SECOND EDITION

VIETNAM
Revolution in Transition

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PREHISTORY

The origins of the Vietnamese people are shrouded in mystery. It has sometimes been asserted that their ancestral homeland was not in the Red River delta, where they first appear in history, but elsewhere, probably in South China. At present, there is little evidence to confirm this view. Archeological evidence indicates that human habitation in the area of the delta and the adjacent mountains extends back at least several hundred thousand years to the early Paleolithic era. Recent finds by Vietnamese archeologists at Mount Do in Thanh Hoa province have confirmed that early human beings lived in the area at roughly the same time as the famous earliest examples of Peking Man and Java Man, about 500,000 years ago.

Unfortunately, there is little to link such scattered evidence to present-day inhabitants. The first clear signs of the probable ancestors of the modern-day Vietnamese and their neighbors in the adjacent mountains recently appeared as the result of archeological finds in the vicinity of the modern cities of Hoa Binh and Lang Son, suggesting the emergence of Mesolithic and Neolithic cultures in the vicinity of the delta at least 8,000 to 10,000 years ago. Available evidence suggests that the earlier stages were characterized by hunting and food gathering; the later stages show signs of the cultivation of agriculture and the domestication of animals—an indication that the inhabitants of the area had mastered primitive agricultural techniques as early as 9,000 years ago. If this is the case, the Vietnamese were among the first peoples to practice settled agriculture.

By 1300 B.C., the Stone Age civilization had clearly passed into the Bronze Age. Concrete evidence for this transformation appeared with the discovery of finely crafted bronze drums at an archeological site at Dong Son in Thanh Hoa province. Bronze work of this type has been found in neighboring areas in Southeast Asia and in China, and some archeologists have speculated that the technique of bronze working was imported into Vietnam from the north. Others, noting the sophistication of the work-
manship, have suggested that the technique may have been first mastered by the inhabitants at Dong Son and later spread throughout the region. Whatever the case, other evidence at the site confirms that, by the end of the second millennium B.C., the inhabitants in the vicinity of the Red River delta had created an advanced civilization based on foreign trade and the cultivation of wet rice.

THE ORIGINS OF VIETNAMESE CIVILIZATION

Were the inhabitants of these Neolithic and Bronze Age sites ancestors of the present-day Vietnamese? At this point, evidence is too scanty to permit firm conclusions, although some experts suggest that the peoples who inhabited these Neolithic sites probably belonged to the Australoid-Negroid group, early inhabitants who may later have combined with arriving elements from South China to form the ancestors of many of the current peoples of mainland Southeast Asia, including the Vietnamese. What seems clear is that sometime during the last millennium B.C. the ancestors of the present-day Vietnamese had emerged as a significant force in the lowland and upland regions in the vicinity of the Red River delta. This was a period of rapid change throughout the area. During the previous several centuries, Chinese civilization had been gradually expanding from its origins along the banks of the Yellow and Yangtze rivers in China. By the late third century, this dynamic culture had begun to expand among the proto-Chinese peoples in the hilly regions south of the Yangtze River. With growth, however, had come instability and a long period of internal civil war (called, in Chinese history, the period of the Warring States) that was brought to an end only in 221 B.C. with the creation of the first centralized Chinese empire of the Ch’in, under the dynamic ruler Ch’in Shih Huang Ti.

Among those peoples who were affected and later absorbed by the new empire of the Ch’in were the so-called Yüeh (in Vietnamese, Viet) peoples then living throughout the southern coastal provinces of China and down into mainland Southeast Asia. Among the southermost of these Viet peoples were the so-called Lac Viet, who lived in the lowland marshy areas of the Red River delta. Sometime during the third century B.C., the Lac Viet united with other Viet peoples (sometimes called the Tay Au, or Hsi Ou in Chinese) living in the nearby mountains to found the small state of Au Lac with its capital at Co Loa, not far from the present-day city of Hanoi. What little is known about the kingdom of Au Lac comes largely from Chinese sources. The state was primarily agricultural, and the people tilled the fields with polished stone hoes. Most of the arable land was owned by feudal aristocrats; there may have been some slavery. By Chinese standards, Lac Viet was undoubtedly rather small and un-

exceptional. According to Vietnamese historical sources, however, the small state had a distinguished ancestry; it was descended from a semimythical Hong Bang dynasty, which had ruled over an ancient kingdom of Van Lang for more than two thousand years, beginning in 2879 B.C. The historical accuracy of such records is difficult to determine, and certainly those parts relating the origins of the Vietnamese peoples to the marriage of a dragon, Lac Long Quan, and a fairy, Au Ca, are apocryphal. Yet historians believe that Van Lang may have been an actual state, and it is not unlikely that the origins of the kingdom of Au Lac can be found in the Dong Son Bronze Age civilization a thousand years earlier.

