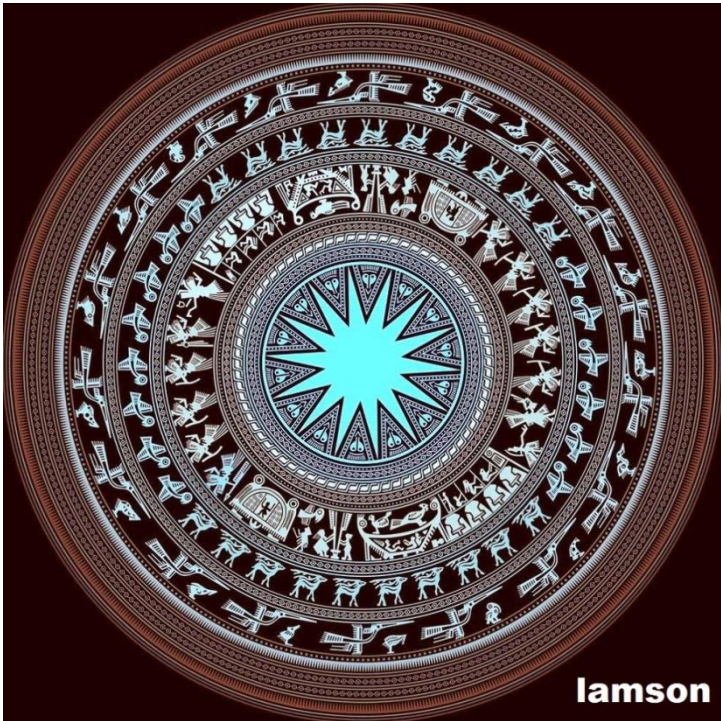


Vĩnh Đào

open letter to young Vietnamese

... who wonder about their origin
(new edition)



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Vĩnh Đào

Open Letter to Young Vietnamese

... Who Wonder about their Origin

New edition

Adapted and translated from the French original title:

*"Lettre ouverte aux jeunes Vietnamiens...
qui s'interrogent sur leurs origines"*

Translated by Phạm Trương Long

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*To Émeline Nhã Vi, Élodie Lan Thi,
Alain Vinh,*



This book is written for the generation of young Vietnamese who either grew up abroad or were born there. Guiding the reader through different stages of the long but fascinating history of the Vietnamese nation, it introduces the country and its people, as well as the main characteristics of its society and culture. The reader will make some surprising discoveries. For example, where did the Vietnamese language come from? Or better, he will learn that since the 11th century, the Vietnamese monarchy has recruited all their top civil servants through competitive exams, which gave the ancient Vietnamese society a surprisingly democratic character. By bringing them closer to their country's history and culture, this "Open Letter" invites the young Vietnamese to reflect on the problem of integration and of respect for their cultural heritage.

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1

Let us assume that you are 17 to 20, or even a little older. You may still be in high school or in college. Some of you may have finished or left school and have begun to earn your living or started a career. As Vietnamese, you have the reputation of being perseverant and hard working. It is very likely that you will make a successful start in the country which has welcomed you.

You may have had a happy and carefree childhood. Or you may have endured many hardships that had left you with painful memories. Despite such diversities, you all have one thing in common: your Vietnamese background. You all have Vietnamese parents who had left their country, sometimes risking their own lives to face an uncertain future, and settled in the country where you currently live. And many of them did it just because of your future.

While remaining proud of your Vietnamese origin, you have adapted to your present way of life without much cultural clash. But it is also possible that for some of you there is sometimes a feeling of uneasiness. The country of your parents and grandparents is so remote, both in time and in space, and you hardly have any memory of it. You barely understand what is being said by your aunts, your uncles and your cousins at those family gatherings which you often attend with reluctance. The stories they relate seem to have little in common with your daily life. They are of so little interest to you.

The past which they like to recall with a nostalgic tone, the traditions and customs to which they are deeply attached, all leave you indifferent. You are more at ease with your friends at school: you share with them the same language, the same preoccupations and the same jokes. Perhaps you are sometimes not quite at ease among your native friends because of your Asian look. Your Vietnamese name sounds discordant and out of place. You would rather be called something more common or familiar among your friends. It would be so much simpler for you.

In any case, being born or having grown up in your present country, you have so little interest in the remote land of your parents which you had probably left a very long time ago. It is somewhat foreign to you.

Its past and its culture are too vague and distant. The future, the fate of Vietnam or of those who live there do not matter much to you. It's not your fault after all. You cannot be expected to be interested in something so vague and immaterial, which has practically no bearing on either your present life or your future.

This letter, this message is addressed to you. It is not our intention to give you a sermon on the need to respect your origin and ancestral traditions, or to give you a lesson in history or geography. We would like to single out a few facts the importance of which has not been rightfully assessed. For instance, it is nothing short of a miracle that the Vietnamese people still exist at all nowadays. There was a big chance that our forebears had all become Chinese. Why didn't they? And the Vietnamese language, where did it come from? And by what miracle did it survive until today? Did you know that during the darkest days of European Middle Ages, the Vietnamese society was already one of the best organized societies in the civilized world, and that, in terms of democracy, it was well in advance during its times?

We want to suggest that you take a new look at some neglected aspects of this country from which you came, in order to know it better and to see how you would feel. For starters, let's glance at its history by going back to the distant origins of its people. But let's

not do this with a historian's concern for thoroughness. Let's make the journey as light and pleasant as possible. You will see a succession of passionate, long, difficult and almost endless struggles of a nation for its survival and independence. At the same time, you will get acquainted with some aspects of its culture, and understand the values which have cemented its society over millenniums.

We are certain that one day, these nagging questions will emerge to trouble your peace and quiet: *"Who am I? Where did I come from?"* Despite your smooth integration into the society in which you live – both in terms of lifestyle and thinking process – you can never be entirely severed from your origin. And the time will come when you will feel a pressing need to return to the source. This booklet, we hope, will help you make the first step in that direction.

2

The long Chinese night (From ancient times to the 10th century)

The cradle of Vietnamese civilization lies in the mountainous areas and the Red River delta of today's northern Vietnam. Recent archeological findings have determined human presence in these areas since the Stone Age. Excavations at the Phùng Nguyên site in 1959 have brought to light a rich neolithic industry in honed stones dating back to the year 2000 BC. During the Bronze Age – which made its appearance toward the end of the second millennium before our era – the civilization that flourished in Vietnam was called Đông Sơn civilization, as the first site of importance containing traces of that period was found in a locality bearing that name in the province of Thanh Hóa. The most famous object discovered to date is the superb bronze drum of Ngọc Lũ. The drum is a 25.2-inch tall cylinder (63 cm). The 31.6-inch diameter (79 cm) drumhead carries in its center the image of a sun

radiating a multitude of rays. Engraved in sixteen concentric circles decorated with geometric figures are various drawings depicting people clad in bird feathers, playing musical instruments, dancing, or grinding paddy.



The Ngọc Lũ bronze drum

The birth of a nation

The people who inhabited the southern region of China, south of the Yangzi River (Đương Tử), were called Bách Việt by the first Chinese historians. The Bách Việt actually consisted of several ethnic groups among whom were the Lạc Việt who lived in the deltas and along the coastal regions of today's northern Vietnam.

Legends associated with this pre-historic period give a mythical explanation of the birth of the Vietna-

mese nation. Lạc Long Quân, chieftain of the Lạc Việt tribe, was wedded to Âu Cơ, an Immortal. The latter gave birth to one hundred eggs out of which came one hundred children. Lạc Long Quân, one day, said to his wife: "*I belong to the race of the Dragons and you are an Immortal, we cannot live long together and have to part.*" Thereafter, half of the children followed Âu Cơ into the mountains while the other half stayed back with their father and settled along the seacoast. Thus, one part of the future Vietnamese population would live in the mountainous regions and the other part, in the deltas along the seacoast.

Lạc Long Quân then passed on his power to one of his sons who became the first king of a dynasty of eighteen sovereigns called the Hùng Kings (Hùng Vương). The latter ruled the kingdom of Văn Lang and founded the Hồng Bàng dynasty.

The *Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư*, an important historical work written in the 15th century by Ngô Sĩ Liên, traced the reign of the first Hùng king back to the year 2879 BC, i.e. some three thousand years before the birth of Christ. It's a most improbable hypothesis for, since it is known that the Hồng Bàng era ended in 258 BC, this would mean that the Hồng Bàng dynasty had lasted more than two thousand years and that each Hùng king had ruled the country for more than one hundred years. Some historians dated the beginning of the Hồng Bàng dynasty back to around the 7th century BC, which would give about twenty years to each Hùng reign, a more plausible hypothesis. In any event, it is in reference to the date mentioned in the *Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư*

that the Vietnamese, correctly or incorrectly, often claim of their "four-thousand-year cultural heritage".

The last king of the Hồng Bàng dynasty had a daughter of great beauty, coveted by both the Mountain Genie Sơn Tinh and the Water Genie Thủy Tinh. Incapable of deciding between the two, the king told them to return the next morning and promised to give the princess to the first to arrive. Sơn Tinh arrived first and took the young princess with him to the mountains. Thủy Tinh, the latecomer, was furious and undertook to catch up with the couple by raising the waters to attack the mountains. But Sơn Tinh, from the mountain top, succeeded in taming the raging floods back. The Water Genie was defeated, but did not give up. Every year he renewed his attack. The legend clearly refers to the frequent floods from the Red River and the endless struggle of the people against natural disasters.

While the Lạc Việt settled in the delta and seacoast areas, the Tây Âu occupied the mountainous region and occasionally conducted warfare against the Lạc Việt. In the 3rd century BC, King Thục Phán of the Tây Âu defeated the last Hùng king, brought together the territories of Tây Âu and Lạc Việt and founded the kingdom of Âu Lạc (258 BC). He called himself An Dương Vương (King An Dương) and founded his capital in Cổ Loa, some 13 miles north of present-day Hanoi. The site is still known to our days with its Cổ Loa fortress, an important historical vestige of Vietnamese antiquity. The fortress consists of three rows of walls arranged in a spiral seashell shape. The walls, some 12 meters thick and 3 to 4 meters high, are reinforced at

some places by watch towers. The construction of this fortress was particularly difficult, especially as the Âu Lạc Kingdom began to be attacked by the Chinese from the North. In fact, by 221 BC, having unified the whole China under his rule, Qin Shi Huangdi (Tần Thủy Hoàng Đế) began to look southward, aiming at annexing all territories beyond the Yangzi River.

