

# Introduction

This book is about Vietnam from the beginning of recorded history in the third century B.C. to the tenth century, when Chinese control ended and an independent Vietnamese kingdom was established. During these twelve centuries, the Vietnamese evolved from a preliterate society within a “south-sea civilization” into a distinctive member of the East Asian cultural world. This long process was the birth of historical Vietnam.

Chinese historians and French sinologists have treated this period of Vietnamese history as a branch of Chinese history. They have seen Vietnam as little more than a refractory frontier province of the Chinese empire, blessed with China’s “civilizing” influence. Vietnamese historians, on the other hand, look at this era as a time when their ancestors struggled under alien rule, a time when their national identity was tested and refined. To gain a balanced view, it is important to consider both the information about Vietnam recorded by Chinese historians and the historical traditions that preserve what the Vietnamese have remembered from this time.<sup>1</sup>

It is sometimes imagined that an indigenous core of “Vietnameseness” survived unscathed through the fire of Chinese domination. To a certain extent this is true, for the Vietnamese language survived, as did mythical traditions from the pre-Chinese period. But both the Vietnamese language and the mythical traditions were transformed through intimate contact with China.

Tenth-century Vietnamese were very different from their ancestors of twelve centuries before. They had grown to understand China as only a slave can know its master; they knew China at its best and at its worst. They could enjoy composing poetry in T’ang-style verse, but they could also be fierce in their resistance to Chinese soldiers. They had become experts at surviving in the shadow of the mightiest empire on earth.

Vietnamese independence did not suddenly appear in the tenth century solely as a result of Chinese weakness. China never renounced its presumed right to rule the Vietnamese and has more than once tried to reconquer Vietnam. But, by the tenth century, the Vietnamese had developed a spirit and intelligence capable of resisting Chinese power. This spirit and intelligence matured during centuries of Chinese rule; it was

1. See Appendix O.

rooted in a conviction held by Vietnamese that they were not, and did not want to be, Chinese.

It has been thought that Vietnamese independence was the result of Chinese influence, that the stimulation of Chinese concepts of government and society galvanized the Vietnamese into reaching the level of modern statehood. But the ancestors of the Vietnamese had their own kings and cultural symbols before the arrival of Chinese armies, and presumably their continued existence would have been assured even if they had never heard of China.<sup>2</sup>

The experience of Chinese rule affected the Vietnamese in two ways. First, it fostered a receptivity to Chinese cultural leadership among ruling-class Vietnamese. As a result of the admission of numerous Chinese words to their vocabulary and of many centuries' experience as a Chinese province, the Vietnamese came to possess a political and philosophical idiom that has something in common with China. Intellectual trends in China, whether Taoist, Buddhist, Confucianist, or Marxist, are easily understood by the Vietnamese.

On the other hand, Chinese rule bred an instinctive resistance to Chinese and, by extension, to all foreign political interference. Over the past one thousand years, the Vietnamese have no less than seven times defeated attempts by China to assert its influence by armed force. No theme is more consistent in Vietnamese history than the theme of resistance to foreign aggression.

The Vietnamese concept of kingship became increasingly encrusted with Sinitic theories and formalities as the centuries passed, but it had its origin in a peculiar quality reflecting the perspective of a stubborn, intelligent peasant who has mastered the art of survival. The founder of the independent Vietnamese monarchy in the tenth century was not reared within the Chinese imperial tradition. He was a rustic peasant warrior whose two achievements, of uniting the Vietnamese and of providing for national defense, have remained the indispensable qualifications for political leadership in Vietnam to the present day.

This book ends with the assassination of the man who founded the new Vietnamese kingdom in the tenth century. China took advantage of this to attempt to reassert its ancient hegemony in Vietnam. Such a crisis, calling for strong leadership to meet invaders, became a common theme in Vietnamese history, and Vietnamese kings were expected to know how to rally mass participation in resistance efforts. In the nineteenth century, Vietnamese leaders grew so dependent on Chinese concepts of government that they alienated themselves from their own people and failed to effectively resist French aggression. Contemporary Vietnam grew out of this failure.

2. See my "An Evaluation of the Chinese Period in Vietnamese History."

The birth of Vietnam was a prolonged process of adjustment to the proximity of Chinese power. It may be more correct to speak of the "births" of Vietnam, for in their long history the Vietnamese have more than once experienced the transformation of consciousness that can be associated with "birth." A prominent Vietnamese scholar recently offered a new synthesis of Vietnamese history, suggesting that the nation has been "established" three times: once during the prehistoric era culminating in the Dong-son civilization that predates Chinese influence, again in the tenth century when Chinese rule ended, and once more now in the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> This book focuses on the birth of Vietnam in the tenth century, although the story begins with Dong-son.

This birth can be analysed in six phases, each one of which contributed to defining the limits within which the Vietnamese were able to grow. These limits were largely determined by the degree and nature of Chinese power felt in Vietnam.

In the first phase, which can be called the Dong-son or Lac-Viet period, Chinese power had not yet reached Vietnam. The Vietnamese were important members of a prehistoric Bronze Age civilization oriented toward the coasts and islands of Southeast Asia. The cultural and political frontier between the Vietnamese and the Chinese was well defined.

