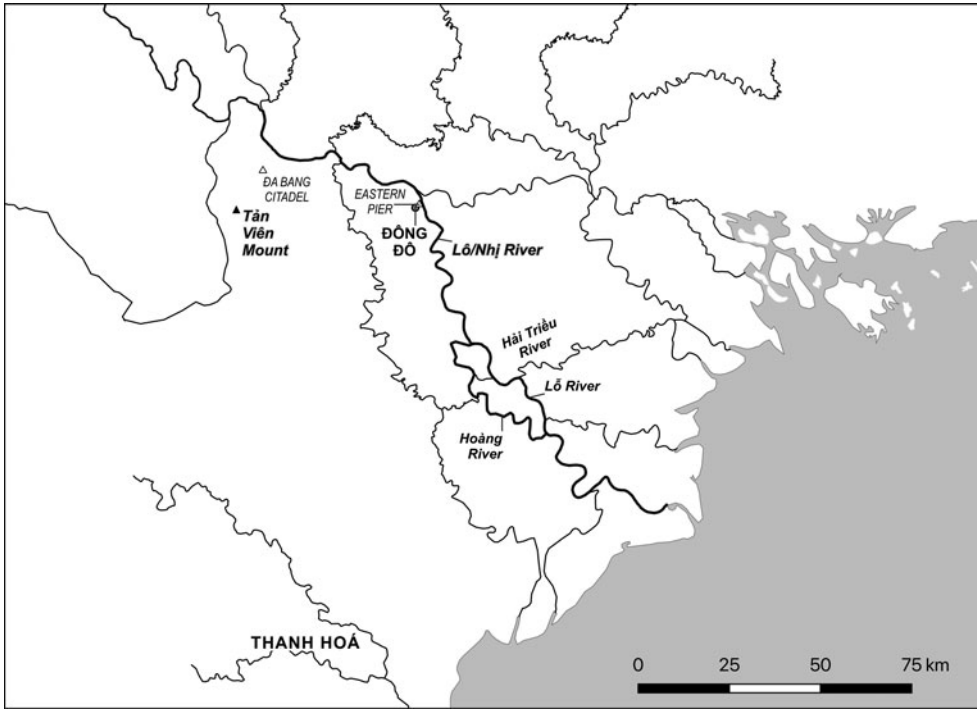


Figure 3. The Lô-Phú Lương-Nhị River, c.15th century

identification in early Vietnamese sources. Neither the reason behind this nomenclature nor its origins is clear. However, the main factor underlying this naming divergence must have entailed certain miscommunications among reporters and writers across the Sino-Vietnamese regimes over the course of several hundred years. As shown above, the exile Lê Trắc in the Yuan court consistently mentioned the Lô River. He also wrote about a different river whose name was indeed Phú Lương, even though he did not specify its location. Lê Trắc characterised it as a river that witnessed a significant event in the eleventh century. ‘The Phú Lương River,’ he wrote, ‘was the place where Guo Kui of the Song dynasty defeated Giao Chỉ [Chinese: *Jiaozhi*; i.e., Vietnam].’⁵⁰ This event, a momentous war in Sino-Vietnamese history, occurred in 1075–76. Other Vietnamese sources, including the *Concise summary* and the *Complete book*, all recounted this event, and yet, they congruently mentioned the so-called Như Nguyệt (如月) River.⁵¹ Twentieth-century Vietnamese scholar Hoàng Xuân Hãn first commented on this difference, suggesting that the Phú Lương and the Như Nguyệt of the eleventh century referred to different sections of the present-day Cầu River. He further observed that Chinese readers, most likely starting from the thirteenth/fourteenth century, mistook the Phú Lương–Như Nguyệt–Cầu River, a large stream north of Thăng Long and the Lô, with the Lô–

50 ‘富良江，宋郭逵敗交趾處，’ *Brief records*, 1, 9a. See also, *ibid.*, 4, 14b–15b.

51 *Complete book*, Bản kỷ 3, 9b; *Concise summary*, 2, 24a–b.

Red River.⁵² He is correct. Official histories of the Yuan and Ming dynasties, for instance, used both ‘Phú Lương’ and ‘Lô’ to record the large river flowing past Thăng Long.⁵³ This pattern of information transmission in Chinese sources was similarly displayed in the *Records of Annam*.