According to a famous legend, the Turtle Genie had one day come to help An Dương Vương by offering him one of his claws. This claw, to be used as a crossbow trigger, permitted the launching of thousands of lethal arrows in one shot. With this magic weapon, the king was able to withstand every attack from Triệu Đà until the day when the latter, through a ruse, succeeded in stealing it. Defeated, An Dương Vương fled the capital with his daughter Mỵ Nương. Triệu Đà, Zhao Tao in Chinese, took over the kingdom of Âu Lạc in 208 BC and divided the territory into two provinces: Giao Chỉ and Cửu Chân. The two provinces stretched between Thanh Hóa and the Hoàng Sơn mountain chain in present-day northern Vietnam.

At the fall of the Chinese Qin dynasty in 206 BC, Triệu Đà proclaimed himself king of Nam Việt and founded his capital in Fanyu (Phiên Ngung), near present-day Guangdong. In China, the Qin dynasty was succeeded by the Han who initiated an era of conquests and territorial expansion. The states south of the Yangzi River fell one by one and were forever integrated into China. In 111 BC, Chinese troops conquered the kingdom of Nam Việt and other states in the region such as Yelang, Kunming and Dong Ou, and turned them into

Chinese provinces. In the northeast of Asia, Emperor Han Wudi (Hán Vũ Đế) took over the Korean Kingdom of Chao Xian (Triều Tiên) in 108 BC and extended the Chinese Empire to all of East Asia. At approximately the same time in Europe, Rome was imposing its rule over the entire Mediterranean world.

A thousand years of Chinese rule

The conquered territory of Nam Việt was divided into seven Chinese districts: Nam Hải, Thương Ngô, Út Lâm, Hợp Phố, Giao Chỉ, Cửu Chân and Nhật Nam. The seven districts formed a Chinese department called Giao Châu. The first four districts corresponded to the present-day Chinese provinces of Guangdong (Quảng Đông) and Guangxi (Quảng Tây). The last three were located on present-day Vietnamese territory: the Giao Chỉ district occupied the whole delta in northern Vietnam, Cửu Chân consisted of the three present-day provinces of Thanh Hóa, Nghệ An and Hà Tĩnh, and Nhật Nam spread from the Hoàng Sơn mountain range to the Hải Vân pass. According to Chinese historical documents, the three Vietnamese districts were inhabited by some 150,000 households representing a little less than one million inhabitants.

The Việt countries were hence part of the Chinese Empire. The Chinese rule lasted 1,050 years, from 111 BC until the 10th century, in 939 AD. We can even date the Chinese rule back to a century earlier, when Triệu Đà, himself a Chinese, conquered the Âu Lạc Kingdom. Throughout these thousand years of Chinese rule, the country was subjected to a relentless sinicization

process: the invaders imposed their language, their culture and their way of life. Chinese was the official language used in government, education and trade. The Vietnamese were obliged to dress like the Chinese and to adopt their customs. If they wanted to be educated, they had to learn the Chinese scripture and Chinese history, as well as philosophical and ethical principles of the Chinese society. In addition, the Vietnamese had to face steady immigration of Chinese from the North, aimed at dissolving the Vietnamese ethnic identity into the great Chinese masses.

How did this small nation of one million Vietnamese succeed in safeguarding its identity and culture, and withstand the gigantic pressure for more than a millennium? By strong will and determination! While numerous other nations and tribes, living in the southern part of China since prehistoric ages and antiquity, had been conquered and subjected to Chinese influence, and had become Chinese themselves in the course of history, and while practically all conquered territories sooner or later had ended up being absorbed into the Middle Empire, this country inhabited by the Vietnamese had succeeded in neutralizing all assimilation attempts, withstanding this formidable Chinese voracity to finally regain its independence. It is nothing short of a miracle that there are still Vietnamese today.

The history of the Vietnamese nation is a long struggle for survival. Revolts and uprisings aimed at getting rid of the Chinese yoke were attempted quite regularly during the one thousand years of Chinese rule.

The first uprising, strangely enough, was the work of two women, the Trưng Trắc and Trưng Nhị sisters, in the year 40 AD. However, the short independence break lasted only two years. At that time, Vietnam was only a small Chinese district called Giao Chỉ. A Chinese Thái Thú (Governor) was assigned to rule the conquered district. The Thái Thú of Giao Chỉ, Su Ding (Tô Định), wanting to suppress a rebellion from the very onset, ordered the assassination of Thi Sách, a local dignitary who happened to be the husband of Trưng Trắc. To avenge her husband, the young woman, aided by her sister Trưng Nhị, staged an insurrection and succeeded in chasing Tô Định out of the country. The two sisters proclaimed themselves queens and established their capital in Mê Linh.

In less than two years, the Chinese court decided to send the fearsome Ma Yuan (Mã Viện) to tame the rebellion. Ma Yuan, still a zealous warrior despite his advanced age of over 60, was the famous general who allegedly had once proudly said: *"A worthy man must find his death on the battlefield, his corpse wrapped in the hide of his dead horse. Why do less and die in the arms of his wife and children?"*

This very man was indeed sent by the court of the Eastern Han, with some twenty thousand soldiers under his command, to fight against the two Vietnamese women. Unable to withstand the Chinese onslaught, the Trưng sisters had to leave the capital and, on their flight, heroically threw themselves into the Hát River, a tributary of the Red River.

Two centuries later, in 248 AD, another woman warrior, Triệu Thị Trinh, or Bà Triệu, led another short-lived uprising. Thereafter, three more centuries went by before Lý Bôn, following a successful insurrection, proclaimed himself king and founded the Vạn Xuân Kingdom in 544 AD. Lý Bôn died four years later. One of his lieutenants, Triệu Quang Phục, then shared the power and ruled the country with Lý Phật Tử, a relative of Lý Bôn. But they were finally repressed and the territory of Giao Châu fell back under Chinese rule in 603 AD. The independence lasted less than sixty years, but this relatively long period of autonomy had decisively contributed to the assertion of nationalistic sentiments and strengthened the Vietnamese aspirations for independence.

In 679 AD, in order to seal their rule on Giao Châu, the Chinese transformed the territory into a protectorate called An Nam Đô Hộ Phủ, An Nam meaning "the Pacified South."

The 8th century was highlighted by two important uprisings: the first by Mai Thúc Loan in 722 and the second by Phùng Hưng some fifty years later, with more lasting results. After the death of Phùng Hưng, his son and successor, Phùng An, continued to rule the country for some ten years before surrendering to Chinese rule in 791.

In the following centuries, uprisings were occurring more and more frequently, with various results. At the end of the 9th century, China was caught up in civil war and anarchy. Favored by the situation, an uprising in Giao Châu in 905 brought Khúc Thừa Dụ to power. He

was succeeded at his death by his son, Khúc Hạo, who in turn was succeeded by his own son, Khúc Thừa Mỹ, in 917.

At the Imperial Chinese court, the Tang (Đường) dynasty was brought down and succeeded by the Hou Liang (Later Liang or Hậu Lương). Bugged down by internal strife, the Chinese court recognized formally the factual autonomy of the Khúc in Giao Châu. Meanwhile, the governor of the Chinese province of Guangdong rebelled against the central authority and founded the kingdom of Nan Han (Nam Hán). His army invaded Giao Châu and reestablished Chinese rule in 930.

In the meantime, the Vietnamese had already acquired a taste of independence. An insurrection took place just one year later and overthrew the Chinese rule. But the Nan Han power did not wait long to react, and the Chinese were poised to invade the rebellious territory by sending a fleet of warships to the Bạch Đằng, a river flowing from east of Hanoi into the Gulf of Northern Vietnam, whose name thereafter became a legend for centuries to come.

The Bạch Đằng victory

A valiant Vietnamese military commander, Ngô Quyền, assumed the responsibility to counter the Chinese invasion. Preparing to face the enemy fleet that was moving to the mouth of the Bạch Đằng River, he ordered the planting of piles with sharp pointed metal covered peaks in the river bed. As the piles were hidden under water at high tide, contingents of light boats were

sent out to provoke the enemy fleet. The Chinese junks then chased after the Vietnamese, but the Vietnamese boats retreated quickly and fled back upstream. As the tide ebbed, Ngô Quyền and his troops turned around and launched a vigorous counter-attack against the heavy Chinese vessels. The enemy, caught unprepared, fled back to the mouth of the river. But the tide had by then exposed the lethal piles and the war vessels were badly damaged, many of them ripped open and sunk. The Chinese had indeed suffered the heaviest disaster ever inflicted by the Vietnamese. A weary Nan Han king recalled his troops.

The year 939 marked a milestone in the history of Vietnam. The first naval victory on the Bạch Đằng opened a new era of real independence after a tumultuous and oppressive millennium. Throughout the thousand years under Chinese rule, the Vietnamese never resigned themselves to the fate of a subdued people. A multitude of insurrections had taken place, some of which had resulted in short spells of independence, but they were no more than brief lightnings in the long dark Chinese night. Nonetheless, during all these centuries, the Vietnamese were able to gradually forge a national consciousness and an unswerving will for independence. It was this strong determination and perseverance of an entire people which had ensured the survival of the Vietnamese nation.

It is interesting to draw a comparison with similar developments in European history. In Europe, the Gaul nation (present-day France) experienced a comparable

fate. The Chinese rule in Vietnam began in 111 BC when Nam Việt was annexed to China. At about the same period, in 120 BC, the Romans conquered the southeast of Gaul and transformed this land into the Narbonnaise province. The rest of the country was conquered by Ceasar's troops from 58 to 51 BC. The Roman rule in Gaul, however, lasted only five hundred years, *i.e.* until the end of the Western Roman Empire in the 4th century, whereas the Chinese domination in Vietnam continued until the 10th century.

3

The prodigious legacy of the Vietnamese language

That the Vietnamese language was able to survive and was being transmitted to us today is nothing short of an extraordinary feat. For it requires a formidable will and an unflinching persistence, from generation to generation, to preserve this precious heritage which enables us to still speak Vietnamese today.

Vietnam, one can recall, had been a Chinese colony since the 2nd century before the Christian era, and for over a millennium, the official language, imposed on the Vietnamese and used in government and education, was Chinese. But the Việt tribes which lived in Văn Lang had their own language. Unfortunately, it was only a spoken language and there was no script or writing form to transcribe it: it was transmitted verbally.

Under such circumstances, those who wanted to be educated had to learn Chinese, as well as the history of China and Chinese philosophy. Native people who wanted to move up the social ladder, to become public servants or mandarins for instance, must excel in Chinese language and literature. Those who did not know Confucius' language were relegated to the illiterate lot.

And yet, the Vietnamese language, with its rudimentary characteristics born in the prehistoric darkness, has been transmitted to us, polished, enriched and perfected in the course of time. Faced with countless obstacles, its difficult journey was only possible thanks to the obstinacy and steadfastness of our ancestors. Otherwise, it could have disappeared at one moment or another in the course of history. To be sure, such occasions were not lacking.

