

Vietnam Imperial March and Nationalism

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In 111 B.C., the victorious Han crushed the young Vietnamese state, and save for a few brief but glorious rebellions, it remained a Chinese colony for more than 1,000 years.

Viet-Nam became a Chinese protectorate ruled by a governor and subdivided into military districts. By the beginning of the first century A.D., the country had absorbed along with many Chinese settlers – a great many of them the refugees from the Han dynasty – much of what was worthwhile in the culture of the occupying power: the difficult art of rice planting in artificially irrigated areas, Chinese writing skills, Chinese philosophy, and even Chinese social customs and beliefs. But – and in this the Vietnamese are unique – they succeeded in maintaining their national identity in spite of the fact that everything else about them had become “Chinese”. Opposition to the Chinese rule built up as the Chinese presence became more ubiquitous and brutal. Finally, what could be called a routine “occupation incident,” the execution of a minor feudal lord, brought about a configuration. In 39 A.D., Trung Trac, the wife of the slain lord, and her sister Trung Nhi raised an army that, in a series of swift sieges, overwhelmed the Chinese garrisons, which had grown careless over the years. In 40 A.D., the Vietnamese, much to their surprise, found themselves free from foreign domination for the first time in 150 years and the Trung sisters were proclaimed queens of the country.

Naturally in so large an empire, Chinese reaction was slow, but when it came, it was effective. Old general Ma Yuan began his counterattack in 43 A.D., and the Vietnamese troops of the two queens made a fatal error: They chose to make a stand in the open field against the experienced Chinese regulars, with their backs against the limestone cliffs at the edge of the river Day – not far from the place where General Vo Nguyen Giap was to pit his green regulars against French Marshal de Lattre’s elite troops 1,908 years later.

The result was the same in both cases: The more experienced regulars destroyed the raw Vietnamese levies. The two queens, rather than surrender to the enemy, chose suicide by drowning in the nearby river. “Sinization” now began in earnest, with Chinese administration taking the place of traditional leaders. Two more rebellions took place. One in 248 A.D., also led by woman, Trieu Au, collapsed almost immediately, and like the Trung sisters, Trieu Au committed suicide. The second led by Ly Bon lasted from 544 to 547 and was also crushed. With the rise of the strong Tang dynasty in China after 618, resistance became hopeless: Viet-Nam became the Chinese Protectorate General of the “Pacified South” (“An-Nam” in Chinese). It was under the name “Annam” a symbol of humiliation and defeat that the region was to become best known to the outside world.

With the decline of the Tangs, Viet-Nam’s chances for freedom rose again. A rash of rebellions in 938 led to the defeat of the Chinese the following year. By 940, the Vietnamese were in full control of their country from the foothills of Yunnan to the 17th parallel. Although they retained formal suzerainty ties with China throughout most of their history until French domination became complete in 1883, their northern neighbor, despite sporadic threats, never quite succeeded in controlling the country again, save for the brief period from 1407 to 1427.

Having secured their rear areas, the Vietnamese now could address themselves to their major historical mission - securing Lebensraum for their teeming agricultural population in the relatively empty deltas to the south of their boundary. But to the south lay the Indianized kingdom of Champa.

VIETNAMESE COLONIALISM

What happened next was as thorough a job of genocide as any modern totalitarian state could have devised. Founded in 192 AD., the Champa kingdom, whose beautiful capital, Indrapura, was located near present-day Faifo on the Central Viet-Nam coast, prospered for several centuries through its flourishing seaborne trade and its powerful battle fleets, one of which sailed up the Mekong and across the Great Lake (Tonic Sap) of Cambodia to capture and sack Angkor in 1177. Like their near contemporaries in Europe the Norsemen, the Chams were mostly seaborne raiders with all the advantages and drawbacks, of the concomitant social and political organization. They were the scourge of the area as long as they were strong and capable of carrying the war to their neighbors in their swift ships, but having neglected agriculture and the penetration of their own hinterland, they were incapable of resisting the slow but steady gnawing-away process with which the peasant-based Vietnamese state faced them. Thus, after several successful Cham raids into the Red River Delta, the Vietnamese finally beat them off, and the Chams were pushed onto the defensive.

