1 How the Vietnamese See the World

It is not actions but opinions about actions that disturb men.

Epictetus

Throughout the twentieth century the Vietnamese have been in upheaval, wracked by conflicting images of the past, the present, and the future. For more than six decades now, the emphasis has been on change, even revolution. During the 1930s many debates in Vietnam were expressed in terms of "the old" versus "the new." Modes of social interaction, claims to status, dress styles, marriage customs, literature, religious practices, medical treatment, even haircuts, were polarized around this dichotomy. A Western-educated, urban middle class had developed, producing a vital new publishing industry to voice its aspirations and to serve as an arena where conflicting visions of the future would compete for influence. Many young writers argued that a sentimental attachment to traditional culture was a major obstacle to progress.

The Communists, a tiny minority in the 1930s, had, of course, a blueprint that purported to provide them with insight into the future. But most young intellectuals in Vietnam before World War II simply knew they were dissatisfied with the way things were and that Vietnam had to discover, or create, a viable modern identity. As Nhat Linh, the editor of a popular Vietnamese-language newspaper, argued in 1932: "When the old civilization is brought out and put into practice before our very eyes, we are dissatisfied with the results. We can only continue to hope in Western civilization. Where that civilization will lead us to we not know, but our destiny is to travel into the unknown, to keep changing and to progress" (*Mores* [Phong Hoa], 20 October). But change to what? To become what kind of people? What kind of society? This is what the subsequent decades of fighting were fundamentally about. Competing

ideologies concerned with the issue of modernization abounded. People were divided in their opinions, even within families. To complicate things further, there was considerable regional variation in Vietnam, dating back to earlier times.

Both regional variation and debates between advocates of competing ideologies in Vietnam are best understood, I believe, as specific outgrowths of, or reactions to, the dominant traditional culture. All major changes and variations are responses to particular circumstances (environmental, political, social) with which the old culture was not designed to cope. Despite all the variability and all the change, the culture of nineteenth-century Vietnam is within—and often constitutes an important part of—the various twentieth-century innovations, just as in its fullest development it contained all of its predecessors. Memories of the past remain an important part of all contemporary Vietnamese sociocultural systems—from the politburo in Hanoi to Little Saigon in Los Angeles to Saigon-sur-Seine in Paris.

"Traditional Vietnam" in the following pages refers to this generalized picture of what has existed in the minds of more recent generations. It is a broad portrait gleaned mainly from widely known literature, commonly used school textbooks, popularized historical and biographical writings, thousands of conversations with Vietnamese of diverse backgrounds, reminiscences exchanged over teacups or beer, in a village home or in the back of a jeep, in a temple, a church, or a Saigon nightspot, in offices and classrooms and refugee camps.

We must learn what people had in mind when they spoke of "the old" before we can understand their debates over "the new" that would replace it. All Vietnamese people are today still, as they were fifty years ago, interacting with that past in the process of shaping their future. And so, in a sense, are we.

Our experience in Vietnam is now part of us; and we are part of Vietnam. We cannot forget Vietnam, but neither can we fit what we "know" about it into our sense of self and country. A grinding tension persists, generated by the discrepancy between our memories and our views of who we are and our proper place in the world. We have tried to resolve this tension by revising our views of ourselves, our society, and the larger world, or by suppressing these memories or denying their importance. But the dissonance remains, and our functioning as individuals and as a people is still impaired.