Thus, alongside the official Chinese language, there had always been a spoken language used by the native people to communicate with each other in their daily life. On the other hand, despite their burning desire for independence and countless uprising attempts, the Vietnamese never actually repudiated the language of their rulers. China, after all, possesses an older, more advanced and more refined civilization than ours, and there should be no shame in learning their language. Our scholars spent their entire life to study all subtleties of

Chinese literature and philosophy; they learned to draft decrees and to compose poems in Chinese, and they did so as well as, if not better than, any honorable subject of the Celestial Empire. Nonetheless – and this is our very own peculiarity – if a Vietnamese had to learn Chinese to be educated and to read Chinese classics, he was in no way obliged to use the Chinese pronunciation. As a result, Chinese words were being pronounced in the Vietnamese manner, with characteristically Vietnamese tonalities which were not understandable to an authentic Chinese. This was to some extent a defying gesture of our ancestors directed at their rulers. Our scholars understood Chinese texts perfectly, but they read them in their own way. Even in China, the pronunciation varies from region to region, and a native of Beijing, for instance, cannot understand a native Cantonese, even though both are using the same written language. This is still true today. So why bother? Let us take an example. There is a well known classic Chinese poem by the poet Wang Han (687-735), "The Song of Liangzhu" which, in essence, can be translated as follows:

*Sweet noble grape wine in a luminous jade
cup,
How I would like to drink it, but the sound of
the cithern urges me to leave,
Do not laugh at me when I get drunk and fall
asleep on the battlefield,
From time immemorial, how many men have
come back alive from the war?*

This is about what it would sound like when read by a Chinese from Beijing:

葡萄美酒夜光杯
欲飲琵琶馬上催
醉臥沙場君莫笑
古來征戰幾人回

*Pú táo měi jiǔ yè guāng bēi,
Yù yǐn pí pá mǎ shàng cuī.
Zuì wò shā chǎng jūn mò xiào,
Gǔ lái zhēng zhàn jǐ rén huí?*

Well, a Vietnamese reads it in his own way:

*Bồ Đào mỹ tửu dạ quang bôi,
Dục ẩm tỳ bà mã thượng thôi,
Túy ngọa sa trường quân mạc tiếu,
Cổ lai chinh chiến kỷ nhân hồi?*

The rules of Chinese prosody as well as rhymes are fully respected. Only the pronunciation is Vietnamese. A Chinese, upon hearing it, would not understand a word. First of all, the name of the poet is for us Vương Hàn, and not Wang Han: all Chinese proper names, for persons or places, have been changed when transcribed into Vietnamese. We must add, however, that a Vietnamese who does not know Chinese would not understand the meaning of the poem, for the text is not in Vietnamese, but actually in Chinese, or Hán (the language of the Han, Chinese dynasty of the 1st century). But in this short text, you must certainly have recognized and understood several words: *chinh chiến*

(war), *sa trường* (sand field, in the sense of battlefield), *tỳ bà* (the cithern, traditional Chinese musical instrument), and perhaps *dạ quang*, consisting of two words: night and light.

They are in effect Chinese-Vietnamese words, *chữ Hán-Việt*, which are Chinese words adopted by and integrated into the Vietnamese language, and are being pronounced the Vietnamese way. The Chinese language has indeed substantially enriched our language with a multitude of words, the majority of which have abstract meanings, as in the case with French or English words in our more recent history. We must indeed recognize that the Vietnamese vocabulary has been greatly enhanced by the addition of words of Chinese origin.

The present-day Vietnamese language comprises purely Vietnamese words which originated directly from the folk language (words which describe common everyday objects) and a good number of Chinese-Vietnamese words, borrowed from Chinese which, through various combinations, can express complex concepts. In several cases, a duality can exist, that is, alongside a Vietnamese word, one also finds a Chinese word: we say interchangeably *loài người* (mankind) or *nhân loại*, a Chinese-Vietnamese word. Side by side with *nước* (country), we also say *quốc*, which is commonly used to form compound nouns such as *quốc gia* (nation), *quốc tế* (international), *quốc kỳ* (national flag), etc.

For a very long time, Vietnamese was a spoken language only, and it can reasonably be said that there was no true literature in the proper sense of the word. From that period there remained only tales, legends, anonymous verses called *ca dao*, which have been transmitted orally to our days. It was soon realized that a nation with aspirations for independence needed a written language of its own. A tool must inevitably be devised to transcribe the national language. Our ancestors had then used the only script at their disposal, namely the Chinese characters, and devised a system to transcribe their own language in combining several Chinese characters. Thus, for instance, to transcribe the word *trăm* (hundred), it was necessary to associate the Chinese word *lâm* (forest) – the pronunciation of which sounds like the Vietnamese word to be transcribed – with another Chinese word, *bách*, which means hundred; written together, the word is pronounced *trăm*, which is the Vietnamese word to be transcribed. But the system could not be used in every case, and our ancestors had to invent other ways for other words. All of this was quite unwieldy and impractical, but at least, there was a tool on hand which could be used to transcribe the national language.

For instance: to transcribe the word *năm* (year), we use two Chinese words *nán* (pronounced *nam*, meaning the South) and *nían* (pronounced *niên*, meaning year) to obtain the word in nôm character which must be pronounced *năm*, which means year.

南

年

nán (*nam* - south)

nían (*niên* - year)

Word in nôm character : *năm*

辭

Other example: to transcribe the word *trăm* (hundred), we use two Chinese words *lín* (pronounced *lâm*, meaning forest) and *bai* (pronounced *bách*, meaning hundred) to obtain the word in nôm character which must be pronounced *trăm*, which means hundred.

林

百

lín (*lâm* - forest)

bai (*bách* - hundred)

Word in nôm character : *trăm*

冪

This time, the two Chinese words are placed one on top of the other instead of side by side as in the previous example. These combinations are unknown to the Chinese and thus not understandable to them. It is rather an invention of the Vietnamese who borrow Chinese characters to transcribe their own language.

The invention of *quốc ngữ*, by using the Latin alphabet for the transcription of Vietnamese words, has helped simplifying considerably the writing of the Vietnamese language.

Those characters were called *chữ nôm* (from *nam*: south, or characters from the people of the South, in contrast to Chinese characters in the North). It is difficult to pinpoint the time when *chữ nôm* was first introduced, but we have discovered in the province of Ninh Bình a stele dated from the 14th century, in 1343 to be exact, which bears inscriptions in *nôm*; it is the oldest evidence which has been brought to light until now. With the invention of this transcription tool, an authentic national literature had at long last seen the light. Thus we witness the appearance in the 14th century of works written in *nôm*, and this seven-century-long literature in national language has given us such masterworks as *Chinh Phụ Ngâm* by Đoàn Thị Điểm and *Kim Vân Kiều* by Nguyễn Du, which have contributed enormously to polishing and embellishing the Vietnamese language, and enabled us to express the most complex feelings in an elegant manner.

Beginning in the 16th century, thanks to developments in maritime travels, Westerners started coming to Vietnam, and among them, French, Spanish and Portuguese catholic missionaries. These missionaries needed a practical tool to propagate the Christian faith. They came up with the idea of utilizing the Latin alphabet to transcribe the native language, which would enormously facilitate the printing of books and documents for the propagation of their religion. The invention of this new script was the work of several persons, the best known among them being no doubt Alexandre de Rhodes (1591-1660), author of the first trilingual Vietnamese - Portuguese - Latin dictionary printed in Rome in 1651. This romanized script,

hundreds of times more practical than the *nôm* characters, was being adopted gradually to become the *quốc ngữ*, or national written language. In the 19th century, the *quốc ngữ* was definitely gaining acceptance at the expense of *chữ nôm*. Indeed, Vietnam was the first country in all of Asia to have adopted the Latin alphabet. Other countries, such as Japan, have also tried to romanize their writing, but without a favorable outcome. In Vietnam, the undertaking has met with complete success.

After a long and hard struggle for its own survival, the Vietnamese language has come out victorious, though not unscathed. It has survived despite a millennium of Chinese rule and endless vicissitudes to finally be endowed with a practical and modern written form. In the various long periods of foreign rules, there had certainly been people who saw no necessity in continuing to use the Vietnamese language. For instance, during the Chinese rule, it was much wiser or smarter to excel in Chinese. It was the official language, that of government, power and knowledge. Without question, one had to know it to be able to move up the social ladder. By contrast, knowledge of the Vietnamese language brought virtually nothing. Next to such people, there were, fortunately, those who defiantly defended the survival of the national language. They were the majority of the people who stubbornly continued to speak this language, to use it in their daily life. Emperors who were scholars or well versed in Chinese took measures to promote *chữ nôm*, even though Chinese remained the official language of the court because the *nôm* was still inadequate for use in government. Emperor

Quang Trung at the end of the 18th century, for instance, with a desire to promote a sense of nationhood among the citizens, tried to gradually substitute the Chinese script with *chữ nôm*: public acts and royal messages to the military, for the first time, were being written in the language of the country; measures were taken to translate Chinese classical works into *nôm*. Other emperors, such as Lê Thánh Tông and Minh Mạng, even wrote poems in the national language.

During the French rule, the existence of the Vietnamese language was once again being threatened, not so much by the French authorities but, oddly enough, by native people who were convinced that a good knowledge of the French language in writing, reading and speaking was a useful and sure vehicle to secure a place in the sun. Indeed, it would even seem to make sense to use French as an official and national language in place of Vietnamese, considering that French is such a refined, precise and well-developed language. In many upper-class Vietnamese families, people were prone to speaking French. They even disdained the Vietnamese language, which they regarded as a language of illiterate people. There were even people who had but contempt and condescendence for those who only knew their mother tongue. If they must speak Vietnamese, they thought it necessary to use foreign words or expressions, as if the Vietnamese language were not adequate to express subtle ideas or concepts. At any rate, it seemed more distinguished and it was surely an opportunity to show one's literary prowess.

Fortunately, there were equally those among the educated people, notably Phạm Quỳnh, a high mandarin and respected scholar, who vigorously and tirelessly defended the quốc ngữ. He aptly asserted that Vietnam – meaning both the country and the people – would only subsist if the national language continues to exist. Other scholars, like Trương Vĩnh Ký and Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh, have also made important contributions to promoting the *quốc ngữ*.

