An Evaluation of the Chinese Period in Vietnamese History

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Introduction

More than half a century ago, Henri Maspero, the pioneer French Sinologist, wrote a series of articles on early Vietnamese history. One of them examined the conquest of the ancient Vietnamese by the Han general Ma Yuan 元 in A.D. 42-43; Maspero ended the article with the following paragraph:

Such was the conquest of Tonkin by Ma Yuan. It marked a fundamental milestone in the history of the country. Until then treated simply as a protectorate, like the kingdoms of Tien and Yeh-lang, preserving its own institutions and customs, it, during the Han period, became a genuine Chinese province. If Annam, after gaining its independence, was able for centuries to resist Chinese aggression, while all the neighboring states—Yeh-lang, Tien, Nan-chao—gradually succumbed, it was because it was the only one to have been subjected to government by a permanent Chinese administration, and this, by breaking the power of particularist institutions and local groups, and by introducing Chinese ideas and social organization, gave it a cohesion and formal structure which its neighbors lacked. It is indebted to Ma Yuan for this advantage... for it was this Chinese conqueror who, in destroying the old political institutions of Tonkin, cast this country for good into the stream of Chinese civilization, thereby giving it that strong Chinese reinforcement which allowed it to play the primary role in the history of eastern Indochina since the tenth century.3

Coming from a man of Henri Maspero's stature, these have proven to be persuasive words. No scholar in the Western tradition has dared venture beyond them.4 Yet Maspero

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(2) Coedes, 47, Le Thanh Khoi, 103, Bai Quang Tung, 80. Woodside, 7.
wrote his opinion without evidence, as though it was sufficiently obvious to require no elaboration. In terms of the colonial mentality of Maspero's generation, his interpretation indeed was sufficiently obvious to require no elaboration. But today, the assumptions underlying that mentality cannot be taken so casually. Not only has the negative side of colonialism come clearly into view, but, more fundamentally, modern Vietnamese archeologists and historians have seriously challenged Maspero's interpretation on the basis of evidence.\(^3\)

The so-called Dong-Son bronze age civilization, which flourished from the seventh century B.C. until Han, rested upon a foundation raised by neolithic cultures in northern Vietnam during the preceding millennium and a half. The archeological remains of that culture are echoed by mythological traditions which form the core of Vietnamese identity to this day. A Vietnamese scholar has recently written of the Dong-son civilization as being "closely related to us."\(^4\) This assertion of continuity from the pre-Chinese era to the present is more than patriotic fervor, for an examination of the Chinese period of Vietnamese history shows that Maspero's interpretation was hasty.

Maspero correctly emphasized Ma Yuan's expedition as a watershed of Vietnamese history, but his comparisons with the upland realms of Tien 和 and Nan-chao 南朝 in Yun-nan and Yeh-lang 粱 in Kuei-chou were unfortunate, for, unlike these kingdoms, ancient Vietnamese society was firmly based on lowland agriculture. Furthermore, Nan-chao was largely a product of T'ang frontier policy and the politics of plunder, and had no strong pre-historic roots.\(^5\) Of Tien and Yeh-lang, ephemeral border kingdoms encountered by Han, so little is known that a comparison with the ancient Vietnamese invites incredulity.

Maspero wrote of Vietnam becoming "a genuine Chinese province" under Han, "subjected to government by a permanent Chinese administration," thereby casting the Vietnamese "for good into the stream of Chinese civilization" and giving them "that strong Chinese reinforcement" which accounts for their prominent role in the history of their region. This idealistic view rests on a simplistic assumption of beneficial colonial influence popular in Maspero's day. Let us look at the sources for a more reliable evaluation of the Chinese period in Vietnamese history.

\(^3\) Hoang Xuan Chinh, Pham Huy Thong and Nguyen Duy Ty. Nguyen Duy Ty, Tran Manh Phu.
\(^4\) Pham Huy Thong. 66.
\(^5\) Stct.
Law and Administration

The uprising which prompted Ma Yuan's expedition was provoked by a growing trend of Han interference in the local way of life, fostered by talented officials who fled south from the disorders of Wang Mang's usurpation (A.D.9-23). Up to this time, the indigenous ruling class had remained intact as vassals of Han.

The uprising was sparked by a Chinese governor's attempt to impose imperial law (yà 法) over the local aristocracy. Although Ma Yuan crushed this aristocracy and established direct Han rule, he prudently refrained from publishing imperial law and was content to "explain the old regulations (chù chūn 諸制)" to the people "in order to control them." Katakura Minoru has interpreted these "old regulations" as a compromise between imperial law and local usage fashioned by the Wang Mang era officials. This seems reasonable.

Imperial law was never successfully imposed over the Vietnamese. During the post-Han era of the Six Dynasties, enfeebled imperial courts were repeatedly forced to compromise their authority and recognize the local power system in Vietnam. In order to do this while maintaining theoretical sovereignty, they resorted to "special amnesties" (ch'ü shē 曲赦).

This term was first coined in Chinese history by Chin in 269, specifically for the Vietnamese situation. In theory, it signified the extension of imperial law over the Vietnamese; prior "foolishness" was forgiven and future "obedience" was expected. In reality, it was a recognition of the local power situation. "Special amnesties" were issued by Ch'i in 479 and by Liang in 505, 516, and 548, in each case to affirm theoretical sovereignty over a politically irregular situation in Vietnam. These "special amnesties" reveal that even in legal theory some adjustment was felt necessary to account for Vietnam's special position in the imperial world.

The reason for this is that the Vietnamese were never subjected to a regular administration in the Chinese sense. Chinese officials from Han through T'ang had two main interests in

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(6) HHS, 116: 9a.
(7) HHS, 24: 12a, and 116: 9b.
(8) HHS, 24: 13b-14a.
(9) Katakura, 24: 25.
(10) Katakura, 28: 29.
Vietnam, and neither of these were administrative.

