SECOND EDITION

VIETNAM

Revolution in Transition

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Westview Press

BOULDER • SAN FRANCISCO • OXFORD
the leadership of several dynamic emperors, notably the founder Ly Thai To and his successor Ly Thanh Ton, the Vietnamese state, now renamed Dai Viet (Great Viet), consolidated its independence and began to expand beyond the confines of the Red River delta. In that undertaking, the new state learned quickly the benefits of relying on Chinese experience. The political institutions and ideology of Confucian China were retained and put to use in building a centralized state.

Like China, and like most of its neighbors throughout the region, Vietnam was an agricultural society, based primarily on the cultivation of wet rice. In terms of landownership, the system in some ways resembled the feudal system in medieval Europe. In theory, the king owned all land, but much of it was normally awarded to top officials or nobles who were thus able to amass vast feudal manor holdings. Most of these manor holdings were tilled by serfs or, in some cases, slaves, but there was also a class of freeholding peasants based on small plots of land in countless villages throughout the Red River delta or along the coast.

If agriculture was the foundation of the state, commerce and manufacturing were not entirely neglected. Handicrafts flourished in the major cities (mainly textiles, ceramics, and wood and metal working), and a trading network developed not only within the country but with the mountain peoples and other states across the South China Sea as well. Like China, however, Vietnam under the Ly was not primarily a seafaring state, and commerce was distinctly secondary to agriculture in national priorities.

China had not abandoned its dream of ruling Vietnam. The Sung dynasty, which ruled until the late thirteenth century, lacked the military prowess to restore Chinese rule over the delta, although the rulers of Dai Viet, in order to avoid provoking imperial hostility, accepted tributary status with the court to the north. In the late thirteenth century, however, the Sung fell to the growing power of the Mongols, who established the new Yuan dynasty in 1279. Under the Yuan the old threat to Dai Viet rapidly revived. In 1285, the Tran ruler (the Tran dynasty had succeeded the Ly in 1225) refused permission for Mongol troops to cross Vietnamese territory to attack the state of Champa along the coast to the south. To punish such insolence, a Mongol army invaded Vietnam and sacked the capital. But the Vietnamese, under the inspired and astute leadership of one of their greatest national heroes, Tran Hung Dao, mobilized a national war of resistance against the invaders and, after several bloody battles, drove them back across the frontier. Two year later the Mongols returned to the attack but were again dealt a stunning defeat and eventually accepted a Vietnamese declaration of fealty to the Yuan emperor.

By the late fourteenth century, the Tran dynasty, plagued by famine, official corruption, land hunger, and almost constant war with the state of
Champa, had begun to decay. In 1400, Ho Quy Ly, the regent for a child emperor, seized the throne. In China, Emperor Yung Lo of the vigorous new Ming dynasty refused to recognize the new dynasty and in 1407 launched an invasion, bringing Vietnam once again under foreign rule. Chinese officials were again imported to fill all high-ranking posts, and a program of comprehensive sinification was adopted to replace all remaining native traditions.

This time, Chinese rule lasted only twenty years. Although early resistance, mounted by a claimant representing the Tran dynasty, failed, in 1418 a more serious threat was mounted by commoner from Thanh Hoa province. Le Loi, son of a prosperous landowner and a former official who had refused to serve under the Ming occupation, declared himself a new "pacifying king" and, with the aid of the astute Confucian scholar and military genius Nguyen Trai, launched a guerrilla movement in the hilly regions of Thanh Hoa province, south of Hanoi. By 1426, Le Loi felt strong enough to begin a major offensive against Chinese positions in the Red River delta and to lay siege to Chinese troops in the capital. The Ming court sent reinforcements, but they suffered a disastrous defeat. In the winter of 1427, Chinese forces surrendered and were permitted to withdraw. Like most founding emperors, Le Loi of the new Le dynasty set out immediately to solve one of the most persistent problems in Vietnamese society, the inequality of landholdings. Large landowners who had served the Tran or the Chinese were dispossessed by the state, and their land was redistributed among Le Loi's followers, while village commune lands were distributed to the poor. Legal restrictions on peasant rights were eased or eliminated, and rents were reduced. Major efforts were made to increase grain productivity.

The early Le dynasty can be considered a high point in the evolution of traditional society in Vietnam. A series of vigorous rulers reduced the power of the feudal magnates and issued decrees calling for greater equality of landholdings. The influence of Buddhist advisers at court declined, and a strengthened bureaucracy based on Confucian orthodoxy was established. The regime reached its apogee under Le Thanh Tong (1460–1497), during whose reign a new civil code, called the Hong Duc Code, was promulgated to establish the rule of law and systematize the laws and regulations of the empire.