Of course we have no misgivings whatsoever about the future fate of Vietnamese as the official language of the country. But there is a real danger that it might fall into oblivion among young Vietnamese living outside the country. As a result of unhappy circumstances, millions of Vietnamese have fled their native land and settled all over the world. The earlier ones left the country more than forty years ago. It is a long time indeed, especially for young people. For the new generation of Vietnamese growing up on foreign soils or born there, the historical event, which caused the biggest mass exodus ever known to their parents' country, is now only a very remote notion. Memories are now blurred. Some have even lost the habit of speaking their mother tongue. There are even elder people who think, once again, that it serves no purpose to encourage the children to learn Vietnamese. What matters is success at school. Why burden the poor children with the onerous task of learning an additional language which has little or no use for their future, when knowledge of the native language, by contrast, has far superior practical advantages? And whether Vietnamese should remain a national language? Absolutely, but it is a matter

for those who currently live in Vietnam. We live a different life in another world, and our preoccupations are wholly different. The defense of the national language is indeed no longer our concern.

If there are people who share the above opinion – and surely their number is not insignificant – well, let them do it. It is not our intention to go into lengthy and never-ending discussions with them. But there are also families who take great pains to ensure that their children do not forget the language of their motherland. They want their children – who were born and/or grew up in foreign countries, be it in Europe, in the US or elsewhere – to be familiar with the national language since their birth, and to have a good command of Vietnamese when they grow up. Those people are not obsessed with the false fear that their children’s mind would be disturbed by an early exposure to two languages, the one spoken at home and the one being taught at school. Their efforts are all the more laudable, as they often have to face conflicts which are not easy to resolve. Children of school age tend to prefer the language they hear more often, namely at school.

Must the Vietnamese language – which has overcome countless obstacles over more than two millenniums – be now condemned to oblivion among overseas Vietnamese in less than two generations? Whether it continues to survive or not rests solely on you. Before resigning yourselves to seeing it disappear, try to reflect on this: you must be proud of this two-thousand-year-old language because it has known an uncommon fate. We can compare what has been

happening to the country Việt with that of Gaul of Vercingetorix during about the same period. The Romans ended their conquest of Gaul in 51 BC, after the victory of Alesia. The Roman colonization lasted until the end of the Western Empire in the 4th century AD, that is about five hundred years, or less than half the period under Chinese rule in Vietnam.

Nonetheless, under Roman occupation, the Gauls had given up their own language to adopt that of their rulers. Gallic, the main Celtic language spoken and understood in Western Europe, from Belgium to northern Spain, has wholly sunken during the Roman occupation. In 1992, a very interesting work, the *Dictionnaire Historique de la Langue Française*¹, made a census of words of Gallic origin in the present French vocabulary: there remain altogether no more than a hundred fifty words inherited from the ancient Gallic, and only forty of them are still effectively being used today. This is fifty times less than Arabic words found in modern French. Gallic disappeared in less than two centuries, during the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD, when the Gauls completely repudiated their own language and used only Latin. But the language propagated by Roman soldiers was only a poor Latin. In addition, it was badly pronounced by the Gauls with their own accent. All this had given birth to the Gallo-Roman dialect, the first phase toward present-day French.

How could a proud and rebellious people, led by valiant warlords, let a language sink into disuse? Many people have advanced hypotheses that Gallic was only a

¹ Éditions Le Robert, Paris, 1992, by Alain Rey.

spoken, and not written language, whereas Latin was an administrative, juridical and commercial language which could be written and was supported by an abundant literature and the prestige of a conquering civilization. Those were exactly the advantages the Chinese language was enjoying in Vietnam. Yet the Vietnamese language continued to exist. Indeed, political, economic or practical reasons are not sufficient to explain the destruction of a language. Alain Rey, who conducted the publishing of the above-mentioned *Dictionnaire Historique*, had made an apt remark: "*A language can only survive if it is loved by the people who speak it. The Gauls did not love theirs. It must serve as a lesson for the future.*"

Henriette Walter, who has equally studied the phenomenon of the Gallic language's disappearance, has made this reflection which is worth pondering: "*To change a language is to renounce a part of oneself.*"² If people abandon their mother tongue, they are deciding to sever a tie which binds them to their origin.

² Henriette Walter, *Le Français dans tous ses états*, Paris, Robert Laffont, 1988, p. 35.

4

The dawn of an independent era. The first dynasties of an independent Vietnam (10th-12th centuries)

The Đinh, Lê and Lý dynasties

After the Bạch Đằng victory over the Chinese army in 939 AD, Ngô Quyền proclaimed himself king, but the country very soon fell into internal dissension. Twelve local warlords, or *sứ quân*, divided the national territory among themselves and fiercely fought one another. For more than twenty years, the country was torn by a devastating civil war.

It was Đinh Bộ Lĩnh who succeeded in subduing the *sứ quân* one after another and in pacifying the whole territory (as a young boy, he was a buffalo keeper and used to conduct sham war games with his friends). Đinh Bộ Lĩnh became king in 968 AD, took the title of Đinh

Tiên Hoàng, renamed the kingdom Đại Cồ Việt and established the capital in Hoa Lư. He was assassinated in 979 by a lunatic who fancied himself to be a carrier of the Mandate of Heaven. The crown prince was then only six years old and the power was in the hands of Lê Hoàn, the regent, who was also the queen's lover. Fearing a new Chinese invasion, supporters of the regent proclaimed him king.

Lê Hoàn ascended the throne under the name of Lê Đại Hành and inaugurated the first Lê dynasty, or Early Lê. Lê Đại Hành died in 1005 after a 24-year reign. He was succeeded by Lê Long Đĩnh, but the latter indulged himself in all kinds of vices and debaucheries. At his death in 1009, as his son was still too young, a number of court dignitaries instigated a plot to bring to power Lý Công Uẩn who was a high mandarin and the commander of the army. The new king, known under his throne name Lý Thái Tổ, inaugurated the Lý dynasty which ruled the country for more than two centuries, from 1009 to 1225, and thus began the first great royal dynasty since independence, after the shorter Đinh and Lê rules. Altogether, nine Lý kings had successively acceded to the throne. Under their rule, the name of the country was again changed to Đại Việt (Great Việt). Lý Thái Tổ moved the capital from Hoa Lư to Đại La, on the Red River. The town was renamed Thăng Long, or "City of the Rising Dragon." She was later to become Hanoi.

The Lý kings undertook a far-reaching reorganization of the nation, consolidating the royal authority, promoting agricultural development as well as education and the arts. Trade and handicraft flourished. Laws and

rules of the kingdom were codified and integrated into a penal code promulgated in 1042: Vietnam had thus been endowed with a legal code since the early Middle Ages. In 1070, the Temple of Literature (Văn Miếu) was erected in Thăng Long to honor Confucius and his disciples. The Temple also housed a school for royal offspring and children of high dignitaries. The first literary examination was organized in 1075 for the selection of mandarins. During that period, buddhism was in its golden age: the monarchs surrounded themselves with buddhist monks who acted as their counselors; the buddhist religion exerted its influence in all walks of life and played a primary role in shaping the customs and traditions of the country.

Since their defeat by Ngô Quyền in 938, the Chinese had never given up their ambition to repossess their former protectorate An Nam. However, they had been too entangled in their internal affairs, civil wars and domestic troubles. The Sung (Tống) dynasty gained power in 960 and was busy restoring unity in China. Not until 1075 was the Chinese army ready once again to launch a new attack against the Vietnamese Kingdom, Đại Việt.

The war against the Sung

This new Sino-Vietnamese war lasted three years, from 1075 to 1077. It is worth going into a few details, for they revealed not only the Vietnamese people's military prowess but also their diplomatic skills. General Lý Thường Kiệt, who was entrusted with the command of the Vietnamese army, decided that the best defense

was to attack. He anticipated that the Chinese army would be crossing Yongzhu (Ung Châu) to move to the Vietnamese borders, while their fleet would be sailing through the estuaries of Qin (Khâm) and Lian (Liêm) to reach the South. Lý Thường Kiệt decided to intercept and attack preemptively where the Chinese would be going through.

Three expeditionary corps under Deputy Commander Tôn Đản infiltrated the territory of China through three routes, destroying all Chinese forts on their way and met up again before launching the attack in Yongzhu. In the fall of 1075, Tôn Đản, now in firm command of the Guwen (Cô Văn), Taiping (Thái Bình) and Yongping (Vĩnh Bình) posts, moved his troops to Yongzhu. At the same time, the troops under Lý Thường Kiệt landed on the Guangdong coast which was left open without defense, taking Qin and Lian, and then moved inland to join the troops of Tôn Đản in Yongzhu, while barring the route for the Sung reinforcement troops due to come from the East.

Lý Thường Kiệt and Tôn Đản surrounded Yongzhu and besieged the citadel. The Chinese commander delivered a fierce resistance while waiting for reinforcement. In the face of forceful Vietnamese attacks, they had to take a defensive position while making every attempt to maintain the morale of besieged soldiers and civilians. In the citadel, rumors of imminent arrivals of reinforcement circulated every day, public funds were being emptied to be distributed to civilians to encourage them to withstand the siege, while desertion attempts were harshly punished by death. Chinese rescue

troops did arrive but they were attacked and cut to pieces by Lý Thường Kiệt's troops in February 1076, at the Kunlun (Côn Lôn) pass, some 25 miles from Yongzhu. The Chinese commander was killed in the battle. Out of supplies, Yongzhu fell the following month, after forty-two days of siege and fierce resistance. The Chinese commander and his loyal followers decided to kill themselves in a mass suicide.

The Vietnamese army swept the entire place and took with them a great war booty. Lý Thường Kiệt decided to withdraw from China, convinced that he had reached his goal of breaking the Sung army's momentum. At the same time, he also feared a Chinese counter-offensive on Vietnamese territory.

The bad news reached the Sung imperial court and upset the emperor. A three-party alliance was hastily forged with Champa and the Khmer Kingdom to attack Đại Việt on three fronts. In early 1077, a strong 100,000-man Chinese army crossed the Vietnamese border at three locations and was due to join together on the north bank of the Như Nguyệt River. Lý Thường Kiệt sent his fleet to the mouth of the Bạch Đằng River to prevent a Chinese squadron from reaching the capital. The armies of the Champas and the Khmers were being kept in check and were thus unable to join their Chinese allies. During this time, the bulk of Vietnamese forces were deployed on a bank of the Như Nguyệt River, thus preventing the Chinese from crossing the river and reaching Thăng Long. Alternating offensives caused heavy casualties to both sides. The first fighting resulted in a Chinese defeat with losses of one thousand men, but

during an offensive by Lý Thường Kiệt on the Kháo Túc River, stone bombing against the Vietnamese fleet inflicted heavy losses to the Vietnamese.