First, the Chinese were drawn south by tropical luxury goods: pearls, rhinoceros horns, elephant tusks, tortoise shells, lapis lazuli, coral, amber, incense, drugs, parrots, kingfishers, peacocks, and “other precious rarities.” From the beginning to the end of the Chinese period, greed and a get-rich-quick mentality prevailed among the majority of imperial officials residing among the Vietnamese; they remained long enough to accumulate a fortune, then hastened back north. This greed often disrupted the international markets and stimulated wars with bordering kingdoms, as in the case with the Lin-i # ç wars of the mid-fourth century and the Nan-chao War of the mid-ninth century. Time and again, unrest and uprisings were attributed to the greedy habits of imperial officials.  

Second, from a broader viewpoint, the Chinese perceived strategic interests in the Hong delta and beyond. When Han arrived on the coasts of the South China Sea, the Vietnamese lands were the demographic center of the entire region, comprising, according to the Han census of A.D. 2, over seventy percent of the population in what is now Kuang-tung, Kuang-hsi, and northern Vietnam. In order to control the markets of the South China Sea, the Chinese had to make subjects of the Vietnamese; only after the Canton area had been built up by Chinese immigration as a counterweight to the Vietnamese did this strategic concern diminish.

Control of the Vietnamese territories provided the Chinese with an important buffer against neighboring peoples; it also precluded the potential threat of a hostile Vietnamese border kingdom. Throughout the Chinese period, frontier defense superseded administration as the primary concern of imperial officials.

Far from being “a genuine Chinese province” under Han, the Vietnamese lands were part of an amorphous frontier jurisdiction where, after the impact of Ma Yuan’s conquest had worn off, periodic punitive expeditions soon replaced a crumbling civil administration. Major uprisings occurred in the years 100, 136-138, 144, 157, 160, 178-181, and 184. Han policy alternated between brief military campaigns and attempts to win the cooperation of the local people through conciliatory gestures. When Han outposts were overrun in Vietnam in 136, a court official advised against a military expedition, citing seven reasons why such a
policy would only create more trouble. A major consideration was the extreme distance of Vietnam from the Han centers of power in northern China. The land route covered nearly two thousand miles; Ma Yuan's return trip had taken six months. In ancient times, this was a formidable distance.

Even during T'ang, at the peak of Chinese power in Vietnam, the Vietnamese were not subjected to a regular administration but were rather ruled under a "protectorate" (le hu fu 離扈府), a jurisdiction used to control non-Chinese peoples in strategic frontier areas. In 836, T'ang remitted the taxes in Vietnam "lest the garrisons be cut off and starved out" by the people who were "bewailing their suffering and hardship," and funds were sent down from the imperial treasury to meet the financial needs of the local government. T'ang accepted Vietnam as a financial liability in this case in order to maintain its strategic position against expansionist Khmer and Nan-chao powers. Vietnam was important for T'ang, according to a contemporary account, "to defend the land routes and prevent the Khmers from coming to buy weapons and horses; furthermore, in the mountain valleys dwell savage and stubborn people who must be repressed."

The Chinese never established a regular administrative system in Vietnam. Rather, collecting taxes and other administrative activities among the Vietnamese was a specialized skill, constantly being refined. Hsüeh Tsung 許模, a third-century official, wrote that "if district-level officials are appointed, it is the same as if they were not...[the people] easily become rebellious and are difficult to pacify; district officials act dignified but are careful not to provoke them. What can be obtained from field and household taxes is meager. On the other hand, this place is famous for precious rarities from afar treasures enough to satisfy all desires; so it is not necessary to depend on what is received from taxes in order to profit the empire." Hsüeh Tsung went on to say that "peaceful administration" depended upon selecting "wise and cautious men with the ability to devise resourceful methods for keeping the loyalty of the people...If men of ordinary talent are used, governing according to the usual way without shrewdness or unorthodox measures, then day-by-day rebellion and banditry will increase."
From this it is clear that the Vietnamese were beyond the realm of normal government; ruling them required special efforts. But Hsiêh Tsung admitted that officials were "not carefully examined" before being appointed and that, "under Han, law was lax and many officials were self-indulgent and debauched; consequently, many illegal acts occurred."(19)

Considering Hsiêh Tsung's remarks, it is clear that whatever imperial administration there was in Vietnam was chiefly occupied with extracting wealth. This was especially true during the Six Dynasties era. One deed which caused particular resentment under Wu was a levy of over one thousand master-craftsmen who were sent to the Nanking court. (20) Chin officials provoked a war with Lin-i by forcing foreign merchants to pay bribes amounting from twenty percent to half the value of their merchandise. (21)

One bright spot during this period was the rule of the Tu Th family. Descended from a Chin official who came from northern China early in the fourth century, the Tu ruled the Vietnamese for fifty years at the end of Chin and the beginning of Sung. They were unique in their ability to rule, their integrity toward the people, and their formal loyalty to an empire too feeble to assist them. (22)

Under the Tu, the Vietnamese became effectively autonomous and developed a strong political momentum of their own which was not brought to an end until the rise of Sui two centuries later. A Ch'i edict of 484 stated that the Vietnamese refused to pay taxes, ignored orders, and intercepted tribute coming from foreign countries. (23) One Ch'i official wrote that, "trusting in their remoteness and the dangers of the road," the Vietnamese had "gone their own way." (24) The Vietnamese were openly independent for much of the sixth century.