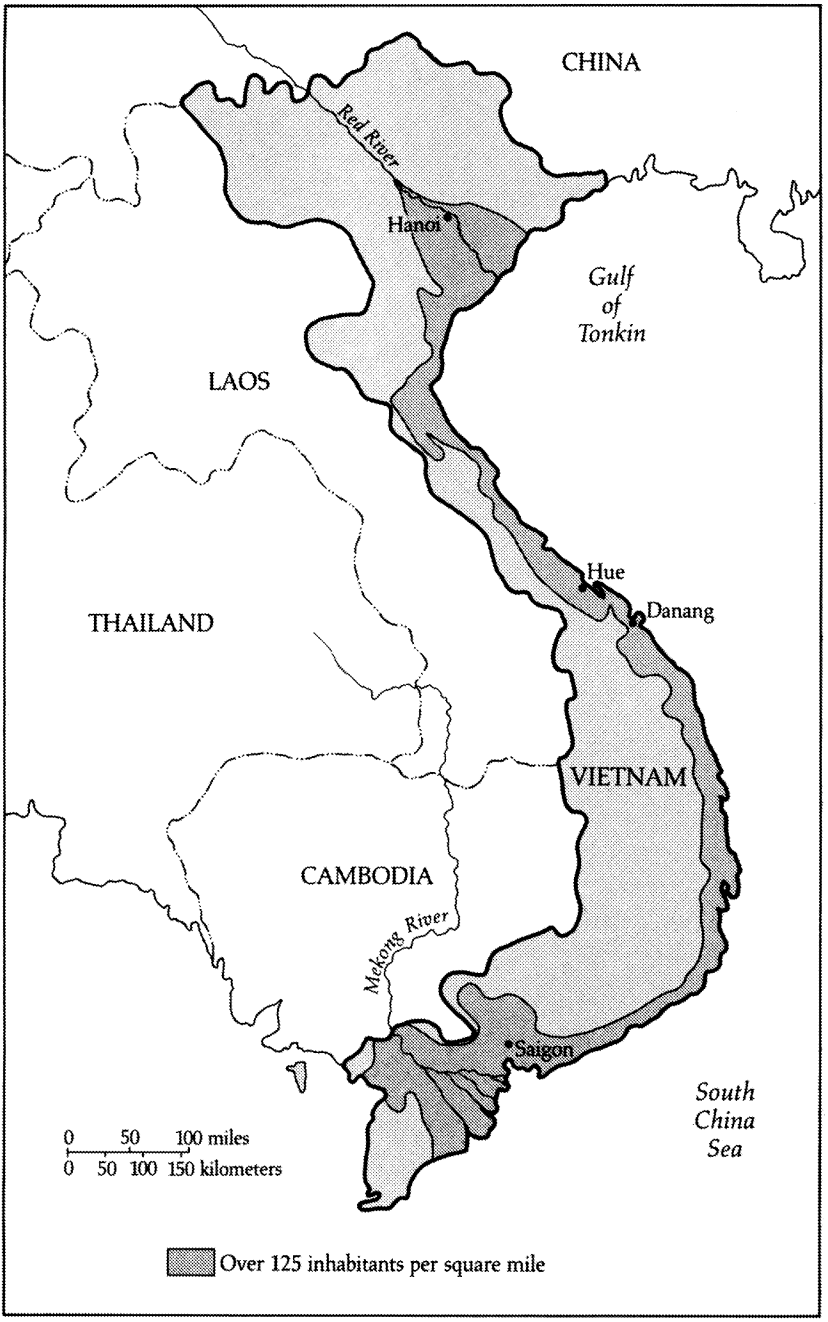
By putting our old and partial perceptions into a new and broader context, we may transform them. By working to understand the competing Vietnamese paradigms, we may clarify the muddled debates about our involvement in Vietnam, and perhaps in the process transform the lingering pain and doubt into more positive insights. In trying to understand the Vietnamese, we may learn something important about ourselves.

The Land of Vietnam: Ecology as History

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam is the twelfth most populous nation in the world. Although it has one of the world's largest and most battle-hardened armies, it is also one of the poorest nations in the world. The territory of Vietnam is slightly smaller than the state of California, but its population, about seventy million, is more than a quarter as large as that of the United States. Vietnam is elongated along a north-south axis that extends from China to the Gulf of Siam. It is evident that Vietnam is a crowded country, and the population is stretched along a fairly narrow band of land. But the topography of Vietnam exaggerates this phenomenon. Most of the people live in a relatively small portion of the land area (see map on p. 4).

Only about a quarter of Vietnamese territory is good farmland (i.e., suitable for wet rice cultivation), and that is where most of the ethnic Vietnamese, who make up roughly 85 percent of the population, live. Wet ricefields, people, and political power have always been associated and concentrated in relatively small core areas. Even today, most of the paddy fields, most of the people, most of the wealth, most of the industry, and most of the economic, political, and cultural activity are in one of two core areas. One core area consists of the Red River delta and the City of Hanoi in the north; the other consists of the Mekong River delta and Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon) in the south. These two concentrations of people are joined by a long thin band of coastal plains along the South China Sea. The bulk of the central portion of Vietnam is mountainous and has been traditionally inhabited by ethnic minorities, tribal peoples who have been seen by almost all Vietnamese as "backward."

Ecological and historical factors have combined to produce very significant regional differences between the two core areas that dominate the country.[1] The Red River is subject to rapid and extreme variation in water level, and both flood and drought have



Significant Vietnamese settlement areas, early twentieth century

always occurred with ominous regularity. Epidemics and pest infestation have also been common. The Red River delta has simultaneously been one of the most densely populated and least safe regions in the world. In an uncertain and dangerous environment, hunger and social unrest have been constant threats. As a result, the local culture has emphasized the subordination of the individual to collective discipline of family and village. Both the family and the village have been relatively closed, corporate entities, self-reliant, and responsible for the action of their individual members.