As time went on, the lack of supplies, the hard climate and diseases began to shatter the morale of the occupying troops. For its part, the Đại Việt court feared a protracted war which would wear down the army and aggravate the population's sufferings; therefore, it made peace overtures to the Sung. Too happy to conclude a deal which would save their face, the Sung accepted to withdraw their troops in return for five contested districts along the border. The conflict thus ended in 1077. The following year, King Lý Nhân Tông sent an envoy to China, offering to Emperor Sung a present of five trained elephants in a friendship gesture and asking for the return of the five districts ceded to the Chinese. The Sung court accepted the offer, demanding in return that the Vietnamese released some 200 civilian and military prisoners apprehended during their incursion into Chinese territory two years earlier. The peaceful relationship with the Chinese lasted until the Mongols came to power. Taking advantage of a lull in the tumultuous relationship with their neighbor in the North, the Vietnamese turned southward and attempted to enlarge their territory at the expense of the Cham Kingdom. While Vietnam had managed to survive all Chinese domineering ambitions, Champa did not fare that well and finally succumbed under Vietnamese expansionism.

The rise and fall of Champa

As we have seen, in the prehistoric era the Việt people mostly lived in the mountainous areas and the deltas of present-day northern Vietnam. Until the Lý reign in the 11th century, their borders ended at the Hoàng Sơn mountain range, where the Champa Kingdom began. Founded in the 2nd century AD, Champa would subsist only sixteen centuries and end up being entirely absorbed by its Vietnamese neighbor. The kingdom was first called Lâm Ấp (Lynyi), and the name Champa (Chiêm Thành in Vietnamese) was not used until the 7th century. The kingdom was founded following the decline of the Han who had been ruling the seven districts set up after the fall of Nam Việt. The southernmost district, Nhật Nam, was constantly harassed by the "barbarians". In 192, one of these barbarian leaders attacked the prefecture of Tương Lâm, killed the Chinese prefect and proclaimed himself king. The kingdom, located within the borders of the Nhật Nam district, covered what is now the Huế region, in today's central Vietnam. The Chinese then called it Lâm Ấp, an abbreviation of Tương Lâm Ấp, or the capital of Tương Lâm. The kingdom was inhabited by dark-skinned Chams who had been influenced by the Indian culture, probably since the 4th century. Numerous temples of Brahmanic style found all over the country were signs of a brilliant civilization. From the 7th to the 10th centuries, Champa enjoyed a favorable position at the crossroads of maritime routes and controlled a flourishing trading traffic with China and South Asia. However, the country had always been coveted by the Vietnamese who wanted to expand their territory southward.

During the Lý dynasty, Champa extended from the Hoành Sơn mountain range to the present-day province of Bình Thuận in central Vietnam. Its capital was located at Vijaya, north of Bình Định. In 1044, alleging that the two southernmost prefectures of Đại Việt were being attacked by Cham pirates, Emperor Lý Thái Tông launched a punitive expedition which was to bring him to the capital of Champa. The Cham army was battered, King Xạ Đầu was killed during the battles. Lý Thái Tông took home the Cham queen, My Ê, and numerous court musicians and courtesans. During the journey home, Lý Thái Tông gave orders for the captive queen to be brought to his junk, but the beautiful My Ê wrapped herself in a blanket and jumped into the river to save her honor.

After the defeat, Champa had to pay regular tribute to the court of Đại Việt. But the new king Chế Củ (Rudravarman III) dreamt of revenge. After having reorganized his army, he started the attack in 1068. The response of Lý Thánh Tông, who had in the meantime succeeded Lý Thái Tông, was prompt and decisive.

A thirty-thousand-man army, under the command of Lý Thường Kiệt, took the sea route with some 200 junks and landed in Champa. The Cham army was defeated, its king fled but was eventually captured. He was later released in exchange for three border districts. Đại Việt went on to expand southward during the following centuries. Annexation sometimes took place peacefully. At the beginning of the 14th century, Emperor Trần Nhân Tông promised to Chế Mân, or Jaya Simhavarman III, the hand of his daughter, Princess

Huyền Trân, in exchange for the two districts Ô and Rí, north of the Hải Vân pass (between Huế and Đà Nẵng). Many were shedding tears for the fate of this Vietnamese princess who was being offered to a "barbarian", be it a king, but Emperor Trần Nhân Tông was determined to take the action for the success of a peaceful expansion policy. In 1306, the princess left for the Champa capital. King Chế Mân kept his word, and the two promised districts were annexed to Đại Việt. They comprised the present province of Thừa Thiên, where the city of Huế is located, and the south of Quảng Trị province. Đại Việt was then extended to the Hải Vân pass.

In the 15th century, under the Later Lê (Hậu Lê) dynasty, Emperor Lê Thánh Tông headed an expedition which took him to the capital of Champa in 1417. The Cham king was taken prisoner and Champa lost once again all territories north of Cap Varella, which were to become the current Vietnamese Quảng Nam province. The remaining territory of Champa was divided into three principalities under Vietnamese protectorate: Chiêm Thành, Hoa Anh and Nam Phan. In the annexed territories, Đại Việt proceeded with a cultural assimilation policy and sent settlers to cultivate the new land.

Champa at the end of the 15th century was thus substantially torn into pieces. It finally succumbed to the ultimate assaults of the Nguyễn at the end of the 18th century. Today, in central Vietnam's coastal areas, on wind-battered hills, red clay towers can still be seen facing the sea, vestiges of a brilliant civilization unable to withstand the Vietnamese "Southward March."

5

Victories over the Mongols (13th century)

The Trần dynasty

The Lý dynasty fell into decadence in the 12th century. Rival warlords, rebelling against the central court, established themselves all over the country. The last emperor, Lý Huệ Tông, ill and half insane, was inebriated all day long. Real power was in the hands of Trần Thủ Độ, the all-powerful head of the Trần clan. The emperor was forced to abdicate in favor of his seven-year-old daughter, Princess Chiêu Hoàng. In that same year, Trần Thủ Độ married Chiêu Hoàng to his eight-year-old nephew, Trần Cảnh, and forced the young princess to cede the throne to her husband.

Trần Cảnh ascended the throne in 1225 under the name of Trần Thái Tông and became the first emperor of

the new Trần dynasty which ruled the country for 175 years to the end of the 14th century. In the beginning, the power was firmly in the hands of Trần Thủ Độ, who took steps to systematically root out all members of the royal family to prevent any eventual restoration of the Lý dynasty. Despite his machiavelism, Trần Thủ Độ must be credited for his far-reaching reforms for the country, giving it a solid administrative and military structure which enabled Đại Việt to successfully resist the subsequent repeated Mongolian invasions.

The Mongols' first invasion

While the Trần dynasty ruled over the Đại Việt, the Mongols had already begun their conquest of the world. A nomadic tribe of the same race as the Huns – who spread great terrors in Europe in the 5th century (in 450 AD, Attila unleashed his storm troops in Gaul, spared Paris but overran Orleans before ravaging Italy) – the Mongols in the 13th century, in turn, sowed blood and fire in all of Asia and all the way to the gates of Europe. In the beginning of the 13th century, after unifying Mongolia, Genghis Khan (Thành Cát Tư Hãn) took over Beijing after a bloody two-year siege, and thereafter undertook the pacification of all of China.

The Chinese Empire at that time was divided into three parts: the North was dominated by a Manchurian dynasty which established its capital in Beijing; Southern China was ruled by the Song whose court was established in Hangzhou (Hàng Châu); and the North-East belonged to the kingdom of Xixia (Tây Hạ). After

seizing Beijing, the Mongols conquered Xixia and moved to the farther countries in Europe, annexing all of Central Asia and several states in Russia and in Eastern Europe. Batou, grandson of Genghis Khan, at the helm of the Mongolian troops, attacked northern Russia's rich principalities in 1240, and ravaged Kiev and the Ukraine before subduing Hungary. From 1264 to 1280, the Mongolian army commanders deployed their troops to attack the Song in the South.

In the fall of 1257, the Mongolian General Ouriyanqadai (Ngột Lương Hợp Thai), arrived at the Vietnamese border and asked Đại Việt for authorization to cross its territory in order to attack the Song in the South. Emperor Trần Thái Tông took an unprecedented action: not only did he turn down the request but also held Ouriyanqadai's envoys prisoners. Fearing an expected reaction from the Mongols, he sent an army commanded by his nephew Trần Quốc Tuấn to guard the border. But the Mongolian storm troops quickly overran the Vietnamese, who were then forced to withdraw to Sơn Tây. The emperor personally headed an army corps to stop the invaders' advance, but was forced to retreat rapidly. The capital Thăng Long, badly plundered by the enemy in January 1288, was abandoned.

Within a few months of occupation came a heat wave. The Mongols, poorly adapted to the climate, began to show signs of weariness. Trần Thái Tông, waiting for the propitious moment, launched a counter-attack with such forcefulness that the enemy were forced to evacuate their troops. In their retreat, while passing by Quy Hóa, the Mongols were once again attacked by the

region's mountaineer tribes and suffered another severe defeat.

Twenty-five years of fragile peace

At the end of 1258, Trần Thái Tông, after a 33-year reign, abdicated in favor of his son, Trần Thánh Tông. The Mongols, though forced to withdraw from Đại Việt, never abandoned their intention to subdue the country. Why should those warriors who had conquered all of China, attacked Russia, defeated the Turks in Central Asia and annexed the kalifat of Bagdad and Syria..., be stopped in their southward march by Đại Việt? Defeat was an unthinkable fact that the Mongols could not accept.

They did not wait long to send an envoy to Thăng Long to demand an annual tribute from the Vietnamese and to ask the emperor to go to Beijing and present himself before the Great Mongol Khan as gesture of submission. Emperor Trần Thánh Tông rejected the demand. After numerous exchanges of messengers and haggling, both sides finally agreed on the terms and contents of the tribute which was due to take place every three years instead of annually. During this negotiating period, the Vietnamese took advantage of the respite to train their troops and to prepare themselves for any eventual armed conflict with the Chinese. They were fully aware that the Mongols, who had conquered two thirds of the civilized world, would not remain conciliatory toward them forever.

In effect, the relations between Beijing and Thăng Long kept deteriorating as time went by. In 1282, Kubilai (Hốt Tất Liệt) became the Great Mongol Khan. He then decided to attack Champa and asked to be allowed to cross the Vietnamese territory to reach the Champa Kingdom. Trần Nhân Tông, who had succeeded Trần Thánh Tông in 1279, called a meeting of dignitaries and military commanders in Bình Than to ask for their advice regarding the Mongols' demand. Generals Trần Quốc Tuấn and Trần Khánh Dư recommended a firm stand and proposed the deployment of military forces to defend strategic positions. The emperor embraced their position and refused to allow the Mongols to cross the territory. The Mongols, therefore, took the sea route to invade Champa.

