Mary Somers Heidhues

pp 87-15

Southeast Asia
A Concise History

with 131 illustrations and 11 maps

Thames & Hudson
Chapter Four

Southeast Asia as a Crossroads

Relations with China and European Advances

Previous chapters have described early influences from India, China and the Near East on Southeast Asia. This region may be the part of the globe most affected by foreign influences. Although sometimes called an ‘Asian Mediterranean’, it is geographically even more open to the outside world. This is especially apparent in the early modern period, which bridged the time between the downfall of the ‘classical’ kingdoms and the consolidation of Western colonialism.

Chinese Influence

China’s interest in Southeast Asia waxed and waned over the centuries. Its trade continued to be a motor of Southeast Asian economies, more important than trade with India or the West even as late as the early nineteenth century. From the time of the Song Dynasty (960–1278), Chinese ships or junks – which combined traits of Chinese river vessels with innovations from Malay sea-going ships – competed with Southeast Asian vessels as long-distance carriers. After the seventeenth century, Chinese junks replaced much native shipping.
The Mongols (who ruled China from 1278 to 1368) attempted conquest; other dynasties were satisfied with trade. For Chinese officialdom, trade was part of the so-called tribute system that governed foreign relations. The Ming (1368–1644), however, were also interested in the security of long-distance Asian trade. Under the Ming Dynasty a flurry of important visits of fleets led by admiral Zheng He, a court eunuch and a Muslim, reawakened trade and interest in the south. Often known as Sam Po, Zheng is widely venerated within Southeast Asia, especially among the Chinese minorities, who have dedicated temples to him, usually near the sea coasts. The most important of these is in Semarang in central Java.

China’s renewed attention probably helped make Malacca the dominant entrepôt in the region in the fifteenth century. Increased commerce also led many Chinese, not least members of Zheng He’s fleet, to settle permanently in Southeast Asia, although in theory Chinese were not allowed to go abroad for private reasons, much less to remain there. The settlers married local women and established families; Chinese communities gradually formed at major trading ports and Chinese traders, craftsmen and market gardeners came to dominate much of the commerce at the major cities of the area. This process affected native ports and, later, European harbour settlements like Batavia and Manila.

Three Chinese pepper merchants at the market of Banten, west Java, in the late sixteenth century. On the left, the trader weighs a sack of pepper with his Chinese scales.
Where Chinese successfully settled in independent Southeast Asian kingdoms and sultanates, they often intermarried with the local elite, as was the case in Siam and Vietnam. Not even Islam was a barrier to this practice; Chinese or their progeny converted easily, perhaps because they knew Islam from their homeland. In sparsely populated areas of the region, Chinese settlers found a niche as producers of raw materials for the Chinese market, importing Chinese labourers to plant and work gambier (a vegetable dye used in tanning and dyeing), to mine gold and tin, or to grow pepper.

The Chinese stayed on, for the most part, when Western colonialism took over. By the time that colonial territories were consolidated, however, Southeast Asia’s economic relations had changed decisively. China had been supplanted as the major trading power by Europe and North America.

CHINA’S SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP WITH VIETNAM
The most important site of Chinese influence – economic, political and cultural – was Vietnam. Unlike other states in the region, and in large part because of its proximity to China, Vietnam has left a written record of its early history, even if these histories stress Confucian orthodoxy and are silent about other aspects of Vietnamese life.

Bronze-working at Dongson (see pp. 19–20) nearly coincides with the early kingdoms of Van Lang (c. 800–258 BC) and Au Lac (257–208 BC) in northern Vietnam. Under these kingdoms there was increasing social differentiation and agricultural intensification, perhaps even with irrigation and double-cropping of rice, something that would later become widespread in the more densely populated areas of Southeast Asia. Au Lac was conquered by a Chinese warlord who gave the name Nan Yue (Southern Yue or, in Vietnamese, Nam Viet) to his territories, a precursor of its current appellation, ‘Vietnam’. Nam Viet included only the north of modern Vietnam, and with it, the Chinese provinces of Guangdong and Guangxi. In 111 BC, the Chinese emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty invaded Nam Viet and ended its semi-independence. Three Vietnamese provinces formed, Giao Chi (in Chinese, Jiaji), Cuu Chan (Zhouzhuang) and Nhat Nam (Rennan). To the south was what the Chinese called Linyi, probably one or more Cham kingdoms. In AD 40, two women, the Trung sisters, led a rebellion against Chinese rule. When they had finally suppressed the uprising, the Chinese absorbed the southern dominion as a province of China. Later, they would call Vietnam
'Annam', the pacified south. By that time, the capital was situated at Thang-long, close to modern Hanoi.