At any rate, the compilers of the *Records of Annam* accurately located the Lô/Phú Lương at Đông Quan district (a new administrative name for Thăng Long) of Giao Châu prefecture (a pre-tenth century name reused by the Ming authorities). They also recognised it as a body of water that extended beyond a provincial scale. The description of the Lô/ Phú Lương in the *Records of Annam* aptly attested to this distinction:

The Lô, also known as the Phú Lương, is located in Đông Quan county. It is connected upward with the Bạch Hạc River in Tam Đái prefecture. It courses past the eastern side of the county seat [of Giao Châu prefecture] and travels into a faraway distance in order to channel into the Đại Hoàng [i.e., the Hoàng River] before emptying itself into the sea.⁵⁴

The Lô/ Phú Lương was a section of the modern Red River. However, embedded in the Ming depiction was a sense of the Lô/ Phú Lương as a ‘great river’. It was linked with the upstream Bạch Hạc River (the Tam Đái River in Lê Trắc’s *Brief records*), as well as with the downstream Đại Hoàng and the sea. The Lô/ Phú Lương also took on the quality of a ‘great river’ because of its far-flung downstream channels. By emphasising how the Lô/ Phú Lương travelled downstream ‘a faraway distance’, and by singling the Đại Hoàng out, the Ming observers were being selective; they only highlighted some features of a waterscape apparently too vast to be perceived at a glance. In a separate description of the Đại Hoàng, they clarified that this stream was channelled via the Giao Thủy (膠水) River before emptying into the sea.⁵⁵ Likewise, their note on the Hải Triều River further captured the complexity of the interlaced waterscape down the Lô/ Phú Lương River. As earlier discussed, in the Việt–Cham war in 1389–90, Trần Khát Chân retreated from the Hoàng to the Hải Triều and eventually defeated the Cham leader Po Binasor on the Hải Triều. From the Ming perspective, however, ‘the Hải Triều was located at Khoái Châu, and it

52 Hoàng Xuân Hãn, ‘Lý Thường Kiệt: Lịch sử ngoại giao và tông giáo triều Lý’ [Lý Thường Kiệt: A political and religious history of the Lý dynasty], *La Sơn Yên Hồ Hoàng Xuân Hãn*, vol. 2, ed. Hữu Ngọc and Nguyễn Đức Hiền (Hanoi: Giáo Dục, 1998), p. 420.

53 This naming pattern in the official histories of the Yuan and Ming dynasties, such as the *Yuanshi* (元史) and the *Ming shilu* (明實錄), requires further research. Both texts are patchwork compilations, requiring the reader to be mindful about the dating of each individual piece of information. See: Frederick W. Mote, ‘A note on traditional sources for Yüan history’, *The Cambridge history of China*, vol. 6, ed. Herbert Franke and Denis Twitchett (Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 689–726; Geoff Wade, ‘The *Ming Shi-lu* as a source for Southeast Asian history’, in *Southeast Asia in the Ming shi-lu: An open access resource* (Singapore: Asia Research Institute and National University of Singapore), accessed 22 Feb. 2020, <http://www.epress.nus.edu.sg/msl/ming-shi-lu-source-study-south-east-asian-history>.

54 ‘瀘江，一名富良江，在東關縣。上接三帶州白鶴江，經本府城東，汪洋浩渺，下通大黃江，入于海。’ *An Nam chí (nguyên) 安南志(原)* [Records of Annam], reproduced in *Ngan-Nan tche yuan: Texte chinois édité et publié sous la direction de Léonard Arousseau*, ed. E. Gaspardone (Hanoi: Imprimerie d’Extrême-Orient, 1932), p. 41.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 42.

diverged from the Hà Lỗ River'.⁵⁶ Although there is insufficient information and even certain reservations about the Hà Lỗ (河魯), this river seems to have been what the Vietnamese chroniclers then referred to as the Lỗ River, at a location where the Hồ erected their defensive fences in 1406. Hence, the Lô/ Phú Lương in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was never perceived as merely one vast stream stretching directly to the sea. Its waterflow seemed to have diverged into two different channels — the Đại Hoàng and the Hà Lỗ — before the point at which the Hải Triều branched off (see fig. 3).