In the south, the flow of the Mekong River is regulated by its link to the Tonle Sap, a large inland lake in Cambodia, which absorbs any excess flow of water and supplements a reduction in flow from its large reserve storage. The Mekong environment is more predictable and more benign than that of the Red River. These ecological differences between the Red River and the Mekong delta have been of immense significance in generating differences in cultural emphases and social organization between the two core regions of Vietnam. But historical factors have exacerbated these differences. The Mekong delta has been the recent frontier area. Not until the seventeenth century did Vietnamese seriously begin to settle the southern delta region, and the lower Mekong delta was not heavily settled until the nineteenth century.

Life has been easier and more secure in the southern third of Vietnam, and the harsh discipline found in the north has always been considerably moderated there. Southern villages have always been more open, less corporate, more tolerant of individual initiative and cultural heterodoxy. Then, under the French, who began colonizing Vietnam in 1859, the southern third of Vietnam, known as Cochinchina, was the first part to be colonized, and it was directly administered by the French authorities as a colony. The south thus experienced relatively greater Western influence and more political freedom than did the rest of the country, which was administered as "protectorates" (Annam in central Vietnam and Tonkin in the north). The protectorates came under French rule later and were administered indirectly, through local Vietnamese administrators.

There are, then, two common ways of talking about Vietnamese geography. We think of the north and the south, divided by the seventeenth parallel. This makes sense in recent political terms. It also makes sense historically, because Vietnam was divided not too differently for most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

But Vietnamese have more commonly spoken of their country in terms of three sections: north, central, and south. And this makes some sense culturally and linguistically, although all Vietnamese share a core culture, have a common historical heritage, and speak mutually understandable dialects of the same language.

The point to be emphasized here is that "traditional" Vietnam refers primarily to the Red River delta and the central coastal plains regions, mainly as they existed in the nineteenth century. The discussion does not always apply directly to the villages of the Mekong delta. In fact, when the French arrived only a small percentage of the Vietnamese population lived in the Mekong delta. The French opened much of the Mekong delta for settlement with massive engineering projects that drained swampland to make it arable. The later chapters of the book will examine southern Vietnam as a variant development of Vietnamese culture.

The People of Vietnam

The story of the Vietnamese—of all Vietnamese—began in the north.[2] Many millennia ago Austronesians, remote relatives of the peoples of the islands of Southeast Asia and the Pacific, were an important part of the population of this area. Then, some four or five thousand years ago, people, languages, and cultures flowed out of what is now southern China into Southeast Asia, where they interacted with indigenous peoples and cultures. The Vietnamese people, southern and northern, their culture and their language, are a rich mixture of these and other influences. The Vietnamese language is basically Mon-Khmer, related to Cambodian. But Tai influence (which produced the Thai and Laotian languages of today) is reflected in the tonal quality of Vietnamese and in many vocabulary items.[3]

Early Vietnamese shared many traits with their Southeast Asian neighbors. Chinese influence has been extremely important, but more recent. When genes and languages and cultures began interacting and intermixing and developing intensively in what is now northern Indochina, some five thousand years ago, much of what is now the Red River delta was still under water; the elevated sea level that had covered it for millennia had not yet receded completely.[4] And as the sea withdrew much of the newly exposed plain was swampy. It was in the midlands, on the foothills and surrounding valleys of the Red River delta, about three or four

thousand years ago, that a distinctive culture began to emerge that can be traced to the people who now call themselves Vietnamese. Vietnamese archeologists have come a long way in tracing the descent of these people down onto the emerging plain and into historical time.

Sometime in about the seventh century B.C. in and around the area where the Red River descends from the mountains and enters the plain, the kingdom of Van Lang came into being, ruled by the Hung kings.[5] This tiny kingdom that existed over 2,500 years ago is an important part of contemporary Vietnam's living past. The ancient site from which the Hung kings ruled, only recently discovered by Vietnamese archeologists (the French dismissed Van Lang as a fairy tale), is now a national park, like our Independence Hall or Valley Forge, but more than two thousand years older in significance.

According to ancient myth the Vietnamese are descended from dragons and fairies. When the Dragon Lord of the Lac fathered a hundred children by a mountain princess of fairy blood named Au Co, he returned to the sea with half their offspring while she settled in the midlands of the Red River with the other half. One of these children became the first king of the Vietnamese people, the first of the eighteen Hung kings featured in so many myths and legends and venerated in village shrines into the twentieth century.[6] The last Hung king is said to have committed suicide in 257 B.C. after being defeated by a neighboring chieftain to the north; this led to the creation of the new kingdom of Au Lac. With the aid of a Golden Turtle spirit, the new king, An Duong, built a magnificent citadel at Co Loa, near present-day Hanoi.