Slowly, Vietnamese rice farmers peacefully occupied the unfilled northern plains of the Champa kingdom, very often with the consent of the Chams, who felt that this process would serve their own enrichment. But as the settlements of the Vietnamese grew so grew the willingness and ability of the neighboring Vietnamese state to protect its own citizens. Slice by slice, delta by delta, the process was repeated. There were a few temporary setbacks in the process but by the end of the eleventh century, all the coastal provinces north of Hue had been conquered. The next important slice, including Hue later Viet-Nam's imperial capital, became Vietnamese in the course of the mid-fifteenth century, thanks to a marriage between the sister of the Vietnamese king and the king of Champa. But in 1471, after renewed bitter warfare, in the course of which the Vietnamese conquered the Chams' second capital, Vijaya-Indrapura having been lost earlier-the once-flourishing Champa kingdom was near collapse. It lost more than 300 miles of shore line and in fact became little more than a beachhead stretching precariously over the small deltas of Khanh-Hoa, Phan-Rang, and Phan-Thiet

One and a half centuries later, the Champa kingdom had simply disappeared. Today, all that is left of it is a series of watchtower ruins at the landward edge of the Central Vietnamese coastal plains and a small group of perhaps 30,000 handsome Indian-featured people eking out livings as fishermen and artisans around the Vietnamese cities of Phan-Rang and Phan-Ri.

companies of the time, had taken physical possession of several provinces stretching from Kampot to Camau. When the Cambodians and their Siamese allies threatened Mac-Cuu's "state within a state" he appealed for help to the neighboring Vietnamese, who were only too happy to oblige. By 1757, Viet-Nam had occupied the rest of the Mekong Delta and the swamp-infested Camau Peninsula. Vietnamese settlers began to pour into the empty provinces, which became a vast "Far West" for the Vietnamese state. To this day, the areas on the western side of the Mekong are known to the Vietnamese as "Mien-Tay" ("the New West"). By the end of the eighteenth century, Viet-Nam had expanded to the full extent of its present shore line.

Vietnamese intervention in Cambodian affairs had begun in 1623 when Chey Chettha II, a king of Cambodia who had married a Vietnamese princess, attempted to shake Siam's overlordship with the help of the Nguyen. In exchange for that help, the Hue government requested Cambodia's authorization to send settlers to Prey Kor, and a Vietnamese general was sent with a security detachment to protect the new settlers. In 1658, a Vietnamese expeditionary force again had to intervene in the endless internecine struggles of the various pretenders to the Cambodian throne, and in 1660, Cambodia began to pay a regular tribute to the Vietnamese court.'

But the Vietnamese yoke on Cambodia was to take a shape far more direct than the highly theoretical suzerainty China still exercised over Viet-Nam. The declining Khmer state was split into three Vietnamese "residences" under the control of a Vietnamese Chief Resident at the Cambodian court at Oudong. The Vietnamese began an acculturation process that, as in the neighboring provinces and in the case of the Chams, amounted to veritable genocide: destruction of the Buddhist temples and shrines, compulsory wearing of Vietnamese clothing and hairdress, Vietnamization of city and provincial names, and, finally, abolition of the royal title of the Cambodian sovereigns. By the early nineteenth century, the queen, Ang Mey (1834-41), held a virtual prisoner in her palace, was officially referred to as merely "chief of the territory of My-Lam".

From 1841, Cambodia was purely and simply incorporated into Viet-Nam, but after a Cambodian rebellion encouraged by Siam and a brief war in which Siam and Viet-Nam fought each other to a standoff, both countries agreed in 1845 to a condominium that ended only when France's protectorate was established, in June, 1863. A similar condominium policy in northern Laos also had brought the important Tran-Ninh Plateau—now better known as the Plaine des Jarres—under intermittent Vietnamese control beginning in the sixteenth century.

It is interesting to compare the Vietnamese colonization process with the corresponding process of state-building going on in Europe at that time; for too many well-intentioned writers (particularly those in the United States who feel that Europe must continually make amends for her colonial performance) tend to gloss over the non-European colonial processes that were going on simultaneously. In Europe, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed what could be called a national "regroupment" process: Spain left the Low Countries; non-German states lost their influence in Germany; and the Turks, after a high tide that had brought them to the gates of Vienna in 1529 and 1683, returned to the lower reaches of the Balkans. In Europe outside Russia, only Austria-Hungary was to survive as a major multinational state until 1918, and no new state rose to power by ethnic assimilation of alien areas. Viet-Nam was obviously doing exactly the opposite: It carved out its territory through military conquest over states whose level of indigenous culture was at least equal, if not

superior, to its own. In other words, it did not invoke the moralistic rationale of “Manifest Destiny”, “la Mission Civilisatrice”, or “the White Man's Burden”; its action, like the German *Drang nach Osten*, was simply a manifestation of the vitality of its people. It was simply and purely a process of colonial conquest for material gains, no more, no less. The fact that it took place on contiguous territory does not make it any more respectable than, say, the Russian conquest of Hungary.