In the second phase, which can be called the Han-Viet period, Chinese military power arrived, and a new ruling class of mixed Sino-Vietnamese ancestry emerged. Chinese philosophy appeared, and Vietnamese Buddhism began. Vietnamese culture experienced an initial realignment toward China, while countering this trend with a Buddhist religion preached by missionaries that arrived directly from India by sea. The cultural and political frontier during this phase was drawn through the midst of Vietnamese society.

The third phase can be called the Giao-Viet period, for it was a time when the province of Giao was firmly established in the Vietnamese lands and a new concept of cultural and political frontiers was enforced by men owing allegiance to northern dynasties. Lin-i, the Cham kingdom on the southern coast, ceased to be a factor in domestic Vietnamese politics and instead became a foreign enemy. The Lin-i wars are the most distinctive characteristic of this period. This phase began in the late third century, after the violence of the Chin intervention, when T'ao Huang, a popular Chinese governor, pushed back the borders and reorganized provincial administration. The cultural and political frontier was now between the Vietnamese and their southern neighbors.

In the fourth phase, which spanned most of the sixth century, Chinese power momentarily withdrew from Vietnam, and local heroes attempted to enforce a new concept of frontiers that set the Vietnamese off, not only from

3. Pham Huy Thong, "Ba lan dung nuoc."

their southern neighbors, but also from China. This was a time of self-discovery as the Vietnamese experimented with different forms of national expression, from an effort to imitate the dynastic institution of China to an attempt to return to the mythical traditions of the pre-Chinese past and, finally, to a Buddhist rendition of national authority that foreshadowed the establishment of Vietnamese independence in the tenth and eleventh centuries.

The fifth phase, the T'ang-Viet phase, found the Vietnamese firmly within the northern empire. The pressure to conform to Chinese patterns of behavior was relatively intense, and the Vietnamese responded with acts of resistance, inviting their non-Chinese neighbors to intervene on their behalf. But all resistance and all attempts to ally with neighboring peoples were crushed by T'ang's military power. The most serious challenge to T'ang rule came in the mid-ninth century, when anti-T'ang Vietnamese allied with the mountain kingdom of Nan-chao in Yün-nan. But the Vietnamese discovered that they could tolerate T'ang misgovernment easier than they could the undisciplined habits of their "barbarian" neighbors. The T'ang-Viet period saw the cultural and political frontiers of Vietnam severely drawn, not only separating the Vietnamese from their coastal and upland neighbors, but also dividing the Vietnamese from the Muong, who inhabited peripheral areas beyond the direct control of T'ang officials and who preserved a form of Vietnamese culture that shows little Chinese influence.

In the tenth century, the final phase was reached when Vietnamese leaders drew a political frontier between themselves and the Chinese. Defining and enforcing this frontier has played a large role in subsequent Vietnamese history.

Each of these phases modified the Vietnamese perception of themselves in relation to their neighbors. The modifications made in the second, third, and fifth phases, when strong Chinese dynasties asserted their power in Vietnam, drew the Vietnamese closer to China and cut them off from their non-Chinese neighbors. Only in the sixth and tenth centuries, when the Vietnamese were able to take the initiative, did the frontiers reflect an effective native power. And even then there is little evidence of backsliding, of the Vietnamese reverting to an earlier outlook.

By the tenth century, the Vietnamese knew that their national destiny was unavoidably entangled with China. They could never pretend that China did not pose a continual potential threat to the unhindered development of their national life. Whatever they did would have to be done with one eye on China. They had no time to indulge any primeval longing to become more like their Southeast Asian neighbors.

This does not mean that the Vietnamese are not "Southeast Asian," whatever that may mean. First and foremost, they are Vietnamese. They

have asserted their distinctive view of the world against both China and their Southeast Asian neighbors. Vietnam's non-Chinese neighbors have little understanding of the price paid by the Vietnamese for their national survival and of the depth of the Vietnamese resolve to resist China's historical pressure. The Vietnamese have accepted the perspective imposed on them by history. They see themselves standing alone between a threatening giant and a circle of relatively self-absorbed realms. In fact, the Vietnamese revel in their Southeast Asian identity, though not for its own sake, but rather for the refreshment and reinforcement it provides in the grim business of maintaining the northern border.

From a broader perspective, Vietnam stands on the frontier between East and Southeast Asia. The question of whether Vietnam "belongs" to Southeast Asia or to East Asia is probably one of the least enlightening in Vietnamese studies. Although everything from the Vietnamese language to Vietnamese eating habits reflects a distinctive blend of the two cultural worlds, literature, scholarship, and government administration clearly show that the Vietnamese have been participating members of the classical civilization of East Asia. This stems from the success of Chinese dynasties in enforcing a cultural and political frontier between the Vietnamese and their Southeast Asian neighbors for several centuries.

The birth of Vietnam described in this book was the birth of a new consciousness within the East Asian cultural world that had its roots outside that world. Within the context of East Asia as a whole, this was a frontier consciousness, but for the Vietnamese it was simply what they happened to be. They had learned to articulate their non-Chinese identity in terms of China's cultural heritage. Given the constraints imposed by Chinese power during long periods of their history, the survival of this identity is as significant as the cultural form in which it came to be expressed.