While T'ang gave the Vietnamese their strongest lesson in Chinese administrative procedures, this nevertheless fell far short of a regular administration in the Chinese sense. The Vietnamese were taxed at half the rate prevailing in China proper; this was a recognition of the difficulties inherent in ruling a non-Chinese population. When a governor attempted to impose the full tax in 687, he was killed by a popular uprising after being besieged in his capital for several months. (25)

(19) SKC, 53 : 9b.
(20) SKC, 48 : 12a.
(21) CS, 97 : 9b.
(22) SS, 92 : 4a-6b.
(23) TCTC, 135, vol. 7, 733.
(25) CTS, 185a: 11a-b, HTS, 201 : 3b-4a.
In the early ninth century, T'ang built up a strong administration using locally recruited men, but the result was to polarize the Vietnamese and provoke unrest, rebellion, foreign intervention, and prolonged warfare. T'ang governors were killed or chased out by the Vietnamese in 803, 819, 828, 843, 860, and 863. The second quarter of the century witnessed a deepening confrontation between anti-T'ang and pro-T'ang Vietnamese accompanied by a rising crescendo of violence which culminated in the Nan-chao War of 854-66. By the end of this war, T'ang was already fading from the scene, and a reconstructed Sino-Vietnamese aristocracy rebuilt the country and led the Vietnamese into the post-T'ang era.\(^{[14]}\)

In the tenth century, when indigenous Vietnamese sensibilities re-awakened, this Sino-Vietnamese aristocracy was at a loss and dissolved in anarchy as Dinh Bo Linh, a rustic leader of peasant origin, established the foundations of independent Vietnam at Hoa-lu. His court, with five queens and prominent religious officials, had much in common with other Southeast Asian realms. There were but two discernible points of contact between Dinh Bo Linh's government and the Chinese-colonial regime of earlier centuries.

One was the appointment of a "Judge of the Protectorate" (Do ho phu si su 都護府士師), which can be more meaningfully rendered as "Judge of the Central Government."\(^{[17]}\) This title suggests a perceived continuity with certain aspects of T'ang law and administration, for the central government over the Vietnamese under T'ang was called a "protectorate"; yet, in the context of the Hoa-lu court, it is clear that this judgeship was little more than a tribunal where difficulties among members of the court and other high officials were resolved and where traitors and bandits were publicly condemned. Insun Yu has pointed out that portions of the T'ang legal system retained by later Vietnamese dynasties were confined to such matters as court etiquette, loyalty to the ruler, the behaviour of officials, public order, and various administrative procedures.\(^{[18]}\)

A second selection from the T'ang experience was the concept of dividing the realm into ten circuits. Dinh Bo Linh applied this idea specifically for military purposes by organizing a territorial militia called the "Ten Circuit Army" (Moc dao quan 十道軍).\(^{[19]}\) The arming and

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\(^{[14]}\) CTS. 13: 20b. NT5. 8: 35b. 16a: 9: 1b. 2a: 80: 12a.
\(^{[17]}\) TT. Ban Ký, 1: 3b.
\(^{[18]}\) Yu, 56-80.
\(^{[19]}\) TT. Ban Ký, 1: 4a.
training of this army was one of the major accomplishments of his reign, for it provided the means by which his successor, Le Hoan 謌桓, was able to defeat the Sung invasion of 983, thereby giving the new kingdom a chance to survive.

Chinese law and administration in Vietnam was neither regular nor permanent. It was in a perpetual state of ad hoc adjustment to a situation which contradicted basic concepts of Chinese government. The Sino-Vietnamese relationship eventually broke because it did not develop upon a mutually satisfactory basis. The reason for this was that the Vietnamese did not want to become Chinese.

Family and Society

The reforming officials of the Wang Mang era attempted to enforce Chinese-style marriage customs. It is recorded that on one occasion a ceremony was organized in which two thousand persons were married at one time. (30) This suggests that Chinese officials perceived serious differences between the family systems of ancient Vietnam and China, for a society's concept of marriage is a direct reflection of its family system. The Vietnamese family, with its diffuse authority, its tendency toward individualism, and its bilateral character, was an immediate target of Chinese policy. The Chinese concept of political authority was based on a tightly controlled patriarchal family system. The Vietnamese family was by nature seditious of Chinese authority, and China's failure to transform the Vietnamese family system ultimately meant the failure of Chinese rule in Vietnam.

The uprising which Ma Yuan 玛院 crushed erased whatever changes the Wang Mang era reformers had wrought, and thereafter Chinese officials were more cautious. After his expedition, Ma Yuan "reported more than ten contradictions" between local and Han statutes (ll. 31). (31) These "contradictions" are no longer known but it is reasonable to assume that these "statutes" refer to customary law concerned with marriage, inheritance, and other aspects of the family system.

Two centuries later Hsüeh Tsung 謥詒 wrote that historical records claimed the Wang Mang era officials had "made everyone follow proper marriage ceremonies with designated

(30) T'T. Ngày Ky, 3 : 1b.
(31) HHS, 24 : 13b-14a.
matchmakers, public notification of officials, and parental invitations to formal betrothals”; yet Hsüeh Tsung went on to say, “according to the records, civilizing activities have been going on for over four hundred years, but, according to what I, myself have seen during many years of travel since my arrival here, the actual situation is something else.”

Commenting on marriage customs in the Hong and Ma deltas of northern Vietnam, Hsüeh Tsung wrote, “When an elder brother dies, a younger brother marries his widow; this has been going on for generations thereby becoming an established custom, so district officials give in and allow it, not being able to stop it... In short, it can be said that these people are on the same level as bugs.” The Chinese reserved a special disgust for unorthodox marriage customs that denied the strong patriarchal authority lying at the heart of their political system.

This mention of levirate reveals that strong female rights were honored among the ancient Vietnamese. Anthropologists do not agree on the significance of levirate. As it was practiced in historical times, it gave a childless widow the right to bear an heir by means of her deceased husband’s younger brother. It is possible to see in levirate the lingering influence of a polyandrous, matrilineal society. The uprising put down by Ma Yuan was led by two sisters. The tomb and spirit temple of their mother has survived but nothing remains of their father; furthermore, the names and biographies of over fifty leaders of their uprising are recorded in temples dedicated to their cult, and a large percentage of these are women. Another uprising in 248 was also led by a woman. Women in ancient Vietnam clearly held strong rights which enabled them to play leading political roles.

Hsüeh Tsung’s teacher, Liu Hsi, resided for a decade among the Vietnamese and later wrote that their “women are untrustworthy and promiscuously wander about; for this reason they are made to wear tinkling pendants in their ears to keep them at home.” Apparently, women were accustomed to enjoying wide prerogatives, and aspiring patriarchs tried to keep track of them by hanging bells in their ears.