But what makes the Vietnamese colonial process unique in Asia is that it took place in competition with that of several European powers—and the Vietnamese beat them to the punch on several occasions! By 1750, nearly all the later European colonial powers had appeared on the scene: the Dutch and Spaniards in the Spice Islands, the French and British in India, and the Portuguese through-out Southeast Asia, even as far inland as Laos. All of them, at one time or another or simultaneously, had trading stations in Viet-Nam. Whether through superciliousness or plain ignorance, none of the “traditional” colonial powers consciously reacted to the Vietnamese colonial process. But it was not without reason that the French consolidated their position in South Viet-Nam first when they set out to conquer the country one century later; after all, it had been Vietnamese for so short a time that its conquest proved easiest, for its inhabitants were the least secure in their social structure and institutions. This assertion appears to be borne out by the fact that the South appeared more “pro-French” (or simply “French”) than central and North Viet-Nam and that the French colonial penetration became more difficult as it advanced farther North.

Thus much of what today is the Republic of Viet-Nam south of the 17th parallel has been “Vietnamese” for a shorter span of time than the Eastern seaboard of the United States has been American. This is a reality that cannot be simply talked away, for it affects the very fabric of the nation in times of stress and crisis, as in the 1960’s.

Having consolidated their hold on the lowlands, the Vietnamese committed virtually the same error as their Cham predecessors. They failed to give their country sufficient depth. Literally, teeming in their narrow delta, few Vietnamese had any particular desire to face the inhospitable forests and primitive tribes of the highlands, and save for a few government-sponsored settlements in the mountain areas of both zones, 95 per cent of all those who are Vietnamese ethnically rather than by political fiat, live at an altitude of less than 900 feet (300 meters).

In the highlands, the fierce Thai, Muong, or Tho tribes tolerated Vietnamese overlordship with about as much good grace as the latter tolerated their own submission to the Chinese. Tribute in ivory, precious woods, and spices was exacted by Vietnamese mandarins who otherwise left the tribes to their traditional leaders and Vietnamese annals are full of mountaineer uprisings. In fact, the tribal Thai were left almost entirely to themselves from the middle of the eighteenth century until the arrival of the French in 1893. The primitive southern tribesmen presented a problem of their own. The Vietnamese kings sagely recognized that they constituted a buffer zone against the still dangerous Khmer empire, and simply left them to their own devices, after the tribal chieftains had made their formal submission and paid a symbolical tribute. That direct relationship between Vietnamese-crown and the mountain tribes continued until 1955.

Nevertheless, the failure to integrate the mountain minorities into the Vietnamese national community has remained a serious problem to this day and is unlikely to be resolved satisfactorily in the near future.

The Vietnamese themselves, for all their cultural and social homogeneity suffered politically from their own over rapid growth and their separation from the Tonkinese homeland. With the means of communication then in existence, the government in the Red River plain was simply incapable of exercising effective control over 1,400 miles of deltas. Divisions occurred, with local feudal lords taking matters into their own hands. In the north, the exhausted Le dynasty had been overthrown by the Governor of Hanoi, Mac Dang Dung, who had, in Buttinger's words, "built himself a staircase of lordly and royal corpses right up to the throne", which he reached in 1527. In the south, another feudal lord, Nguyen Kim had set up a Vietnamese government-in-exile in Laos, built around a descendant of the Le. When Nguyen Kim died in 1545, murdered by supporters of the Mac clan, the struggle degenerated into a long civil war that, save for some brief spells of unity, lasted almost two centuries—with both sides claiming to represent the interests of the hapless legitimate Vietnamese kings while, in fact, merely watching over their own privileges. In the apt words of one French historian, the Vietnamese kings "were reduced to reigning over all Viet-Nam while being incapable of ruling over even the smallest district".