While many Chinese sources in the fifteenth century, as well as in the following period, maintained the appellation 'Phú Lương', Vietnamese writers were in favour of a new name, 'Nhị' or 'Nhị Hà' ('hà' means 'river').⁵⁷ No substantial evidence exists to explain how and why the name 'Nhị' emerged to replace the 'Lô' and/or 'Phú Lương' (if 'Phú Lương' was indeed in use).⁵⁸ Nevertheless, Vietnamese authors began to evoke the Nhị River in the fourteenth century. In one of his poems, well-known Confucian scholar-official Phạm Sư Mạnh (c.1289–1368) referred to the Nhị as a symbol representing the royal capital in Thăng Long. He wrote:

An official serving in three dynasties, I have held important positions in the forbidden palace.
My hair has turned white, I have yet to retire.
Burning some incense, I sit while facing the moon on the Nhị river
Ruefully—a misty valley somewhere in Hiệp Thạch.⁵⁹

This was a poem about a recurring question posed by Confucian scholars of all eras, whether to remain in or withdraw from public life. In the poem, Phạm drew a parallel between this issue and the river scenery. He used the moonlit Nhị as a symbol for political life in Thăng Long, while the hazy imagery of a misty valley far away in Hiệp Thạch, the author's home village, represented his yearning for reclusion. From this perspective, the Nhị was not merely a physical body of water coursing past Thăng Long, but also an emphatic symbol for the heart of the political arena in which Phạm was residing.

The Nhị also appeared in the poetry of some other writers in Thăng Long in the same period. Because poetry had become a common means of communication among highly educated scholars, Trần Nguyên Đán (1325–90) once wrote a piece as a response to his fellow scholar Lê Quát. The poem was set in the capital city and Trần used it as a token of appreciation of Lê. He chose the Nhị River as one of the backdrops for his portrait of Lê. Like Phạm Sư Mạnh, Trần Nguyên Đán perceived the Nhị River in both physical and symbolic terms. He emphasised the imagery of

56 '海潮江, 在快州, 自河魯江分流.' Ibid., p. 47.

57 Examples of post-1500 Chinese sources on Vietnam include Li Wenfeng's *Yue qiao shu* 越嶠書 [Book of the mountainous land of Yue/Việt] and Li Xiang'en's *Annan shi shi jiyao* 安南使事紀要 [Notes of a mission to Annam].

58 There were already doubts about the original meaning of 'Nhị' in the 19th century. See, for instance, Nguyễn Văn Siêu and Bùi Quý, *Đại Việt địa dư toàn biên* 大越地輿全編 [Complete book of geography of Đại Việt], A.72, print (1900), 4, 38b–39b.

59 '仕宦三朝備省官, 蒼頭白髮未還山. 焚香坐對珥河月, 惆悵煙溪峽石間.' Phạm Sư Mạnh, 'Chu trung tức sự' 舟中即事 [Immediate thoughts in my boat], in *Thơ văn Lý Trần* [An anthology of the Lý and Trần dynasties], vol. 3, ed. Đào Phương Bình et al. (Hanoi: Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1977), pp. 85–6.

the Nhị in the timeless moonlight as an allusion to a sense of the stability and permanence of Lê Quát's world. In Trần Nguyên Đán's eye, because Lê Quát was a man of that precise world, he would be able to 'make the vulgar concerns of life melt away' just by 'requesting a cup of hot tea'.⁶⁰

During this period, there emerged the perception that the Nhị was emblematic of the country as well. In this sense, the Nhị shared the characteristics of the Great River. When Nguyễn Nhữ Thuyết protested against the Hồ authorities' decision to relocate the principal capital from Thăng Long to Thanh Hoá in 1397, he spoke of the river in this way. Nguyễn made a geomantic argument. He argued that the site of Thăng Long was appropriate for the royal capital because its landscape 'has the form of a dragon's belly'. '[The presence of] the Tản Viên Range and the Lô Nhị River,' he clarified, '[makes this landscape] high, deep, flat, and open.'⁶¹ Pairing the Tản Viên with the Lô River had been a common practice from at least the mid-fourteenth century. Yet, Nguyễn Nhữ Thuyết's combination of 'Lô' and 'Nhị' suggests certain evidence for the transition from the former to the latter (fig. 3).