In the eleventh century, Vietnamese territory — still only the northern part of today's Vietnam — achieved its independence, taking the name Dai Viet (Greater Viet). Leaders of the struggle were a new nobility, aided by the Buddhist monkhood. Successive dynasties attempted to consolidate political and administrative order. Borrowings from Chinese culture, including organizational concepts, helped them establish independence from China. About half the vocabulary of modern Vietnamese is of Chinese origin, although the language is not Sinitic. Interaction with China, with neighbouring kingdoms, and probably with mountain peoples as well gave the Vietnamese a strong sense of their own distinct identity. These earliest centuries of independence were critical for Vietnamese self-definition.

The first independent dynasty was the Ly (1009–1225), whose rulers established not only a military but an administrative and cultural base for the state, relying at first on an alliance between military figures and the Buddhist monkhood. Vigorous leaders revised the legal codes and the tax systems and maintained trade relations with peoples in the interior. Ly emperors built temples and patronized Mahayana Buddhism, though they honoured the traditional spirits as well. Ly Nhat Ton (r. 1054–72) adopted court titles from China, and the Chinese noted that he called himself 'emperor', an offence in their eyes. Ly Nhat Ton attacked the Sino-Viet border in 1059, forcing the withdrawal of some expansionist Chinese officials in the area.

Like his grandfather, Ly Nhat Ton also waged war against Champa. This power to the south was an 'Indianized' kingdom (or maybe kingdoms — see p. 25). Champa too left its mark on Vietnamese culture, for the Vietnamese also defined themselves in relation to these southern neighbours — in opposition, or sometimes in imitation. And although Dai Viet is usually considered to have been a land-based, agrarian kingdom, trade also brought influences from far away.
The Song Dynasty emperors were unhappy with their independent-minded neighbour. After a number of border skirmishes in which the Vietnamese forced the Chinese to a standstill, the two parties finally agreed to delineate their border. By implication this meant that the Chinese emperor recognized Dai Viet as more than merely a vassal. And because border delineation was distinctly non-Southeast Asian, it forced Dai Viet for its part to acknowledge its special relationship with the empire to the north.

During this time, civil service examinations on the Chinese model were introduced, although the system soon fell into disuse. Among the achievements of the Ly was their affirmation of Buddhism. They also instituted 'a Vietnamsed version of Chinese political theory' that made of the king a 'southern emperor', while China was subject to a 'northern emperor' whose power stopped at the Vietnamese border. Nevertheless, Dai Viet continued to send tribute to China.

Ly kings continued to reign until 1225, but during the twelfth century the throne was repeatedly occupied by weak rulers, often mere children. By the thirteenth century, civil war prevailed.

The succeeding Tran dynasty (1225–1369) built up a fleet that, together with a strong army, enabled them to repel Mongol threats. By choosing queens only from their own family and by the ruler naming his heir on assumption of the throne (the reigning monarch was 'senior king'), the Tran avoided many pitfalls of Southeast Asian royal successions. In the 1230s, they re-introduced the Chinese examination system. This had the effect of creating a class of literati-officials whose culture was determined by their Confucian education; they were the forebears of Vietnam's mandarin elite. Challenged by the Mongols and threatened by invasions, the Tran successfully asserted that they were emperors too, not subject to the Chinese emperors.

When a Tran emperor took a concubine from another family, her kinsmen exploited the unrest of the late fourteenth century to seize the throne. A Cham king took advantage of the ensuing disorder to attack the kingdom and sack the capital, Thang-long. Quick in turn to seize the opportunity given by internal and external unrest, in 1406 the Ming rulers of China invaded. Their resources were not equal to the task of holding onto their prey, however, and in 1428 the last Chinese withdrew before the attacks of the forces of Le Loi, who became the founder of another dynasty.

The most prominent Le emperor was Le Thanh Ton (r. 1460–1497). His achievements included establishing a model
bureaucracy, presiding over a time of great cultural flourishing in literature, history and law, and making significant territorial conquests in Laos and Champa. A few years after his death, however, civil war was rekindled.

Dai Viet's control of wet-rice agriculture and management of the periodic flooding of the Red River through a system of dikes enabled the land to support a dense population in the lowlands. Its manpower was an asset in the rivalry with Champa, and eventually led to the latter's disappearance, or rather absorption. In the seventeenth century, the Trinh achieved dominance in the north and were again able to enforce Confucianist ideals. The villages of the north were tightly organized and disciplined, a necessity in crowded but insecure conditions where survival was dependent on the constant maintenance of the dikes and waterworks.