In this indecisive struggle, the south remained largely on the defensive. In the 1630's, the Nguyen rulers built two huge walls across the Vietnamese plain of Quang-Tri near its narrow waist at Dong-Hoi—barely a few miles to the north of the present dividing line at the 17th parallel—and for 150 years the country remained divided on that line, just as it now has been since 1954. A de facto truce existed between the north and the south from 1673 to 1774, although the feudal Trinh lords (who, in the north, had succeeded the Mac as protectors of the Le kings) still demanded the surrender of the southern "rebels", and the Nguyen in the south refused to agree to reunification as long as the Le kings were helpless puppets of the Trinh. It is apparent that the Vietnamese people have had abundant experience in the kind of bitter internal division that was to rend it again 180 years later, after a brief period of independence and unity. There has been much debate over why the Trinh, with four-fifths of Viet-Nam's population in their area, never succeeded in breaking the hold of the Nguyen over the south, especially since the Nguyen not only had to hold the line against their northern foes, but also had to fight several bitter wars on their own southern frontiers with Cambodia, where Vietnamese settlers were advancing into the Mekong Delta. Economic and social reasons have been invoked by some historians who accept the Marxist interpretation of history as the only valid one, but that interpretation does not quite hold here for the economic and social organization of the Nguyen area was a carbon copy of that of the north. Militarily, also, both sides operated along similar lines, and both sides received "foreign aid" (a situation not unknown today). The Dutch backed the northern regime, while the Portuguese backed the Nguyen by providing modern artillery and military advisers. Since neither side was willing to consider a flanking maneuver through the inhospitable jungles to the west of the Wall of Dong-Hoi, a military stand-off resulted, which left the way open to a politico-ideological struggle. It was in the ideological sphere that the Nguyen side had the overwhelming advantage, for in the eyes of their own population, the Trinh lords had lost the mandate of heaven. In an explanation of that important aspect of the attitude of the Vietnamese toward his government, a Vietnamese nationalist wrote in 1948:

"If the sovereign oppressed the people, he no longer deserved to be treated as the sovereign. His person was no longer sacred, and to kill him was no longer a crime. Revolt against such tyranny not only was reasonable but was a meritorious act and conferred upon its author the right to take over the powers of the sovereign."

In the name of this right to revolution, the Nguyen were eventually victorious over the decadent Le and Trinh; Ho Chi MM. defeated the French- Ngo Dinh Diem overthrew the discredited Nguyen ruler, Bao-Dai; and the National Liberation Front of South Viet-Nam has sought to gather a popular following first against the stagnant Ngo Dinh Diem regime and then against its successors.

But an unforeseen event was to change for a brief moment the course of Vietnamese history. This was the rebellion of the three brothers from Tay-Son, a small village not far from Ankhe on the northeastern edge of the PMS. The uprising began in 1772; by 1777, the Nguyen had been defeated and the last surviving prince of the family Nguyen Anh, had been driven into the inhospitable swamps of the Mekong Delta. The Trinh, who had thought the moment ripe to settle their accounts with the southern regime became the next victims of the victorious Tay-Son. By 1786, most of North Viet-Nam had fallen into the hands of the Tay-Son, who officially abolished the moribund Le dynasty in 1787, although the youngest of the Tay Son brothers, Hue, took care to marry the daughter of the last Le king.

Between 1789 and 1792, Vietnam was once more united under a single ruler, but the reunification brought in its wake a bitter civil war waged by the Nguyen, the Tay-Son, and the Trinh, which left Viet-Nam more devastated than had 150 years of division. Present-day Marxist sources like to describe the Tay-Son as “progressive” rulers who lost their “mandate of Heaven” because they failed to solve the “social contradictions” then prevailing in Viet-Nam. The actuality seems to be less poetic: They were simply the first Vietnamese rulers to try to attempt to establish a military dictatorship in a country where the military were regarded with somewhat less than high admiration.

Thus, when Nguyen Anh began his campaigns of re-conquest with the help of a French force of Katanga-type adventurers, the populace, mindful of the relatively efficient administration built up through competitive examinations under the Nguyen, began to flock again to the tatter's banners. The fact that, thanks to his experienced French cadre and its better artillery, he outclassed the Tay-Son, militarily, also had a great deal to do with the renewed enthusiasm for the Nguyen. But the final victory of Nguyen Anh over the Tay-Son was also the beginning of a new era: that of European political and military intervention in Vietnamese affairs.