Early Vietnamese rulers were often powerful mediators with the spirit world, high priests whose claim to office was based on a privileged relationship with a powerful spirit who could be persuaded to serve a supernatural protector of the realm. The Dragon Lord of the Lac served as protector of the kingdom under the Hung kings, as the Golden Turtle spirit guarded the realm of Au Lac. As these potent leaders and other major cultural heroes joined the spirit world after death, they too became powerful spirits whose aid and sympathy could be evoked by subsequent generations in time of need. The historical memory of the Hung kings and King An Duong was transmitted over centuries not only in myth and legend but through the physical presence of hundreds of village shrines

and altars. Before these visible emblems of ancient glory, rituals periodically bound the people to their shared past and to each other.

In 208 B.C. a new kingdom appeared in south coastal China, Nan Yueh in Chinese, Nam Viet in Vietnamese. Au Lac was soon conquered by Nam Viet, and the Red River delta and northern coastal plain of what is now Vietnam was incorporated into Nam Viet. Then the great Han dynasty unified China, and in 111 B.C. Nam Viet fell under its control. The plains of northern Vietnam became a colonial province of China, although indigenous cultural patterns remained essentially intact and local leadership was little disturbed.

In the first century A.D. this indigenous authority structure came into sharp conflict with more rigid demands for conformity as Chinese administrators from the north became more numerous and more assertive. One dauntless young woman sparked the leap from protest to revolt. Trung Trach was a member of the indigenous elite class through both birth and marriage. Her father and her husband were Lac Lords, hereditary district chiefs. With her sister, Trung Nhi, Trung Trach prayed at a shrine on Hung Mountain, where her ancestors once ruled in the name of the Dragon Lord, invoking their blessing upon rebellion. In A.D. 40 Trung Trach was proclaimed queen after her rebel army forced the Chinese officials to flee to Canton. As an expeditionary force recaptured the Red River delta for the Han dynasty in A.D. 43 the Trung sisters are said to have committed suicide. They became immortalized in song and story and today are still held up as exemplars of traditional Vietnamese values.

In the decades and centuries that followed, the population of the Red River delta and northern coastal plain was gradually Sinicized in many ways; ethnic Chinese in the region were also heavily influenced by local custom and regional perspectives. Genes and cultures mingled to produce a new Sino-Vietnamese elite. For seven hundred years this region would be Giao Chau, a province of China. But a distinctive local identity was retained.

Revolts broke out periodically, producing new culture heroes, more shrines, and more legends. During the ninth century rebellions grew more frequent and a renaissance in local cultural traditions emerged. With China plunged into weakness and disorder under the crumbling Tang dynasty, the Vietnamese gained independence in A.D. 939. During the early years of independence, no

monarch could integrate the land firmly. Leadership in Vietnam rested ambiguously on two separate concepts of political legitimacy: indigenous tradition and a heavily Sinicized system of politics and administration that had been assimilated during a thousand years of Chinese rule. Most early monarchs were soldiers whose leadership was based largely on personal prowess. In this milieu, Buddhism played a vital role in stabilizing Vietnamese society.

Not until the Ly dynasty (1009–1225) did the development of what we now think of as traditional Vietnam begin to take shape. Shortly after taking the throne, the first Ly king moved the capital to what is now Hanoi, which he named Rising Dragon (Thang Long). In 1048 an agrarian cult was established, with the construction of a temple to the gods of soil and grain, formalizing the role of the king as a national high priest of agriculture. The Ly kings bore a dragon tattoo, signifying spiritual succession from the illustrious Dragon Lord of the Lac and the Hung kings. In fact, the greatness of the Ly dynasty rested to no small degree on a foundation of unprecedented moral force that was built by calling forth these spirits of past culture heroes to bolster the efficacy and legitimacy of their rule;[7] this same kind of moral force has been significant in the rise to power of many Vietnamese leaders up to the present day.

Buddhism flourished. Many Ly kings spent part of their lives in a monastery, and one was leader of a major sect. The ideological viewpoint of the Ly court, as revealed in the extant poetry of the time, was strongly Buddhist in tone and content, with a marked Zen influence emphasizing insight and awakening rather than scriptures or good works. Noninvolvement, detachment, and paradoxical mysticism were pervasive values.[8]

But a modest rejuvenation of Confucian studies was also encouraged after a century of relative neglect. In 1070 a Temple of Literature dedicated to Confucius was constructed in Rising Dragon (its remains can be viewed today in Hanoi). In 1075 national examinations were held for the first time under independent Vietnamese rule, and in 1076 a national university was created. Confucianism began to revive under the Ly.