The bilateral character of the Vietnamese family system survived a millennium of Chinese
patriarchal influence and emerged in the tenth century to provide an important legitimizing principle in the arena of monarchical politics. Dinh Bo Linh took five queens from among the politically prominent families of his time. This was a typical practice in other Southeast Asian realms where bilateral kinship patterns prevailed.\(^{37}\) Royal polygamy was practiced at the Vietnamese court into the thirteenth century.

The only surviving evidence that the propagation of Confucian family ethics in Vietnamese society was promoted by legal measures comes from the mid-eighth century. A mother who disowned her bandit son, thereby encouraging her neighbors to “respect the law,” was honored with an imperial decree assigning two “men-servants” (ting shih 傳士) to support her.\(^{38}\) The system of assigning ting shih was part of the Confucian-style family organization as codified within T'ang law. Old and feeble people of merit were assigned able-bodied men to care for them; these men were in turn exempted from corvée obligations.

This example shows that the system of assigning ting shih was applied in Vietnam. We do not know if the woman in this episode was from a Chinese immigrant family or the member of a traditional Vietnamese community. Still, we can assume that Confucian family values were publicized, officially encouraged, and established in the law during the high-point of T'ang power.

The confrontation between pro-T'ang and anti-T'ang interests during the ninth century reveals that the impact of Chinese influence on Vietnamese society was uneven. Lowland agricultural communities near the Chinese power centers, peripheral areas of the deltas, and upland frontier areas were affected in that order. The core of Chinese influence in Vietnam was the Chinese immigrant community concentrated in the eastern part of the Hong delta. The vicissitudes of this community during the millennium of Chinese rule can be known only in broad outline.

Han census statistics, as compared in Table 1, reveal that demographic patterns in Vietnam remained stable when northern China was depopulated and central and southern China experienced abnormal population growth as a result of refugee movements provoked by the Wang Mang disorders. Between A.D. 2 and 140, the number of households in northern China decreased by fifty percent and the number of persons by forty percent.

\(^{37}\) Kirsch.
\(^{38}\) Katakura, 32.
remaining households absorbed lingering portions of fleeing households thereby causing an increase in average household size. In the Yangtze basin of central China, households increased 102% and the number of persons by 84%; the influx of small refugee households caused a decrease in average household size. In the Hsi basin of southern China, the flow of refugees caused major changes in the population; households increased 247%, the number of persons increased 152%, and the average household size decreased severely reflecting the impact of fragmented refugee families.

On the other hand, statistics available from northern Vietnam show a normal rate of growth for households, 27%, and persons, 31%, as well as a slight increase in average household size. From this we can surmise that, while the demographic map of China was transformed during Han, Vietnamese society maintained a normal pattern of growth.

This does not mean that no Han immigrants came to Vietnam, for surely they did, but it does mean that Vietnamese society was able to absorb newcomers without experiencing abnormal growth. Aside from the geographical remoteness of the Vietnamese lands, the size of the Vietnamese population helps explain this. As mentioned above, according to the Han census of A.D. 2, seventy percent of the recorded population in territories along the South China Sea was in northern Vietnam. Such a state of affairs suggests that Vietnamese society entered the Chinese period at a high level of development and maturity.

In the post-Han era, during the period of the Six Dynasties, a Sino-Vietnamese aristocracy grew out of Chinese immigrant families. Through intermarriage and longevity of residence, this class at one end merged with Vietnamese society while at the other end, through education and political or social ambition, it was linked to the imperial world. It is significant that Chinese who settled permanently in Vietnam were for the most part from upper-class backgrounds. They did not come as common immigrants simply looking for a place to live. They often came with books and education and imperial appointments, and sometimes with a sense of duty to bring their civilization to a benighted frontier. During T'ang, some of the most influential immigrants were political exiles. These were different from the general crowd of officials who temporarily resided among the Vietnamese with the main idea of making a quick fortune before returning north.

T'ang census statistics, as compared in Table 2, reveal that major demographic changes

(39) Lu Shih-p'eng, 136-137.
in Vietnam produced abnormal population growth in the eighth century. Yet, these changes reveal two opposing trends reflecting the differing impacts of immigration from north and south.

During the first half of the eighth century, at the peak of T'ang power, the number of households in the Hong delta grew three times faster than the population, causing a significant decline in the average household size. This indicates the impact of immigrant Chinese who arrived as individuals or in relatively small nuclear family groups. However, in the Ca delta on the southern border, during the same time, the population grew over four times faster than the number of households, causing average household size to more than double. This reflects a Southeast Asian pattern of immigration in large kinship groups of extended families, clans, and tribes. These statistics show that the effects of Chinese immigration had to compete with the effects of non-Chinese immigration in the context of Vietnamese society, even during the time of greatest Chinese power in Vietnam.

When T'ang faded from the scene, Vietnam was in the hands of a Sino-Vietnamese family from the eastern part of the Hong delta, where the Sinophile community was based. However, during the tenth century, the Sino-Vietnamese edifice crumbled, and the man who successfully established the independent Vietnamese monarchy, Dinh Bo Linh, was from an upland village on the southern edge of the Hong delta; moreover, he built up his base of power in the Ca delta on the southern frontier where his father had served as a governor. This suggests that even while Chinese influence pressed from the north, Vietnamese society was constantly reinforcing its distinctive non-Chinese identity through contacts with the south.

Culture and Political Consciousness

When Han fell, the Vietnamese were ruled by a man from a Chinese immigrant family named Shih Hsieh 王曦. Shih Hsieh had received a Confucian education in northern China and had a reputation as a patron of scholars. During the forty years of his peaceful rule, the Vietnamese felt new cultural currents.

It has been generally assumed that these currents flowed from the north and consisted

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(40) Yamamoto (1943), 49.
of classical Confucian learning. One French scholar went so far as to compare Shih Hsieh to Alcian, under whose leadership Charlemagne's palace school was established and Latin culture propagated into northern Europe. Shih Hsieh did indeed give refuge to scores of Han scholars uprooted by the disorders attending the fall of Han. But the impact of these men on the Vietnamese was negligible, for they generally viewed the Vietnamese as incorrigible barbarians and eagerly returned north as soon as conditions allowed.