They landed in Champa, took the capital of Vijaya, but their campaign foundered. The Mongolian reinforcement troops, coming through the sea route, were decimated by a hurricane. His patience wearing thin, Kubilai Khan decided in 1284 to give his own son Toghan a powerful army, entrusting him with the mission of completely erasing Champa and Đại Việt.

In the last twenty-five years of relative peace, the Vietnamese had been consolidating their army to prepare for their defense. In the fall of 1284, General Trần Quốc Tuấn, Prince Hưng Đạo (hereafter called Trần Hưng Đạo), was appointed commander-in-chief of the ground and naval forces. He organized a big review of his troops on the east side of the Red River: the Vietnamese army was then two hundred thousand men strong. Facing imminent danger, in January 1285, the emperor took the

initiative of convening the country's elderly people at the Diên Hồng palace to give them an account of the situation and to ask them whether to fight or to surrender. The answer was unanimous: we shall fight. It was an unprecedented popular consultation to test the determination of the population in the face of a grave national danger.

The second Mongolian invasion

In early 1285, the Mongolian army assembled at the border, under the command of Toghan (Thoát Hoan), son of Kubilai Khan, and seconded by Sogetu (Toa Đô) and Omar (Ô Mã Nhi). Toghan sent a messenger to reiterate that he only wanted permission to pass through the Vietnamese territory to fight Champa, and that he had no intention of invading the Đại Việt Kingdom. If consent was given, Đại Việt would be duly compensated once the victory over Champa is achieved; in case of opposition, the country would be put to fire and sword. General Hung Đạo threw the messenger out and sent his troops to confront the Mongols.

The Mongolian army immediately crossed the border at Lạng Sơn. For a short while, Hung Đạo succeeded in containing the enemy's advance, but finally must abandon the Lạng Sơn front to retreat to Vạn Kiếp as he was no longer able to withstand the forceful Mongolian thrust. His troops were pursued by the army of Omar and were forced to flee. King Trần Nhân Tông, commanding the front on the River Cái, whose objective was to bar the route to the capital, was equally pushed

back by Toghan. Hung Đạo took his army to rejoin the king and escorted him in a retreat to Hải Dương. In less than two months, nearly all of the Vietnamese territory was lost. The situation had never been so desperate: the Mongolian flag was flying in the capital and on the main fortresses of the country. In the desolated countryside, whole villages were being wiped out by the storming passage of nomadic soldiers. In the face of such disaster, only one person was keeping his determination intact, and it was Trần Hưng Đạo, this remarkable general who succeeded in maintaining the spirit of his soldiers by instilling into them his own resolute confidence. He ordered his troops to avoid head-on encounters where the enemy's forces are gathered and to attack only small, isolated units, or where the terrain is favorable. Thanks to this strategy and to orderly retreats in cases of forceful Mongolian attacks, the Đại Việt army was able to keep intact their main forces.

A few months later, the first signs of a reversal in the situation began to emerge. Beginning with the fourth month of the year, the climate in northern Vietnam became torrid. The Mongols, not used to such heat, soon showed signs of exhaustion. Meanwhile, the southern front was being efficiently defended by Trần Quang Khải, who did not give up strategic points and alternated offensives with tactical retreats. Sogetu and Omar were still unable to break the Vietnamese resistance while the delivery of supplies to Mongolian troops was getting more and more difficult. The north front army, commanded by Toghan, could not reach the southern part of the country by land in order to provide reinforcement to the expeditionary army which was

bogged down there. Troop movements between the two army corps had to be effected with great difficulties by sea route. Discouraged, Sogetu and Omar left for the northern front.

Trần Hưng Đạo chose that moment to launch a series of counter-attacks. Prince Trần Nhật Duật, supported by Trần Quốc Toản and Nguyễn Khoái, assembled some fifty thousand troops to harass Sogetu's forces, severing all communications between him and Toghan. Two big naval victories at Hàm Tử and Chương Dương, where there was a large concentration of Mongolian troops, opened the road for the liberation of the capital.

Trần Quang Khải who, in the meantime, had left the southern front, also joined in the offensive. The Vietnamese forces launched an attack on Thăng Long on two fronts. Mongolian infantries entrenched in the town must, on the one hand, fight back the Vietnamese offensive and, on the other, lend support to the Chinese fluvial forces which were being battered at Chương Dương, some twenty kilometers away. Finally, Toghan had to leave Thăng Long and cross the Red River to retreat to Kinh Bắc. Sogetu, on the other hand, having been defeated at Hàm Tử, attempted to reach Thiên Mạc in order to join his forces with those of Toghan and to open a new front. But as Toghan and his army were already on their way to Kinh Bắc, Sogetu decided to retreat to Tây Kết. There he was surrounded by Hưng Đạo, Nhật Duật and Quang Khải. The Mongolian army suffered a severe defeat and Sogetu was killed in the

fighting. Thus, of Toghan's two lieutenants, one was dead, and the other, Omar, took flight to China.

The Vietnamese were then resolved to cut all withdrawal routes to Toghan's troops which had left Kinh Bắc for Bắc Giang. Half of the remaining Mongolian forces, which attempted to flee toward the sea, was decimated at Vạn Kiếp by troops of Hưng Đạo, Nguyễn Khoái and Phạm Ngũ Lão. A thirty-thousand-man army corps, under the command of the two sons of Hưng Đạo, was entrusted with cutting the route to the other half of the Mongolian troops which attempted to reach the border by land. Toghan and his generals were forced to retreat in a most disastrous manner. Toghan himself was able to survive, but only at the cost of a humiliating flight, hidden in a copper pipe which his guards hurriedly carried on a chariot to the border. Thus, the fearsome Mongolian army which, a few months earlier, swept through Đại Việt like a hurricane, was smashed to pieces. The second invasion on Đại Việt ended with a big and humiliating disaster.

The third Mongolian invasion

Toghan and the remainder of the expedition-ary corps returned to China, bringing the bad news to the Great Khan Kubilai. The latter, furious, wanted to decapitate all the generals who had taken part in the Đại Việt campaign. They were only saved by pleadings from members of the court.

Kubilai Khan then decided to postpone the preparation for his third expedition against Japan in

order to muster all available forces for an immediate revenge. The Chinese court ordered a general draft in the three border provinces and took measures to speed up the training of its troops. News of war preparations by the Mongolian army reached Trần Nhân Tông, who then sought counsel from Trần Hưng Đạo. The general was confident: "The last time, our country had known a long period of peace and had not been prepared for the war. Some had deserted and others had surrendered to the enemy. This time, in the wake of our resounding victory, the people and the army are more hardened for battle. As for the Mongols, their fighting spirit must have been hurt by their recent defeat. I am confident that we are going to win more easily this time." The emperor, reassured, ordered a census of his troops and an intensive production of arms and war vessels.

At the end of 1287, Toghan, commanding some three hundred thousand men, once again crossed the border, while a fleet of some five hundred junks was sailing toward the Vietnamese coasts. Fightings began to flare up. The Vietnamese succeeded in winning some battles, but the Mongolian army's advance was inexorable. Trần Hưng Đạo's troops pulled back to organize the defense of the capital, but very soon, they had to abandon the city. In the meantime, Trần Nhật Duật ambushed the enemy's supply fleet at Vân Đồn, on the coast. He succeeded in destroying the fleet and seized its arms and food supplies. It was a decisive blow which shattered the determination of the Mongols.

From then on, Chinese troops were constantly being attacked. Mongolian soldiers, not sufficiently

supplied, began to plunder. Constantly harassed and lacking sleep and food supplies, the Mongols once again were overwhelmed by the rigorous climate; it did not take long to hurt their combativeness. Realizing the danger of a protracted occupation and of the demoralizing spirit that gripped his men, Toghan contemplated a troop withdrawal to limit the damage. A retreat by sea and land routes was planned. But Trần Hưng Đạo decided that the time had come to foil the Chinese withdrawal plan and to inflict on them such a defeat as to deter all future Mogolian attempts to venture into Đại Việt. He set up traps and ambushes, and cut all roads and bridges the Mongols might use to return to China. Anticipating that a large part of the invading army would try to reach the sea by way of the Bạch Đằng River, Trần Hưng Đạo repeated Ngô Quyền's strategy and ordered the planting of piles with metal covered peaks in the river bed. He also ordered General Phạm Ngũ Lão to post troops at the Lạng Sơn crossing point, near the Chinese border. He himself commanded the largest part of the army and started the offensive. While crossing the Hóa River, he vowed not to cross it again if he did not succeed this time to crush the invaders.

On April 3, 1288, Omar, at the head of the Mongolian fleet, sailed down the Bạch Đằng. Hưng Đạo launched the attack at high tide, but rapidly feigned to take flight. Omar went immediately after him. When the tide ebbed, the Vietnamese fleet launched a vigorous counter-attack on the Mongolian junks and forced them to retreat upstream. But the water had receded and the Mongolian vessels crashed against the piles' metal peaks.

Omar was taken prisoner and the junks which survived the crash were all captured by the Vietnamese. As he learned about the disaster, Toghan hastily gathered his troops and hurried toward the border. At the Nội Bàng crossing point, he encountered Phạm Ngũ Lão whose troops, posted in a high vantage point, showered the panic-stricken Mongolians with poisonous arrows.

Toghan, surrounded by his last circle of loyal soldiers, escaped in a headlong flight. For the third time the Vietnamese had defeated the most formidable army in the world, and known to be invincible in those times.

Once again, Vietnam was able to survive in the face of an enemy who was ten times more powerful. Despite the victory, Trần Nhân Tông and his court remained lucid. The Mongolian Empire was extremely powerful and it would be unwise to remain in conflict with it. By the end of that year, Đại Việt sent an envoy to China to make peace overtures and to propose the continuation of tribute payments to the Mongolian court. Although furious over their recent defeat, the Mongols accepted the offer as they were weary of their setbacks in this small country. Until the end of the 13th century, Đại Việt was a well-organized country, endowed with a strong army and an efficient administration, which had enabled it to withstand the forceful Mongolian invasions. The empire reached its apogee under the fourth emperor, Trần Nhân Tông, who ruled from 1293 to 1314. The country lived in times of peace and the economy was prospering. Beginning with the next emperor, the Trần dynasty entered its period of decadence which ended with the usurpation of the throne by Hồ Quý Ly in 1400.