MARCH TO THE SOUTH

One major contribution of the Le dynasty was to solve a long-standing problem in relations with Vietnam's neighbor to the south, Champa. For centuries, the major foreign policy concern of the Vietnamese state had been the danger of invasion from the north. Under the independent
dynasties of the Ly, the Tran, and the Le, however, a new frontier opened up to the south. Here, along the central coast, lay the kingdom of Champa. Originally of Malay extraction, the Cham were a seafaring people who since the first millennium A.D. had inhabited the coastal areas of what is today central Vietnam and down into the Mekong delta. Unlike Vietnam, Champa had been exposed to influence not from China but from India and, after the eighth century, from Islam. If Dai Viet was a classic example of an Asian agricultural society, using its ability to exploit water resources to produce a food surplus, Champa was an active participant in the trading network establishing by Chinese and Arab traders throughout the region of the South China Sea. With the rise of the Ly dynasty in the eleventh century, tension between the two neighboring states began to increase and eventually led to conflict. On several occasion, Cham armies invaded the southern provinces of Dai Viet and once, taking advantage of the internal decay of the Ly, even sacked the Vietnamese capital. In general, however, the Vietnamese had the better of the struggle and, during the early Le dynasty, gradually advanced south, forcing the Cham to cede territory and move their capital southward. In 1471, Vietnamese troops occupied the Cham capital at Vijaya (in present-day Binh Dinh province) and reduced the state to a virtual dependency.

Vietnamese expansion to the south provided new lands for a growing population and extended the power of the state but also created new
problems. With territorial expansion, combined with the gradual decline of the Le dynasty in the sixteenth century, tension arose at court and led to the rise of two powerful noble families, the Trinh and the Nguyen. Under weak rulers, land seizures by the wealthy and powerful and official corruption drove desperate peasants to rebellion. Rivalry between the Trinh and Nguyen led to the domination of the former in the North, while the latter were compelled to accept viceroyship over the newly conquered lands in the South, with their capital at Huế.

Internal dissension, however, did not end Vietnamese expansion in the South. On the contrary, the Nguyen completed their conquest of the Mekong delta and placed the entire area under Vietnamese rule. By now their main rival was the declining Khmer empire of Angkor in Cambodia. In earlier centuries, Angkor had been the most powerful state in mainland Southeast Asia and had held sway over much of the lower Mekong and the area around the Tonle Sap. By the mid-fifteenth century, however, its power was in decline, and when marauding Thai armies sacked the capital near the present-day market town of Siem Reap, the Angkor kingdom abandoned the area near the Tonle Sap and established a new capital at Phnom Penh. During the seventeenth century, Vietnamese settlers, frequently supplemented by armed force, gradually occupied lands from modern Bien Hoa down to the delta of the Mekong. Taking advantage of factionalism at the Khmer court, the Nguyen periodically intervened in internal politics and reduced the disintegrating Khmer state to a virtual dependency of Vietnam, while consolidating their control over the lower Mekong.

**THE COMING OF THE WEST**

The expansion of the Vietnamese state toward the south in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries coincided generally with the appearance of a new political and cultural force on the Southeast Asian scene. In 1511, the first signs of the new age of Western adventurism emerged with the arrival of a Portuguese fleet under Admiral Alfonso da Albuquerque at Malacca, on the west coast of the Malayan peninsula. The Portuguese were followed by others, and by the end of the century the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea were teeming with ships flying the flags of Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, France, and England.

The motives of the Europeans were diverse. While statesmen viewed the East in terms of imperial grandeur, control over the seas, and national wealth and power, merchants were lured by the promise of riches and a monopoly of the spice trade that had so long been dominated by Arab traders. Men of the cloth viewed the newly discovered lands as the home of millions of heathen souls to be saved. As the process acceler-
ated, such motives often coalesced and intertwined. European governments subsidized the formation of joint stock companies, like the famous Dutch and British East India companies, to exploit the riches of Asia. Catholic missionaries accompanied Spanish, French, or Portuguese fleets on their voyages and frequently combined mercantile activity with their evangelical mission.