According to Hsieh Tsung, who served under Shih Hsieh, it was useless to try to “civilize” the Vietnamese: “The people are like birds and beasts... on the same level as bugs.” He cited the alleged efforts of the Wang Mang era reformers who “established schools for instruction in the classics,” but went on to affirm that, in fact, those who studied books gained only “a rude knowledge of letters,” and the impact of Chinese culture on the local way of life was essentially passive: “Those who came and went at the government outposts could observe proper ways of doing things.”

The cultural atmosphere in Vietnam under Shih Hsieh nevertheless attracted many kinds of religiously and intellectually inclined persons. Mou Po 莫若, from a Chinese immigrant family in modern Kuang-hsi, went to Vietnam as a young man during the early years of Shih Hsieh’s rule. Trained as an orthodox Confucian, he was drawn to the cultural life prevailing there. Apparently as a result of his experience in Vietnam, he was eventually converted to Buddhism. In the preface to a Buddhist treatise he wrote, precious information is given on the intellectual atmosphere of the region:

At that time, after the death of Emperor Ling 哀帝 [189],... the empire was in disorder; only Chiao-chih 胶渓, Kuang-tung, Kuang-hsi, and northern Vietnam] was relatively calm, and unusual men from the north came to live there. Many occupied themselves with the worship of gods and spirits, abstinence from cereals, and immortality. Many people of that time devoted themselves to these studies. Mou Po unceasingly proposed objections based on the five classics; none of the Taoists and spiritualists dared argue with him.

This was an era of cultural ferment and experimentation for the Vietnamese. The pre-Han

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(41) Gaspardone (1947), 8.
(43) SKC, 53: 9a-b.
Dong-son civilization had been destroyed, but its spirit survived and was seeking new forms of expression. As Mou Po’s career suggests, the cultural direction of the Vietnamese under Shih Hsieh was toward Buddhism.

The Buddhism that penetrated Vietnam at this time came from the south. According to Vietnamese tradition, Buddhism spread during the time of Shih Hsieh as a result of miracles performed by Man Nuong, 曼努勢, the daughter of an immigrant holy man from the Mekong delta. Man Nuong was the disciple of a visiting Indian Buddhist missionary who arrived from the south. She was reportedly able to summon rain in time of drought, and, under her inspiration, four statues were carved from a huge banian tree to represent the Buddhas of Clouds, Rain, Thunder, and Lighting; temples were then built for each of the statues. By dedicating temples to manifestations of the monsoon season and identifying them with incarnations of the Buddha, the Vietnamese reinforced old concepts of fertility with a new world of thought.

Mythical traditions rooted in the pre-Han Dong-son culture have been encrusted with Buddhist details which reflect the era of Shih Hsieh as a time of heavy maritime contact with India as well as other parts of Southeast Asia. According to Shih Hsieh’s biography, “wherever he went he was accompanied by scores of Hu people bearing lighted incense.” Hu, in this context, refers to natives of India and Central Asia.

The biography of one such Hu person was preserved in China. He was K’ang Seng Hui, 顧僧會, literally “Sogdian Buddhist Priest Hui.” His father was a merchant from Sogdiana in Central Asia who settled in Vietnam via India. K’ang Seng Hui was educated in Vietnam and subsequently travelled to Nanking where, in 247, he converted the founder of Wu to Buddhism, thereby introducing Buddhism into southern China.

It is clear from the careers of Mou Po and K’ang Seng Hui that Vietnam was at that time a center for the diffusion of Buddhism into China. Far from being a time of ascending Chinese influence in Vietnam, the era of Shih Hsieh saw Vietnam transmitting foreign cultural currents into China.

During the ensuing era of the Six Dynasties, cultural life in Vietnam evolved at three

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(47) SKC, 49:114.
(48) Chavannes, 199-211.
recognizable levels. The Sino-Vietnamese aristocracy fully accepted the assumptions of Chinese civilization, even when it dared assert its political independence from the imperial world. Among the people, cultural assumptions inherited from pre-Chinese times survived in mythological form, as well as in daily-life customs and habits. Between these two cultural outlooks, Buddhism developed in a mediatory role with a foot firmly planted in each world.

These three cultural currents were successively tested during the sixth century when, for sixty years, China was too weak to dominate Vietnam and the Vietnamese were effectively independent. At first the Sino-Vietnamese aristocracy, under the leadership of Ly Bi 李異, proclaimed its independence, but did so in typical Chinese style. Ly Bi proclaimed himself emperor, established a reign title, and organized an imperial court in characteristic Chinese fashion. His experiment failed, however, because it was pursued on the basis of imperial assumptions, and at that level the Vietnamese could never successfully compete with China. His imperial pretensions drew the wrathful attention of one of contemporary China's most vigorous military leaders, Ch'en Pa-hsien 陳霸先. Pa-hsien crushed Ly Bi's armies and returned north to found a dynasty of his own.\(^{45}\)

Ch'en Pa-hsien's departure nevertheless meant the end of Chinese power in Vietnam for more than half a century. With the Sino-Vietnamese aristocracy in disarray, an indigenous movement based on the political heritage of pre-Chinese times emerged under the leadership of Trieu Quang Phuc 趙光復. Trieu Quang Phuc resurrected hoary concepts of political power and sovereignty embodied in the claw myth associated with the pre-Han kings of Vietnam. This myth was based on the idea that political power derived from the sea, an idea shared with other Southeast Asian societies which comprised the foundation of ancient Vietnamese mythology.\(^{46}\)

But even as mere imitation of Chinese forms could not satisfy the deeper feelings of the Vietnamese people, so a purely indigenous attitude took ill account of the centuries of imperial influence already experienced. Buddhism was the synthesizing agent, and Trieu Quang Phuc was eventually pushed aside by Ly Phat Tu 李佛子, a patron of the Buddhist religion.\(^{47}\) Under Ly Phat Tu, a Buddhist sect was founded in Vietnam by an Indian monk named Vinitaruci 妙至多流支. The Vinitaruci sect was the earliest and most popularly

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\(^{45}\) ChS. 1: 2a-4a. L. 51: 27a. TT. Ngoai Ky. 4: 15b. VSL. 1: 8b.
\(^{46}\) VDLT. 7-8. Yamamoto (1950).
\(^{47}\) VDLT. 8-9.
based of three historic thien sect which, in the eleventh century, made important contributions toward building up the independent Vietnamese kingdom.  