THE CHINESE CONQUEST

Whatever its origins, the infant kingdom of Au Lac was not destined to survive. In 206 B.C. the short-lived Ch’in dynasty collapsed. In the chaotic situation that ensued, one of the Ch’in military commanders in South China, General Chao T’o (in Vietnamese, Trieu Da), founded a new kingdom of Nam Viet (South Viet, or Nan Yueh in Chinese), with its capital at Canton. In the process of consolidating his rule, Trieu Da defeated the armies of Au Lac and assimilated the lands of the Red River delta into his own empire. Trieu Da was able to maintain control over his kingdom until his death, but his successor soon ran into conflict with the new Han dynasty that had risen from the ashes of the Ch’in in China, and in 111 B.C. Chinese armies defeated Nam Viet and incorporated it into the growing empire of the Han.

The Chinese conquest had lasting consequences for Vietnam. At first Chinese rulers were willing to apply the principle of indirect rule and governed the peoples of the delta through local tribal chieftains. During the early years of the first century A.D., however, Chinese efforts to assimilate the area politically and culturally into the Han empire intensified. Chinese settlers began to immigrate into the area in increasing numbers, and some were selected to assume a major role in administration. Chinese institutions and customs were introduced as Chinese authorities sought to transform what they considered a semibarbarian society into a more civilized reflection of parent China to the north. This policy of Sinification undermined the social status and political authority of the native feudal magnates, however, and in 39 A.D. led to a revolt by the famous Trung sisters (Hai Ba Trung). Trung Trac and her sister, Trung Nhi, were widows of Vietnamese noblemen who had allegedly died fighting the Chinese. Now they hoisted the banner of rebellion against foreign rule. The revolt was briefly successful, and Trung Trac declared herself ruler of an independent kingdom. But Han armies under General Ma Yuan soon returned to the attack and reincorporated the rebellious areas into the Chinese em-
pire. In despair, the Trung sisters committed suicide by throwing themselves into a river.

For the next several centuries, Vietnam was a part of China, exposed to a concentrated policy of political and cultural assimilation. Chinese administrators replaced local aristocrats in positions of authority, although a few Vietnamese were permitted to occupy subordinate positions in the bureaucracy. The Chinese written language was introduced and became the official language of administration and literary expression. Chinese rituals and customs replaced the relatively informal social mores practiced by the local Vietnamese. The Confucian classics became the foundation of the educational system in Vietnam. Chinese art, architecture, and music were imported and served as models for Vietnamese creative workers.

From the Chinese standpoint, the effort to integrate Vietnam into the broader world of Chinese culture was simply an extension of the historic attempt to pacify the outer frontier of the Chinese world and bring culture to the allegedly barbarian peoples living beyond the bounds of Confucian civilization. As such, the conquest and absorption of the Red River delta was not only a security problem but a consequence of the cultural dynamism and moral imperatives of the Chinese state. For most of the proto-Chinese peoples living in South China, the effort was a success, and the provinces south of the Yangtze River are today an integral part of the cultural world of modern China (although it should be noted that cultural differences between North and South China remain, and even today, Vietnamese intellectuals are occasionally prone to comment on the cultural and ethnic similarities of Vietnamese and South Chinese). In the case of Vietnam, the effort failed. Why this occurred is both a matter of intense pride to the Vietnamese and a source of dispute and fascination among historians. Whatever the reasons, several centuries of Chinese rule were not able to erase the memory of Vietnamese independence, and revolts broke out sporadically in abortive efforts to drive out the foreign invader.

**INDEPENDENCE RESTORED**

In the early tenth century, the T'ang dynasty, one of the most powerful and advanced in Chinese history, began to disintegrate. Taking advantage of the chaos, a revolt led by Ngo Quyen drove out the Chinese and restored the independent state of Nam Viet, with its capital at the ancient city of Co Loa. But Ngo Quyen died in 944, and for the remainder of the century the country was shaken by civil war. Only the weakness of the new Sung dynasty prevented a reconquest of the area by Chinese troops. In 1010, however, a new Ly dynasty rose and soon proved to be one of the stabllest and most glorious in the history of the Vietnamese nation. Under
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 years 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