The coexisting records of the Lô and the Nhị in the dynastic chronicle that covers the eras of King Thái Tổ of the Lê dynasty (r. 1428–33), often known by his birth name Lê Lợi, further confirm this transition. The period in question stretched between 1418 and 1433. During this time, Lê Lợi and his followers, who initially built their base in Thanh Hoá, established themselves as a threat against Ming rule in Annam. By the end of 1427, Lê Lợi's forces crushed the Ming headquarters in Đông Quan, driving the Ming forces to retreat to China. A new imperial power, the Lê dynasty, was established shortly after.

In most cases, the dynastic historians continued referring to the Lô, but there was one mention of the Great River.⁶² Two incidents on the Nhị, however, indicate the transitional pattern. While the limits of evidence do not enable a thorough explanation for the gradual replacement of 'Lô' with 'Nhị', some hypotheses can be proposed. First, the volatility of the period might have resulted in a wide range of sources which were initially produced by different people. Using these sources to draft the chronicle of King Thái Tổ would, therefore, easily contain contradictory information. The fact that two different names, 'Lô' and 'Nhị', were used to refer to the same body of water, might be an outcome of such a patchwork compilation. Second, 'Nhị' might have been the name initially used by a small group of Thăng Long scholars in order to refer to a very specific section of the Lô. The establishment of the Lê dynasty and its administrative capital city in Thăng Long entailed significant territorial and cultural integration. Is it possible that the slow overshadowing of the Nhị partly resulted from the growth of the literati culture in Thăng Long?

In any case, concurrent records of the Lô and the Nhị are almost completely absent in the later chronicles of the *Complete book*. A cursory survey illustrates that historians of the various generations between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries

60 Trần Nguyên Đán, 'Canh Đồng tri phủ Hữu ti Mai Phong Lê công vận' 廣同知府右司梅峰黎公韻 [A companion piece for a poem of Prefect-cum-Right official Lê whose penname is Mai Phong], in *Thơ văn Lý Trần*, p. 165.

61 '今龍肚之地，傘圓之山，瀘珥之河，高深平闊.' *Complete book*, Bản kỷ 8, 28b.

62 On the Great River, see: *Complete book*, Bản kỷ 10, 39a.

shared an implicit agreement: the Nhị officially replaced the Lô.⁶³ After 1427, written sources continued to emphasise the intimate connection between the Nhị River and the site of Thăng Long. Although the name ‘Nhị’ remained active until the nineteenth century, its underlying geographical assumptions had changed significantly. This part of the history of the Red River, however, demands a different study.

Conclusion

Whereas modern geography tends to assume a single, supposedly objective, description of the Red River, this article shows that observers did not perceive this waterscape in the same way at different periods of its history. As part of a larger project that aims to trace the history of the Red River, this research has focused on the river’s historical names in the period between 1000 and 1500 CE.⁶⁴ I have argued that the changes in place-names denoted transformations in the relationship between the named places and related human activities. Lô, Phú Lương, Nhị, and ‘Great River’, were all appellations used to refer to the historical Red River. They shared a similar characteristic with the modern Red River because all could be identified with one critical waterway that flowed past an important urban centre of the Vietnamese, Thăng Long–Hà Nội.

However, tracing the role that each of these river names played in Vietnamese history has illuminated how the association of Vietnamese activities mainly with the mid-section of the Red River slowly changed. The evolution of the notion of the Lô–Phú Lương–Nhị as a ‘great river’ was mostly founded upon the integration of Thăng Long and the lower reaches of the Red River. Although political, economic, and social histories have long examined this integration, this study has offered an alternative perspective. When a feature of the physical environment such as a river is named, it is transformed into a cultural and historical body. The Red River would not be a Vietnamese national river without the various histories of the Lô, the Nhị, the Great River, and even the Phú Lương.

63 One needs to be cautious in reading two other records of a river also called Lô in 1596–97, because this same name began to be associated with the largest river crossing the Tuyên Quang region sometime between the 15th and 18th centuries. See: *Complete book*, Bản kỷ 17, 57a, 61a.

64 In a forthcoming study, I will delineate the transition from the Nhị/Nhĩ to the Red River from since the 1400s. Although the French helped popularise the name Red River, my research shows that the conception that treated this river as an interconnected network of various streams had emerged gradually prior to the 19th century.