The sixth century experiment in independence was cut short by the rising world of Sui and T'ang; yet it demonstrated that not only had the Vietnamese retained the essentials of their pre-Chinese cultural heritage through five centuries of imperial rule, but they were also reinforcing that heritage by incorporating fresh non-Chinese elements into it.

From the Chinese point of view, Vietnamese culture was by definition seditious. Culture and politics became deeply related as the Chinese period wore on, for Vietnam’s political survival would be a result of its cultural survival during this time. The most severe test for the Vietnamese came during the T'ang era when imperial power was at its peak.

Unlike the arrogantly ineffective, relatively benign assimilation efforts of Chinese dynasties in earlier centuries, T'ang policy was an intelligent attack on Vietnamese culture on their level of its own assumptions. This attack achieved sufficient success for us to speak of a T'ang-Viet culture during the seventh, eighth, and ninth centuries.

Traditions of a number of spirit cults established by T'ang officials have survived in Vietnamese sources. They show that some Chinese administrators utilized the indigenous culture to legitimize their authority among the people.

In the 650’s, a governor built a shrine containing the image of a “kingdom protecting spirit” (Ho quoc than 爰國神) and claimed to have presided over a competition of the spirits of the land to select the most powerful one to dwell in the shrine.  

During the K'ai-yüan 開元 reign period (712-741), at the zenith of T'ang power, a governor built a shrine which associated the local earth spirit (Tho di ké  地神) with the K'ai-yüan reign title and the reigning emperor, Hsüan Tsung 昇祿 (Khai nguyen thien tu 葷元天子). This shows a clear attempt to draw the religious sentiments of the people away from traditional objects of veneration and fix them instead on the empire.

At the turn of the ninth-century, a T'ang official named Chao Ch'ang 周昌 ruled the Vietnamese for fifteen years and cultivated a certain popularity among the people. He travelled extensively in Vietnam and was interested in local spirit cults. He compiled a book of these cults and various other traditions. Portions of his book have survived in a thirteenth
century Vietnamese source. The cult of “kingdom protecting spirit” was recorded in his book, and the K’ai-yuan cult may have been as well.

Chao Ch’ang himself built a shrine for the spirit of an ancient Vietnamese giant named Ly Ong Trong 李翁仲 who supposedly aided Ch’in Shih Huang Ti 秦始皇帝 against the barbarians of China’s northern frontier. The cult of Ly Ong Trong appears to owe its origin to Chao Ch’ang. Chao Ch’ang is also credited with building a school for classical training which became a major stepping stone to positions in the government administration. Thus, the common people were urged to worship at shrines associated with imperial traditions while the educated class was encouraged to pursue its ambitions in imperial service.

The T’ang-Viet culture received a severe shock in 819 when an unpopular governor, a member of the imperial clan, and over a thousand of his family and retainers, were killed by an ambitious Vietnamese general whose career had been frustrated by official disfavor. Thereafter, the Chinese were on the defensive in Vietnam, for T’ang was in decline and the Vietnamese were growing increasingly restive. A tradition from the 820’s depicts the T’ang governor being gratefully admonished by a local spirit. After 819, the political life of Vietnam was one long deepening confrontation between pro-T’ang and anti-T’ang factions which culminated in the Nan-chao War of the 850’s and 860’s.

In 820, T’ang attempted to stiffen pro-imperial Vietnamese by lining up the Buddhist establishment behind it. An aged Chinese monk was sent to Vietnam to found a new sect. This sect, called Vo Ngon Thong 福聖通 after the Vietnamese name of the monk, was the second of the three historic Thien sects in Vietnamese history; it took a more scholarly approach than the popular Vinharcui sect and discouraged political involvement.

T’ang-Viet culture cushioned the weight of T’ang power in Vietnam, but it was incapable of accommodating the deeper aspirations of the Vietnamese people. Consequently, a culture of resistance gained momentum during the last half of T’ang. This culture of resistance can be called the Muong-Viet culture. The Muong, upland cousins of the lowland Vietnamese, carried forward ancient Vietnamese traditions without Buddhist or Confucian influence.

(33) Gasparone (1984), 129.
(34) VDULT, 15-16.
(35) VDULT, 52-53.
(36) HTS, 69 : 12a.
(37) VDULT, 16.
(38) Tran Van Giap, 243, 244.
Linguistic evidence suggests that the separation of Muong and Viet was related to the evolution of Vietnamese society in the ninth and tenth centuries.

The mid-T’ang crisis unleashed by An Lu-shan’s 安禄山 rebellion in the 750’s caused a gradual unravelling of imperial power in Vietnam. As a result of this, a national movement emerged in the 780’s led by a man named Phung Hung 徐興. His leadership filled the political vacuum produced by the temporary retreat of T’ang arms to deal with rebellions in the north.

Phung Hung held a hereditary title rooted in the pre-Chinese cultural heritage. According to Vietnamese tradition, this title, Quan lang 越王, was customarily given to the sons of the ancient Dong-son era kings of Vietnam. This title survived into the twentieth century among the Muong.

Phung Hung’s son gave him the posthumous title of “Great Bo Cai King” 布察大王. According to the earliest source for Phung Hung, bo was the word for father and cai the word for mother in the Vietnamese language of that time. The concept of parental kingship was propounded by Mencius in antiquity. But it is clear that this posthumous title was independently anchored in the popular culture of Vietnam, for it is the earliest surviving example of Vietnamese character writing, called nom, meaning “southern script.” The Chinese characters used to represent bo and cai are unrelated to the Vietnamese meaning, but are faithful phonetic transcriptions.