The Vietnamese society – Its culture and values

Vietnam has always stubbornly resisted the relentless Chinese assimilation attempts in order to preserve its cultural and national identity. Yet, despite an unswerving will to be independent, it had never rejected the Chinese culture. Fully aware of the superiority of their neighbor's civilization, the Vietnamese had readily embraced its cultural, moral and philosophical values, but had adapted them to the social and psychological realities of Vietnam. Similarly and much later, while fighting against French colonization, Vietnam was open to the cultural contributions of France. Thus the democratic ideals of the French philosophers of the Enlightenment period have nurtured the dreams of several generations of Vietnamese revolutionaries at the beginning of the 20th century. However, those same

revolutionaries also engaged in a fierce struggle against French colonialism.

The Vietnamese society from the very old days had received almost simultaneously the influence of the so-called three religions: buddhism, confucianism and taoism.

The Buddhist religion, born in India, was introduced into China in the first century before Christ and subsequently into Vietnam at the end of the 2nd century AD. The religion saw its apogee between the 7th and 14th century, blooming with the construction of pagodas throughout the country, and a growing influence of the monks over the emperors. Buddhism at that time was more or less the state religion. But starting with the 14th century, its privileged position was waning and its influence on state affairs became practically insignificant, even though it remained the predominant religion among the population.

The Buddhist religion propagates the teachings of Buddha, also known as Sakyamuni, an Indian prince living in the 5th century BC. Distressed by the realities of life and the sufferings of mankind, he left his rich family in quest for Truth and for a solution which would enable the salvation of mankind. According to his teachings, the origin of man's sufferings is desire. Suffering is not only part of our present life; it is a never-ending process, through successive reincarnations, as each of us is to bear in the present life the consequences of our actions in our prior life. The origin of all sufferings, according to Buddha, is the desire which burns inside each of us: desire for power, for

wealth... In order to put an end to our sufferings, our desires must be eliminated. This would enable us to break the chain of reincarnations and reach Nirvana.

The doctrine of Taoism was explained in *Daode jing* (*Đạo Đức Kinh*, "The Book of the Way of Virtue") by Laozi (Lão Tử), a Chinese philosopher in the 6th century BC. The Dao, literally the "Road" or "Way", is the first principle, the most essential cosmic element, from which come two passive and active elements, male and female, *yin* (âm) and *yang* (dương), that give rise to mankind and the cosmos. The highest wisdom consists in finding this original principle by different means, which would bring about a mystical union with oneself, and end up in the disintegration of the self in the Dao. Taoism preaches salvation in isolation, meditation in the midst of nature and accession to emptiness, to nothingness and to immortality by inaction. Due to the mysticism that pervades its doctrine, Taoism, while being propagated in the population, was soon tainted by superstitions and practices closely associated with sorcery and magic.

Confucius (Khổng Phu Tử) also lived in the 6th century BC, and thus was a contemporary of Buddha and Laozi. Confucianism is not a religion *per se*, but rather a set of moral principles which serve to guide man's behavior and to govern society. It does not deal with metaphysics but represents, above all, a set of civil and social ethics as well as a doctrine of government and behavior.

The teachings of Confucius are embodied in four relatively short texts selected from a vast body of

classical literature. They are known as *Tứ Thư* (the Four Books): the *Đại Học* (Great Learnings), *Trung Dung* (Doctrine of the Mean), *Luận Ngữ* (Philosophical Discussions), and *Mạnh Tử* (Mengtzu). The first three books contain various teachings of Confucius, collected and commented by his disciples, whereas the last book was written by Mengtzu, a disciple of Confucius, who presented his own moral and political principles. (It was Mengtzu who had formulated the theory of man's inborn goodness, that all men are born inherently good; it is society, customs and circumstances of life which corrupt men. With the help of education, men can again find their inherent nature).

Confucian ethics, stressing order and harmony in social interchanges, predicate absolute authority of the sovereign over his subjects, of the father over his children, of the husband over his wife and of the elder brother over his younger siblings. The moral principles of Confucianism are deeply imbedded in practically all aspects of life in Vietnamese society. As Confucius was an adherent of an organized society in which loyalty to the sovereign constitutes the main virtue, it is easy to understand why Chinese and Vietnamese monarchs were eager to encourage the propagation of his doctrine. As a matter of fact, it was predicated that patriotism can hardly be dissociated from loyalty to the monarch (*trung quân, ái quốc*). And this helps explain why there was always in the country a deep belief in the legitimacy of a dynasty, even at times when the ruling monarch was weak, incapable or even depraved. The people always remembered his predecessors, or the dynasty's founders, who, as a rule, were once national heroes or empire

builders who had given them years of peace and happiness. It was likewise easy to understand why throne usurpers would carry throughout their lives a reputation of being deceitful and contemptible, although some of them were men of great talents, such as Trần Thủ Độ or Hồ Quý Ly. In addition to loyalty toward the monarch, honesty in relations with other people also constitutes an essential virtue. Nothing is more despicable than those who cheat their teachers or betray their friends.

The king is the representative of Heaven on earth. Following the example of the Chinese model, the king is the Son of Heaven, who is the absolute Emperor of the cosmos. He does not, however, hold absolute power, but rather has the duty to attend to the happiness of his subjects by insuring order and security, i.e. providing military protection against foreign invasions. In a primarily agricultural economy, good harvests are tangible signs of public well-being whereas crop failures or natural calamities cause famine, hardships and sufferings to the population. In such a case, the monarch has failed in his duties and he must take responsibility for the sufferings borne by the people. The king must make a public apology and take steps to bring security, repair canals and dikes to protect the crops and restore happiness to his subjects. When floods and droughts occur more and more frequently and bad harvests persist, or when insecurity due to banditry prevails, these events are interpreted as discontents on the part of Heaven. Soon the people would lose faith in the monarch who is seen to have lost the mandate of Heaven, and the conditions would then be ripe for a change of dynasty.

Neither does the king have the liberty to appoint at will those he likes as mandarins. Since the 11th century, administrators at the province level as well as court mandarins had been selected through a national examination system which permitted the recruitment to the service of the kingdom of the most deserving candidates among the common people. For a given ministerial office, there were always one or two mandarins with specific outstanding talents to choose from, and the king could hardly bypass them for somebody else he preferred. In fact, in the Vietnamese monarchic system there existed no hereditary nobility who monopolized power and shared offices of high responsibility among themselves.

On the other hand, the king's authority was rather restricted by the great autonomy traditionally enjoyed by the communes which possessed the right to elect their own administrators since the Middle Ages. According to a well-known saying, the rules of the king must yield to the customs of the communes (*Phép vua thua lệ làng*).

The traditional Vietnamese society had always reserved the highest esteem to scholars or educated people. As a matter of fact, a mandarin's career was accessible only to degree-holders. A teacher who instilled knowledge – usually not a rich person – enjoyed the highest respect. According to a moral Confucian principle, one should pay respect first to the sovereign, then to the teacher who even comes before the father (*quân, sư, phụ*). That the teacher is even higher placed than the father in the scale of respects implies the high place reserved for education in the Vietnamese society.

Today, when we witness what is happening in the poor neighborhoods in Western countries, where school children are violent and disrespectful toward their teachers, we cannot help feeling shocked and deeply saddened.

But of course, in a country perennially at war, military prowess was also highly regarded, even though the highest esteem was reserved for learned people. To be a man means to act and bring order and peace wherever he happens to be:

*Làm trai cho đáng nên trai,
Xuống đông, đông tĩnh, lên đòi, đòi yên.*

Thus the ideal type of the Vietnamese man is a learned man who also excels in military skills (*văn võ song toàn*). The history of Vietnam is replete with examples of talented people who have passed difficult and very selective literary contests and who have equally performed brilliantly and valiantly when trusted with a military commanding role, such as Nguyễn Trãi, Nguyễn Tri Phương, Phan Thanh Giản, or Phan Đình Phùng. The latter, selected first in the 1877 national examination, joined the resistance movement of King Hàm Nghi in 1885 to head the armed struggle against the French colonial authorities.

Whereas loyalty to the monarch and filial love represent the most essential virtues for a man, the most important value for a woman is conjugal faithfulness:

*Trai thời trung hiếu làm đầu,
Gái thời tiết hạnh là câu sửa mình.*

The Vietnamese society, which tolerated polygamy until the early 20th century, was very rigid toward women who were expected to preserve their chastity under all circumstances. Whereas a man was allowed to have "five spouses, seven concubines," a woman was expected to remain faithful to one man throughout her life.

Trai năm thê bảy thiếp, gái chính chuyên một chồng.

In the traditional society, the woman was confined to the home where she was supposed to labor on the four virtues (*tứ đức*): *công* (dexterity for household work), *dung* (beauty), *ngôn* (manner of expression), *hạnh* (moral conduct). Still more rigorously, she was subjected to three rules (*tam tông*): while young and living with her parents, she must obey her father; married, she must show submission to her husband; widowed, she comes second to her eldest son.

It goes without saying that the above principles were the very foundations of ancient Chinese society, which reserved every consideration for men and treated women with disdain. Vietnam, which has adopted Confucian moral values, did not accept everything literally, but often modified and adapted the Chinese customs and values in its own manner. Thus a woman in the Vietnamese society did not share the insignificant or underprivileged fate of the Chinese woman, but has always enjoyed a substantially more favorable status. Contrary to the Chinese model, she has the right to paternal inheritance and a say in the management of the home, and is free to participate in village activities. It was no coincidence that already in the first century, two

Vietnamese women, the Trung sisters, had led a great national uprising against Chinese rule. An understanding of the Vietnamese society is not complete without stressing the important role of the family, taken in the broadest possible sense, which consists of every member issued from the same origin who can claim a common ancestor.

The Vietnamese attach high importance to family ties and their notion of "kinship" is particularly large. The Vietnamese family consists not only of living persons, but deceased people as well, who, in a way, continue to take part in family life. To honor their dead, each family has an altar dedicated to them, and ancestral worship is a solemn rite practiced by the father or, in his absence, by his eldest son. During large family gatherings, the living express their gratitude to their forebears whom they owe their lives to.

In this inevitably brief overview of the Vietnamese society, we can already have a glimpse of the relatively liberal, tolerant and surprisingly democratic social system prevailing in Vietnam since the early founding of the nation. Indeed, such characteristics have deeply impressed the French who came to Vietnam at the end of the 19th century: "*With such a deeply democratic social and political organization, it is not possible for the king to exert an autocratic rule, as it has customarily been alleged,*"³ observed a French author who had previously noted: "*From a political viewpoint, the government of Annam can be considered a monarchy without an*

³ J.-L. de Lanessan, *La Colonisation française en Indochine*, Paris, 1895, p. 13.