The Ly dynasty was succeeded by another great dynasty, the Tran (1225–1400). Vietnam slowly continued to expand in population and territory. The army, the bureaucracy, and the examination system were further developed. But the early Tran kings spent

much of their energy in foreign affairs and national defense, fighting off threats from the north. In 1284 Vietnam seemed doomed to fall to Chinese forces, but under the inspired leadership of Tran Hung Dao, the invaders were driven from the land.

During the Tran dynasty the Confucian element in official ideology continued to develop while Buddhism remained important. Then, late in the fourteenth century, in the midst of economic crisis and peasant revolts, a powerful court councillor seized the throne. Under this unpopular new ruler, Vietnam once again fell under Chinese rule in 1407. For a time Ming dynasty administrators from China vigorously regulated village government, religious ceremonies, hair styles, modes of dress, the writing and distribution of literature, and virtually everything else of cultural, economic, or political significance. Both the Ming and the Vietnamese ruler they displaced encouraged the spread of Neo-Confucian doctrines.[9]

Under Le Loi, the Chinese invaders were expelled and the Le dynasty was established in 1428. Neo-Confucianism, based on Chu Hsi's reinterpretation of the classics in eleventh-century China, became a vital influence on Vietnamese thought. During the thirty-seven-year reign (1460–1497) of the great king Le Thanh Tong, Neo-Confucianism became a dominant element in Vietnamese ideology. But the Le dynasty then quickly fell into decline. For nearly three centuries internal conflict sapped the wealth and energy of the Vietnamese. Few heroes, little great literature, and only modest cultural innovations emerged until the second half of the eighteenth century, when cultural ferment was expressed in a lively body of literature in the Vietnamese language. One important element in this resurgence was the expansion and standardization of the writing system employed for transcribing Vietnamese (*nom*).[10]

The later decades of the eighteenth century were dominated by the Tay Son rebellion, which began as a peasant uprising against what were perceived to be unsatisfactory conditions. By 1786 rebel leaders controlled all of Vietnam. The Tay Son era is controversial and poorly understood. This revolutionary movement expressed deep-rooted discontent in rural Vietnamese society; but it also involved new commercial interests, overseas Chinese intrigues, religious heterodoxies, and a resurgence of indigenous tradition at the expense of borrowed elements in Vietnamese culture, especially Neo-Confucianism. *Nom*, the demotic Vietnamese script, replaced Chinese as the official writing system. The Trung sisters were revitalized as culture heroes of the first order.

But by 1802 the Nguyen dynasty held power, declaring the Tay Son reforms null and void. Perceiving recent Vietnamese history as characterized by decadence and disorganization, the Nguyen rulers strenuously sought to make Neo-Confucianism the foundation of the national culture. Under the Nguyen, traditional Vietnamese culture assumed its final form, the one that would persist into the twentieth century to interact with Western influences.[11]

The Traditional Vietnamese View of the World

Over many centuries, Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism had become intertwined, simplified, and Vietnamized to constitute—along with vestiges of earlier animistic beliefs—a Vietnamese folk religion shared to some extent by all Vietnamese.[12] But over time, beginning in the late fifteenth century and becoming most extreme in the nineteenth century, Neo-Confucianism came to be a dominant influence.[13] Neo-Confucianism focused on proper social relationships, but ideas about the proper form of social relationships were based on a wider set of ideas regarding the nature of reality.

The traditional Vietnamese worldview constituted an all-encompassing cosmological scheme based on *yin* and *yang*, conceived as two primordial forces from which everything else in the universe was created. This root paradigm, through which one of the oldest and most fundamental elements of Sinitic influence eventually became a basic part of the way Vietnamese viewed the world, ran right through the entire system, from the family to the state. It suffused the entire world with a coherent system of meaning. Everything was a model, an icon, of everything else.[14] Based on the assumption of a unified and orderly universe, this model provided Vietnamese with a sense of insight into—and a means of dealing with—the intrinsic structure of the universe.

In all things, when a proper balance was maintained between *yin* and *yang*, harmony was maintained and beneficent outcomes were assured. This was equally true in the individual human body, in families, in villages, and in nations. For example, the treatment of illness consisted primarily of restoring the balance between *yin* and *yang*, both within a person and between the person and the external world. According to traditional folk thought, all foods were believed to have an "essential nature," to be hot, warm, cool, or cold. "Hot" and "warm" foods were *yang*, "cool" and "cold" foods were *yin*. Diet could thus disrupt or restore harmony between *yin* and *yang*.[15]