Although nom was eventually developed for literary purposes in the independence period, it was never officially recognized by later Vietnamese dynasties, and in fact, from time to time, was prohibited because it was generally considered to be subversive of the prevailing political order. This view of national language as a language of subversion was rooted in the development of Vietnamese character writing during the Chinese period within a culture of resistance.

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(61) VQVLT. 6.
(62) LNCQ. 6.
(63) Tran Quoc Vuong, 354.
(64) VQVLT. 6. Today, bo still means “father,” but cai has evolved to simply mean “female” and is usually applied to animals, which suggests the erosion of maternal rights during intervening centuries of Neo-Confucian influence.
(65) MT, 12, 77, 114-115.
Phung Hung's posthumous title expressed a stage in the evolution of the Vietnamese concept of kingship. The Vietnamese word for king which appeared in the independence period, _vua_, is written with a _nom_ character which combines the Chinese character for king, Vietnamese _vuong_ 王, and the _nom_ character for _bo_. The idea that Phung Hung's career gave new meaning to a concept of kingship inherited by later Vietnamese kings in the independence period is highlighted by the tradition linking him with Ngo Quyen 奈覇, the first Vietnamese leader in the tenth century to abandon T'ang-style titles and proclaim himself a king. According to this tradition, Ngo Quyen's famous victory over an invading Southern Han 南漢 expedition at Bach-dang 白撫, traditionally viewed by Vietnamese as the beginning of independence, was accomplished by the supernatural intervention of Phung Hung. \(^{66}\)

After the Phung Hung era, the Vietnamese demonstrated an extreme sensitivity to assertions of imperial authority. In 803, a governor was driven out when he ordered repairs on the walls surrounding the capital. \(^{67}\) In 828, a governor was driven out after he collected taxes too efficiently. \(^{68}\) In 843, a governor was again driven out for attempting repairs on the city walls. \(^{69}\) In 858, the governor was temporarily besieged in the capital by local forces stirred up by a rumor that reinforcements were on their way from the north. \(^{70}\) In 860, a governor was driven out after he executed a prominent local leader. \(^{71}\)

Beginning in 854, anti-T'ang Vietnamese openly allied themselves with the mountain kingdom of Nan-chao in Yun-nan. The ensuing war culminated in 863 with the complete defeat of T'ang forces in Vietnam. However, Nan-chao proceeded to institute a reign of plunder in Vietnam which terrorized the populace and devastated the countryside. T'ang armies returned in 855 and eventually restored order. \(^{72}\)

This war dealt blows to both T'ang-Viet and Muong-Viet leadership. Pro-T'ang Vietnamese saw their patron humbled and thereafter took a more self-reliant attitude. Anti-T'ang Vietnamese were betrayed by their erstwhile ally and lost credibility through having inaugurated a national disaster. The war ended with the victory of T'ang arms, and this forced

\(^{66}\) VDULT, 6-7.
\(^{67}\) CTS, 13: 20b. TT, Ngaard Ky, 5: 6b-7a.
\(^{68}\) HTS, 8: 5b.
\(^{69}\) HTS, 8: 10a.
\(^{70}\) HTS, 167: 9b.
\(^{71}\) HTS, 9: 1b.
politicized elements of the Muong-Viet culture into the mountains, lending impetus to the separation of Muong and Viet.

After Nan-chao's forces had been defeated and driven into the mountains, T'ang armies besieged the capital where the Muong-Viet leadership had taken refuge. When the siege was temporarily lifted as a result of intrigue among T'ang generals, more than half of those who were trapped escaped to the mountain; T'ang eventually beheaded 30,000 individuals who remained in the city. (19)

This suggests that the militant Muong-Viet leadership was either destroyed or expelled from the lowlands. This, however, did not mean the end of Muong-Viet culture, for throughout the subsequent history of Vietnam, the Muong provided a reliable anti-Chinese reservoir of manpower and moral authority repeatedly drawn upon by Vietnamese leaders in times of crisis. Furthermore, it was the resurgence of a revitalized form of the Muong-Viet culture in the last half of the tenth century which laid the foundation for Vietnamese independence at Hoa-lu under Dinh Bo Linh and Le Hoan.

The eighty years which followed the end of the Nan-chao War comprised the Dai-la era, named after the reconstructed capital city near the site of modern Hanoi. This era saw the evolution of T'ang-Viet culture along local lines. Direct imperial authority disappeared and a Sino-Vietnamese aristocracy emerged. This aristocracy made the first tentative steps toward independence with great reluctance, for it was intellectually dependent upon the imperial world. Not until the T'ang political system had irretrievably disappeared and the Vietnamese were threatened by a predatory local dynasty at Canton did this aristocracy discard T'ang-style titles and its theoretical loyalty to the empire. But no sooner did these Sino-Vietnamese aristocrats open the gates of independence than they were swept away by the rising tide of a new cultural awakening.

T'ang-Viet culture was superseded by a Dai-la culture. Very little information has survived from this period, and most of it comes from the few years immediately after the Nan-chao War. The cultural tone set during the reconstruction era, however, indicates the direction of Dai-la society, for this was a period of remarkable stability.

Kao P'ien 賈詵, the T'ang general who re-established order in Vietnam and began the work of post-war reconstruction, earned an honorable place in Vietnamese history through
his efforts to rebuild the country and his sensitivity to local feeling. Several traditions survive of encounters between P’ien and local spirits, for whom P’ien showed great respect. The various traditions of Kao P’ien’s labors and of local spirit cults at that time suggest that the Vietnamese experienced both a material and a cultural renaissance. On the material side, Dai-la art and architecture is an early type of what became standard Vietnamese styles in later centuries. On the cultural side, Kao P’ien’s aide-de-camp, Tseng Kun 端憲, remained in Vietnam until 880, when the last T’ang soldiers returned north, and compiled local traditions in a book partially surviving through quotation in a thirteenth century Vietnamese source; several myths from the pre-Chinese period are attributed to Tseng Kun’s book.