Vietnam's first direct exposure to the West came in 1535 when a Portuguese ship entered the bay of Da Nang on the central coast. Within a few years the Portuguese had set up a trading port at Faifo (now, Hoi An), a few miles to the south, which now became the main port of entry for foreign goods. The Portuguese were soon followed by others, and by early in the seventeenth century traders from several European nations were active at several ports along the Vietnamese coast.

The first Catholic mission to Vietnam came in 1615, when Jesuit missionaries from the Portuguese colony of Macao set up a small mission at Faifo. A similar mission was set up in the Trinh capital of Thang Long (today Hanoi) a decade later. The French, however, soon became the leaders in the effort. Under the vigorous sponsorship of an ambitious Jesuit scholar, Alexander of Rhodes, French Catholics set up the Society of Foreign Missions to train missionaries to propagate the Christian faith in Vietnam. A significant aspect of Rhodes' work was his desire to train native priests to serve the needs of Vietnamese converts. As a means of facilitating this goal, he devised the first transliteration of the Vietnamese spoken language into the Roman alphabet. Although this written script (known as quoc ngu, or national language) did not at that time come into general use, French and later Vietnamese missionaries used to translate the Bible into Vietnamese. As a result of such dedicated efforts, thousands of Vietnamese were converted to the new faith.

Success, however, was short-lived. Missionary activities eventually antagonized Vietnamese authorities, who feared, with some justification, that Christian doctrine would subvert Confucian institutions and beliefs and undermine the loyalty of the population to the emperor. In 1631, the propagation of Christianity was barred in the South; thirty years later, a similar decree was issued in the North. European missionaries were expelled, and a few were executed. A similar decline occurred in commercial contacts. Although by no means a poor country, Vietnam had relatively little to offer in the way of spices and mineral resources. In 1697, the French closed down their small factory at Faifo. Others soon followed, leaving only the Portuguese with a small office.

THE TAY SON REBELLION

Throughout much of the eighteenth century, peasant rebellions had underscored rural unhappiness about mandarin corruption, land grab-
bing by the wealthy, and the general incompetence of the decrepit Le regime. Like peasant jacqueries everywhere, most were disorganized and quickly put down. But in 1771, a rebellion broke out that would eventually overthrow both the Nguyen and the Trinh and lead to the founding of a dynasty that united the country once again. The leaders of the revolt were three brothers from the village of Tay Son in Binh Dinh province in Central Vietnam, thus providing the so-called Tay Son rebellion with its name. Riding in the vanguard of such a widespread struggle by impoverished and land-hungry peasants in South to alleviate intolerable economic conditions, the Tay Son brothers, like Asian Robin Hoods, ravaged the countryside while seizing the wealth of the rich and giving it to the poor. For several years the rebellion was limited to the provinces of Quang Nam, Quang Ngai, and Binh Dinh. But in 1776, the Trinh took advantage of the chaotic situation and invaded the Nguyen domain. In the confusion, the Tay Son rebels seized Saigon. Many of the Nguyen lords were killed, but one, Prince Nguyen Anh, managed to flee to safety to an island in the South China Sea.

Flushed with success, the rebels now attacked the North and overthrew Trinh rule. Promising to restore power to the figurehead Le dynasty, the eldest and most capable of the brothers, Nguyen Huê, now married the daughter of the emperor and declared his fealty to the old dynasty. The emperor, however, distrusted the intentions of the Tay Son rebels and requested assistance from Chinese Emperor Ch’ien Lung. In 1788, a Chinese invasion force crossed the border and seized Hanoi, but Nguyen Huê deposed the Le ruler and declared himself the founding emperor of a new dynasty. In a bitter conflict near Hanoi, the Vietnamese achieved a decisive victory over Chinese forces, who fled in disorder back to China.

Following traditional fashion, the new emperor, under the reign title Quang Trung, set out to solidify his rule by improving conditions in rural areas. Common lands were returned to the poor peasants, and fields abandoned by their owners during the civil war were put back under the plow. Commercial activity was promoted and good relations were sought with China. But Emperor Quang Trung died suddenly in 1792 at the age of forty, and his two brothers proved to lack his acumen; the empire rapidly began to disintegrate.