The Trinh expanded southwards but failed to maintain the unity of Vietnam — unsurprisingly, given the geography of the country, which stretches for hundreds of kilometres along a mountain chain. After assuming power, the Trinh had maintained the fiction that the Le dynasty still controlled Dai Viet, and continued to do so even when the realm split in two. A second Vietnam grew up at the expense of the Chams and the north. A general of the Trinh, Nguyen Hoang, established in 1558 a military-based settlement in newly conquered territory to the south. For a time, he and his family acted as vassals of the Trinh, and they continued to recognize the Le as emperors, but in 1687 they overcame Trinh opposition and established a new, Nguyen capital at Hue. Southward expansion continued until the early nineteenth century. By the end of the seventeenth century, Vietnam claimed almost all of Champa, but a small area retained some freedom as a tributary state into the
flourishing territorial demands. The establishment of the dyke system in the south eventually created large areas of arable land which was not surrounded by walls or hedges, an ethnically mixed population, and a lack of binding social institutions. It was, like other frontier areas, a haven for rebels, criminals and exiles. Yet its plenitude of resources could not fail to attract the adventurous. As one folksong described it:

Birds fly to their hearts' content across the fields,
Fish race in droves in the immense sea and lakes.

Consolidating their new territories, Nguyen rulers became patrons of Mahayana Buddhism, under which they could subsume the local belief systems of both immigrants and Chams (although by the seventeenth century most Chams adhered to Islam). Sometimes, a traditional Cham deity was officially elevated to the Vietnamese pantheon. The Nguyen rulers welcomed Chinese immigrants (so-called 'Ming loyalists' fleeing the change of dynasty in China in 1644). Foreign trade flourished at the international emporium of Hoi An (Faifo); Japanese, Chinese, other Southeast Asians, Portuguese and Dutch did business there in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. With southern expansion, the Vietnamese found themselves facing another neighbour, the Khmers, whose territory they also began to incorporate, finally establishing control of the Mekong Delta in the 1780s. The Nguyen territories were multi-ethnic, extending also to mountain peoples who supplied valuable forest products in exchange for salt and other goods. These upland commodities reached the coast through local markets. They were traded to foreign merchants at emporia like Hoi An.

In 1771–1802 the rebellion of the three Tayson brothers, named for their home village in south central Vietnam, put an end to Nguyen dominance in the south and wiped out the rule of the Trinh in the north as well. The rebellion is usually described as a peasant uprising, but a recent work has ascribed the unrest to problems with the hill peoples, who suffered from the collapse of international trade, debasement of coinage, and excessive taxation under late Nguyen rule. Whatever its origin, the rebellion rendered the Nguyen helpless. The last heir to the throne, Nguyen Anh, found refuge in Bangkok. There he received aid from Rama I that helped him return and ascend the throne of a united Vietnam as the Gia Long Emperor.
(r. 1802–20), with Hue as his capital. French merchants and missionaries also supported his efforts.

The restored Nguyen dynasty needed to prove its legitimacy to a populace devastated by rebellion and civil war; its means was the propagation of Confucian orthodoxy. Gia Long, eager to limit the competing influence of Buddhism, forbade adult men to attend Buddhist ceremonies. His successor Minh Mang (r. 1820–41) placed even more stress on Confucian orthodoxy, restricting Buddhism and insisting that all monks be assigned to cloisters and carry identification documents. He limited printed matter in general and began a persecution of Catholic missionaries and converts that his successors (not without provocation) continued. The fate of the Christians attracted the attention of the French at a time of colonial expansion, a tale continued below (see p. 106).
The restored monarchs vied with the Chinese emperors themselves in their adherence to Confucian orthodoxy. Yet even elite Vietnamese culture expressed other values. Vietnamese had borrowed Chinese words and used Chinese characters for writing, but they also developed and used *nom*, a system of writing with new characters to express uniquely Vietnamese terms. Society, culture and politics remained distinctive, incorporating indigenous Southeast Asian and Chinese elements.

**EUROPEAN CONTACTS AND EARLY COLONIZATION**

No other Southeast Asian state had such an intensive exchange with China, but all of them would come under strong Western influences. When the first Europeans arrived in Southeast Asia in the sixteenth century they concentrated their attention on the maritime region, with its plethora of Islamic sultanates and other small kingdoms, the most important of which was the Sultanate of Malacca. After the fall of Malacca in 1511 to Portugal, other states such as Aceh in Sumatra and Juhor on the Malayan Peninsula competed with Malacca for regional power. In westernmost Java, the Sultanate of Banten became a major port in the sixteenth century.

Many factors motivated the earliest European expansion into Southeast Asia. One was the search for spices for the European market. The second was the desire to participate in the trade in luxury goods with China, if necessary through Southeast Asia, where trade was possible even if China was closed to outsiders. In addition,