The marked stability of the Sino-Vietnamese aristocracy for nearly three generations demonstrates how attractive Chinese culture became when it was no longer politically threatening. T’ang in her weakness finally granted what in her strength she was too proud to give, a universal ideology without coercion. Dai-la culture was the residue of the T’ang experience in process of fermentation with a newly awakened Vietnamese identity. The brittle political legacy of T’ang, however, began to crack under the pressure of Southern Han aggression and subsequently broke under the pressure of indigenous forces rising up in response to that aggression.

Dai-la culture disintegrated with the Sino-Vietnamese aristocracy. The Hòa-lu monarchy founded by Dinh Bo Linh in the 960’s was a response to the anarchic dissolution of the aristocratic position in Vietnam. Hòa-lu was a return to basics. While the Dai-la era saw indigenous currents infiltrate an upper-class imperial edifice, the Hòa-lu era saw educated Vietnamese don monks robes to gain access to a rustic royal court presided over by peasant soldiers. As in the sixth century, Buddhism emerged as the cultural basis for independence. At the beginning of the eleventh century, Buddhists founded the Lý Lý dynasty and built a new capital on the ruins of Dai-la named Thang-long 昇龍. The Đại Viêt 大越 period which followed saw the full flowering of an independent Vietnamese culture in Buddhist guise.

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(74) CL. 103-104. VSL. 1:12b-13a. TT, Ngoai Ky. 5:14b-15a.
(75) VDLT. 2. 16, 19, 29. 32-33. 40-41. LNNQ. 19. 24-25.
(76) Besacier, 199.
(77) VDLT. 29.30-37. VSL. 1:13a. TT, Ngoai Ky. 5:16b-17a.

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Conclusion

As we have seen, Vietnam was never "a genuine Chinese province," nor was it ever "subjected to government by a permanent Chinese administration," except within narrow limits. While it can be argued that Ma Yuan's expedition cast the Vietnamese "for good into the stream of Chinese civilization," this does not account for the response of the Vietnamese to Chinese influence, nor for the distinctive Vietnamese identity which has never disappeared through centuries of washing in the Chinese stream, an identity which is the only reasonable explanation for Vietnamese independence.

The Vietnamese naturally learned many useful lessons from their encounter with Chinese imperialism, and their way of life was greatly changed during centuries of Chinese rule, but they do not owe their existence as an independent nation to Chinese influence. Chinese civilization is a fact of East Asian history; Vietnamese independence is a fact of Vietnamese history. The strong sense of continuity perceived by modern Vietnamese with their pre-Chinese past is firmly based on oral lore, archeological evidence, and an evaluation of the Chinese period from historical sources.

Henri Maspero correctly pointed out that the political system of independent Vietnam eventually benefitted from ideas and methods borrowed from China, but most of these ideas and methods were adopted well after the end of the Chinese period. Until the fifteenth century, the Buddhist Kingdom of Dai Viet was closer to the intellectual world of other Southeast Asian realms than it was to that of China. Only after the Ming occupation of the early fifteenth century did Neo-Confucianism establish itself in a dominant role at the Vietnamese court and, for the first time, Vietnamese rulers began to apply Chinese concepts of government as a matter of policy. This came after Vietnam had defeated two invasions of Northern Sung, three Mongol-Yuan invasions, and expelled the Ming occupation forces, all important events in "the history of eastern Indochina since the tenth century." Considering the factional strife and social unrest in Vietnam after the adoption of Neo-Confucianism in the fifteenth century and the paralyzed Confucians of the nineteenth-century Nguyen dynasty, it can be argued that Chinese influence was a hindrance rather than a "reinforcement."
The Chinese period was truly a "dark age" in Vietnamese history. For, however ineffectual in practice, Chinese efforts to rule Vietnam during that time were based on a policy of Sinicization, a policy which denied the cultural heritage of the Vietnamese people. The Chinese failed not merely because of geographical limitations, but more basically because of the inherent stability and maturity which ancient Vietnamese culture and society had achieved before the time of Han, and because of the historic response of the Vietnamese to the Chinese challenge. The Vietnamese endured the centuries of Chinese rule and emerged with their distinctive identity intact; they were not the inadvertent creature of an empire unable to complete its civilizing task. Vietnamese independence sprang from the aspirations of the Vietnamese people and was not a by-product of Chinese imperial history.

I am aware that, by replacing Maspero's assumption of beneficent imperial influence with the currently popular assumption of indigenous continuity, I, no less than he, exemplify prevailing patterns of thought. Yet, I believe that, in regard to this topic, the outlook of my generation is broader than the outlook of Maspero's generation. There was no room for the word "indigenous" in Maspero's vocabulary. When he wrote, the Vietnamese lay silent under an alien regime. My generation has been forced to recognize the Vietnamese as an independent people with a destiny of their own. What the Vietnamese have to say about themselves cannot longer be ignored. I nevertheless take greatest comfort in the sources, where all discussion should begin and end.

(Table 1) A Comparison of Han Census Statistics from A.D. 2 and 140

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>% Increase or Decrease from A.D. 2 to 140</th>
<th>Average Size of Household in A.D. 2</th>
<th>Average Size of Household in 140</th>
<th>Increase or Decrease in Average Size of Household from A.D. 2 to 140</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Northern China</td>
<td>-50</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>+ .8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central China</td>
<td>+102</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>-.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern China</td>
<td>+247</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>-1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Hsi Basin)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Vietnam</td>
<td>+27</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>+ .2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Hong Delta records incomplete)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*HS, 28b:10a-11b; HhS, 33:20a-22a; Goto, 116-119.
Table 2  A Comparison of T'ang Census Statistics from the "Old Census" (circa 700) and the Census of 742 for the Hong and Ca Deltas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>percentage increase from c. 700 to 742:</th>
<th>average size of household:</th>
<th>increase or decrease in average size of household from c. 700 to 742</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hearths</td>
<td>Heads</td>
<td>c. 700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Delta</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ca Delta</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* CTS, 44:42b-44h. Comparisons for the Ma Delta and with other years are not possible because of incomplete or corrupted statistics.

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ChS—Ch’en Shu 陳書*

CTS—Chiu T’ang Shu 蕪唐書*

HHS—Hou Han Shu 後漢書*

HS—Han Shu 漢書*

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