The sudden decline of the power of the Tay Son came as a blessing to the remaining survivor of the Nguyen house in the South. After fleeing to Phu Quoc Island to escape the Tay Son, Nguyen Anh went to Thailand to seek assistance to recover his patrimony, but his first attempt to return was defeated in 1784. Then, however, he was befriended by Pigneau de Behaine, a French bishop stationed at Ha Tien on the Gulf of Thailand. Convinced that French help in restoring Nguyen Anh to power could cre-
ate an opening for the revival of Catholic missionary activity in Vietnam, Pigneau promised to provide him with assistance. A trip by Pigneau to Paris in 1787 elicited a promise from the French government to support a naval expedition against the Tay Son in return for a promise of trade privileges and the cession of Poulo Condore Island and Da Nang harbor to France. The plan was scuttled by the French viceroy in India, however, who refused to provide the funds for the mission. Undeterred, Pigneau raised the money on his own to purchase two ships and provide weapons and volunteers for an expedition that was launched in the summer of 1789. After the death of Quang Trung in 1792, the insurgents began to make progress, and in 1802, Nguyen Anh seized Hanoi and declared the founding of a new Nguyen dynasty with its capital at Huế, in Central Vietnam. Pigneau, who died in 1799, did not live to see the victory of his protégé.

THE NGUYEN DYNASTY

Pigneau de Behaine's gamble that French assistance to Nguyen Anh would provide an opening for French commercial and missionary interests in Vietnam proved to be unjustified. The new emperor, assigning himself the reign title Gia Long, was reasonably tolerant and permitted French missionaries to operate in Vietnam during his lifetime. He refused to ratify the abortive treaty arranged by Pigneau in Paris, however, and French hopes for improved trade relations between the two countries were not fulfilled. After Gia Long died in 1820, his successor Minh Mang continued and in some ways extended this restrictive policy toward contact with the West. Bright and dedicated, the new emperor was a devout believer in Confucian orthodoxy, and although interested in mastering Western technology, he feared the effects of European ideas on traditional culture in Vietnam. During his reign, the propagation of Christianity was sternly forbidden and missionaries and their converts were persecuted. A few who persisted were executed.

The dynasty's effort to solve Vietnam's chronic social and economic problems had only indifferent success. Despite attempts to control land concentration and official corruption, conditions in rural areas did not improve significantly from the declining years of the Le, resulting in sporadic peasant unrest. Such problems were intensified by internal dissension at court and the widespread unpopularity of the Nguyen dynasty in the North, where memories of the civil war ran deep.

THE FRENCH CONQUEST

Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, commercial, military, and religious circles in France had attempted to goad the French
government into adopting a more active policy toward Vietnam. Such voices became even more vocal at mid-century, when periodic executions of French missionaries in Vietnam aroused a public outcry. For the most part, government leaders had resisted these pressures, but by the late 1850s it had become difficult to maintain such an attitude. Commercial interests, concerned at increasing British control over Burma and the possible loss to the British of the "China Market," agitated for an aggressive policy to bring Vietnam under French influence and to open up the "soft underbelly" of China to French economic exploitation. Religious organizations, angered over Hué's persecution of Catholic missionary activity, demanded protection for French missionaries and Christian converts in Vietnam. In 1857, the government dispatched a French fleet to seize the central Vietnamese port city of Da Nang and to compel the Vietnamese court to accept French demands.

The first attack, launched in the summer of 1858, did not achieve these objectives. A predicted revolt against the imperial government in the rural areas along the central coast did not materialize, and European troops were pinned down in the city and unable to advance northward to threaten the imperial capital. With his troops ravaged by disease, the French commander, Admiral Charles Rigault de Genouilly, decided to evacuate the city and resume the attack further south at Saigon, which the French seized the following February. In succeeding months, French troops extended their control into neighboring areas after bitter fighting. Defeat in the South, coupled with a spreading revolt led by Le pretenders in the North, led the court to seek peace, and in the spring of 1862, French and Vietnamese negotiators reached agreement on a treaty that ceded three provinces in the South and the island of Poulo Condore to France. Three port cities were opened to French commerce, and Christian missionaries were granted freedom to propagate their religion in Vietnam.

The seizure of three provinces in the South was only the first step in a process that led before the end of the century to the conquest of the remainder of the country and the creation of an Indochinese Union including Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. In 1867, French units under Governor Benoit de la Grandière seized the remainder of the South and transformed the area into the French colony of Cochin China. In the meantime, the French had assumed Vietnamese rights in Cambodia and turned it into a protectorate. For more than two centuries, Thailand and Vietnam had clashed repeatedly over dominance in Phnom Penh, with each relying for support on factions within the Khmer court. In the early nineteenth century, Vietnam had turned the disintegrating state into a virtual protectorate, but resistance to Vietnamese domination led to a revolt, and in 1846, an agreement between Vietnam and Thailand placed the area under their joint suzerainty. In the Treaty of Saigon, signed in 1862, the Nguyen court
renounced its claims over Cambodia, claims that were assumed a few months later by France.

The seizure of Cochin China and Cambodia did not satisfy the dreams of French expansionists. Exploratory probes made it clear that the Mekong River did not offer a water route to the vast potential market of South China. Militant elements in Saigon and Paris agitated for vigorous action to bring the North under French rule and put France in a more advantageous position to dominate the China market.

In 1873, an opportunity to extend French influence to the north appeared when a French adventurer, Jean Dupuis, who had been running guns up the Red River into South China, encountered difficulties with local authorities. When the Vietnamese authorities attempted to control his activities, he mobilized a small military force of Europeans and Asians, seized parts of Hanoi, and then appealed to the governor of Cochin China in Saigon, Admiral Jean-Marie Dupré, for assistance. Dupré, who viewed the situation as an opportunity to compel the court to accept a French protectorate over the remainder of Vietnam and French authority in all of Cochin China, dispatched a small detachment of French troops under the command of a former naval officer, Francis Garnier. Ostensibly, Garnier's responsibility was to extract Dupuis from Hanoi, but Garnier—an imperialist in the mold of Cecil Rhodes—joined forces with Dupuis and seized the Hanoi citadel. Garnier himself was killed in a brief skirmish with imperial troops in December. In Paris, however, reaction to Saigon's unilateral effort to seize the North was hostile, and after the government had informed Saigon of its opposition to an occupation of the North, French troops were withdrawn in return for the court's recognition of French sovereignty over all Cochin China.

In the mid-1880s, the French completed their conquest of Vietnam. Pressure in France to adopt a more aggressive policy to counter British advances in Burma continued to rise, and in early 1882, reacting to the arrival in the North of Chinese troops in response to a plea for help from the court at Huê, Captain Henri Rivière was dispatched with 200 men to Hanoi. Arriving in April, he seized the citadel and consolidated French control over the entire lower delta. Rivière was later killed in a skirmish with pirates, but Paris had already decided to take further military action to bring the court to heel and to force it to accept French suzerainty. Taking advantage of the death of Emperor Tu Duc, Paris ordered additional troops to the delta. Resistance from Chinese and Vietnamese forces was soon broken, and in August 1883, the dispirited court acceded to French demands and signed a treaty establishing a French protectorate over the remainder of the country. In a separate treaty, China renounced its claims to a tributary relationship with Vietnam. Less than a decade later, the new
French “balcony on the Pacific” was completed by the establishment of a protectorate over the kingdom of Laos.

CONCLUSION

To those acquainted with the history of the Vietnamese people, the relative ease with which the Nguyen court succumbed to the French is somewhat puzzling. Why, after a tradition of centuries of staunch resistance to invasion from the north, did the Vietnamese so readily accept the new rulers from the West? One obvious factor is the military superiority possessed by the French, an advantage that marked virtually every confrontation between European and non-European societies at that time. But another was that Vietnam had the misfortune of encountering intense Western pressure at a time of serious internal weakness. Since the decline of the Le dynasty in the late sixteenth century, the country had faced serious internal problems. Expansion to the south had eased the heavy pressure on the land in the Red River delta, but it had not solved the problems of official corruption or concentration of land in the hands of the wealthy. Peasant unrest had become a familiar part of the political landscape and continued to cause internal instability well into the middle of the nineteenth century. Furthermore, expansion had led to a growing split within the ruling elite, resulting in the de facto division of Vietnamese society into two separate and mutually antagonistic regions in the North and South for several generations. The rise of the Nguyen dynasty had not brought a solution to this problem, and regional factionalism continued during the nineteenth century beneath the superficial unity of the Nguyen dynasty.

The internal divisions and tensions within Vietnamese society were exacerbated by the cultural challenge from abroad. Although the official attitude toward the West at court was tinged with hostility, fear, and at least initially, a whiff of Confucian contempt for barbarian ways, it did not take long for perceptive members of the ruling elite to observe that Western civilization was equal or perhaps in some respects even superior to Sino-Vietnamese civilization in Vietnam, particularly as the latter was facing a severe internal crisis. For many Vietnamese intellectuals concerned over the fate of their nation, fear of the West was soon tempered by the realization that, in order to survive, Vietnam might be compelled to abandon its traditional heritage and adopt many of the attributes of Western culture.