*aristocracy, a clergy or an official religion, but with democratic institutions and a strong communal decentralization."*⁴

The traditional Vietnamese society has adopted Confucian moral values and, of course, some other Chinese social institutions as well, such as the administrative and examination systems. To be sure, with time some of the values have become obsolete or somewhat toned down. But in adopting the Chinese model, the Vietnamese were selective enough and knew how to take advantage of China's experience. By adopting the best Chinese values, they were able to create a coherent and efficient administrative, social and military structure, which helped them successfully withstand all their neighbor's invasions as well as foil all its assimilation attempts.

⁴ *L'Indochine française*, Paris, Félix Alcan, 1889, p. 214.

The renewed Chinese occupation and the 10-year resistance (15th century)

The rise of Hồ Quý Ly

The Trần dynasty fell into decadence as the talented and valiant dynasty founders were succeeded by weak and incapable monarchs who neglected state affairs. In the 14th century, corruption at the court and the war against Champa depleted the kingdom's coffers. Bad harvests and severe floods, compounded by heavy taxes levied by the court, made life unbearable for peasants. The incompetence of the last emperors had made possible the rise of Hồ Quý Ly, an ambitious and cunning, but talented, high mandarin.

In his 27-year mandarin career, during which he had held practically every high post at the court, Hồ Quý Ly put in motion a huge program of administrative, fiscal, economic and military reforms. In order to consolidate state resources, he initiated the use of paper

money for the first time in 1397 and ordered the exchange of gold and metal coins in return for paper money issued by the kingdom. A decree was issued stating that counterfeiters would be punished by death and property confiscation.

A rigorous fiscal reform trimmed down part of the privileges enjoyed by the aristocracy. In addition, Hồ Quý Ly undertook an ambitious agrarian reform to encourage the efficient cultivation of unexploited lands.

In 1398, Hồ Quý Ly forced Emperor Trần Thuận Tông to abdicate in favor of a three-year-old prince who was Hồ's own grandson. The following year, Trần Thuận Tông was compelled to take his own life. In 1400, Hồ Quý Ly finalized his scheme by deposing the young emperor and proclaiming himself king.

New invasion and renewed Chinese occupation

Hồ Quý Ly's reign lasted only seven years. Using Hồ's usurpation act as a pretext, the Chinese launched a new invasion aimed at reestablishing their rule on Đại Việt. At that time, the Ming dynasty in China had been in power since 1368 when it replaced the Mongolian Yuan dynasty, following the ouster of the Mongols from Beijing by Zhu Yuanzhang (Chu Nguyên Dương). At the beginning of the 15th century, China initiated a policy of commercial conquest, sending their vessels sailing along the Đại Việt coastal areas while en route to the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea and the eastern coasts of Africa. An occupation of Đại Việt would suit their plans as it would

provide the Imperial Fleet with a valuable support base in their long sea expeditions.

Thus, under the pretext of overthrowing Hồ Quý Ly in order to restore the Trần monarchy, the Chinese army invaded Đại Việt in 1405. In response to this new Chinese invasion, part of the population, as well as officers and soldiers loyal to the Trần monarchy, preferred to lay down their arms without any resistance. Meanwhile, troops faithful to Hồ Quý Ly could only deliver a weak resistance to the invading army. Hồ Quý Ly and members of his family were captured and the capital was occupied by the Chinese.

In order to legitimize their presence, the Ming published a sham proclamation inviting descendants of the deposed dynasty to report to the court, but, at the same time, they made the Vietnamese dignitaries sign a petition for the restoration of Chinese rule, alleging that the Trần dynasty had no more living descendants. The Ming renamed Đại Việt to its former name Giao Chi and proceeded with an accelerated Chinese transformation process. They imposed the cult of Chinese deities, sent large groups of preachers to spread superstitions and implemented an extensive policy of obscurantism. At the same time, all literary works, legal codes written or being used under the various Vietnamese dynasties were confiscated and sent to China or simply destroyed. The Ming also imposed Chinese customs and traditions, including the way they dress. The population was subjected to a heavy tax burden and a hard labor regime; in addition, a draconian control system permitted the Chinese to keep watch on every movement of the

people. A census during that period came up with an estimate of 5.2 million inhabitants in the country, of which 3.1 million lived in the delta region and 2.1 million so-called "barbarians" belonged to mountain tribes. Thus, the colonization this time was as brutal as it was radical. It was then that Lê Lợi – later to become a symbol of peasant uprising – started his patient struggle to liberate the country from the Chinese occupation, a resistance which would last for ten long years.

The uprising of Lê Lợi

Born in a family of rich landowners in the Lam Son region, Lê Lợi was very popular because he used his wealth to help hardship-stricken peasants. The Ming, aware of Lê Lợi's influence over the peasants, wanted to enlist his service. But Lê Lợi ignored their offer and began grouping around himself partisans who, like him, were driven by a desire to regain national independence. The most notable among them was Nguyễn Trãi, a famous scholar with a Doctor of Letters degree earned in 1400, who served as Lê Lợi's advisor and strategist.

Lê Lợi proclaimed himself king in 1428 under the name of Bình Định Vương, and led a difficult struggle against the Chinese rulers. With some five thousand followers facing one hundred thousand Chinese soldiers scattered all over the territory, Lê Lợi had to rely on guerilla warfare, engaging in small-scale ambushes or surprise attacks. He often suffered setbacks and several times, being tracked down by the Chinese, was forced to take refuge in the Chí Linh forests.

One day, as he and his entourage were being pursued to their last refuge, Lê Lợi was saved at the last minute by his lieutenant Lê Lai's sacrifice. The latter, disguised as the king, mounted an elephant and launched himself into combat. The Chinese, mistaking him for the man they were after, set off in pursuit and killed him. Lê Lợi took advantage of the diversion to escape.

Small successes alternated with setbacks until the year 1424 when an ambush in Kha Lru resulted in the loss of two Chinese generals: one killed and one captured. Lê Lợi's fame grew rapidly in the country. Wherever they went, his troops were greeted with enthusiasm by the population, who provided them with food and new recruits. At the end of 1425, Lê Lợi had succeeded in liberating the whole territory, except for a few province capitals. He then decided to launch a broad front in the North, judging that the time was ripe and that his troops were now strong enough to conduct large campaigns.

Worried, the Emperor of China sent a new commander-in-chief, Wang Cong (Vương Thông), to head the Ming forces. But an important victory by the Vietnamese in Tuy Động in November 1424 forced a large part of the Chinese forces to withdraw into the Đông Quan fortress, which was subsequently besieged by Lê Lợi's troops. Wang Cong made several successful counter-attacks and succeeded in killing two of Lê Lợi's generals. Informed of the vulnerable situation of his army, the Chinese emperor immediately sent General Liao Sheng (Liễu Thăng), seconded by the War Minister Li Qing (Lý Khánh), to take command of an army of one

hundred thousand men and some twenty thousand war horses in order to reinforce Wang Cong's troops. Another contingent of fifty thousand men and ten thousand war horses, under the command of General Mu Sheng (Mộc Thạnh), crossed the border by another route.

Lê Lợi decided to loosen the grip around the Đông Quan fortress in order to face the newly arriving enemy troops. He sent his men to take positions at different points in order to block the Chinese advance when they cross those places. An important army corps of ten thousand men was assigned the task of preparing an ambush at the Chi Lăng pass, while a detachment was sent to meet the army of Liao Sheng. After a brief encounter with the enemy, the Vietnamese withdrew hastily to lure the Chinese into pursuit. At the Chi Lăng pass, troops in ambush entered into action, encircling the Chinese in a steep and muddy ravine. The battle raged on for three days during which ten thousand Chinese soldiers were killed. Liao Sheng was also killed together with his entourage. The Chinese War Minister, realizing how desperate the situation was, committed suicide in the midst of his soldiers fleeing in disarray.

General Mu Sheng, who commanded the 2nd reinforcement contingent, learned of the debacle and of Liao Sheng's death. Frightened, the old general judged it wiser to turn around and withdraw his troops to the border. A Vietnamese contingent, under the command of Lê Khả, launched into pursuit and annihilated the Chinese second army in Lĩnh Thủy. Another ten

thousand Ming troops were killed, but General Mu Sheng was able to escape.

The morale of the occupying army, which waited for reinforcement in vain, reached the lowest point. The Chinese general Wang Cong, whose troops were besieged in Đông Quan, sent an emissary to Lê Lợi, asking for a compromise that would allow the Chinese garrison to withdraw to the border. Lê Lợi's generals, who had not forgotten the cruelties committed by the Chinese during the occupation years, were against any compromise with them. But Nguyễn Trãi, more sensible, advised a more flexible attitude in order to avoid alienating the Ming. He did not want the Ming to seek revenge, which would plunge the country into another long and exhaustive war. Thus, at the beginning of 1428, Chinese troops left the Vietnamese territory after expressing their gratitude to Lê Lợi, whose conciliatory gesture would permit Đại Việt to live a long period of peace with its Chinese neighbor.

The new Lê dynasty

With the country freed from Chinese occupation in 1428, Lê Lợi became the first king of the new Lê dynasty, or Later Lê (Hậu Lê). His ruling name was Lê Thái Tổ. The new Lê dynasty ruled the country for a century until 1527. The first three kings undertook vast reforms in the administration of the kingdom and the reconstruction of the economy. The monarchy reached its apogee under the fourth emperor, Lê Thánh Tông, who ruled the country from 1460 to 1497. This period

corresponds in time to the end of the Middle Ages in Europe (which lasted from the 5th till the 15th century). But Vietnam, very advanced in its time, was already endowed with a remarkably well-organized administrative system. The country was divided into twelve provinces (*đạo*), which in turn were subdivided into smaller units such as *phủ*, *huyện*, *châu*.

The basic administrative unit was the commune (*xã*). In 1490 there were 8,006 communes in the whole country. In each province, authority was vested in three offices in charge of public administration, justice and defense. The governors of the provinces, as well as the mandarins of the *phủ*, *huyện*, and *châu*, were all appointed by the king, but the communes had the right to elect their own administrators. Large communes, with more than 500 households, could elect five administrators. Smaller communes, with less than 400 households, would elect four and those with less than 300 households, three. The administrators of the communes (*xã trưởng*) were the real representatives of the people. They were chosen by the population from among the virtuous or learned people who had not yet passed the national examinations.

At the royal court, the affairs of the kingdom were conducted by six ministries (*Bộ*): *Bộ Lễ* (Protocol), *Bộ Lại* (Interior), *Bộ Hộ* (Finance), *Bộ Binh* (Military), *Bộ Hình* (Justice) and *Bộ Công* (Public Works). Each ministry is headed by a Minister (*Thượng thư*), assisted by two deputies (*Thị lang*). In the field of justice, the Hồng Đức code was promulgated at the end of the 15th century, compiling in 10 chapters more than 700 articles

which constituted the body of laws and regulations of the kingdom. This was the oldest Vietnamese legal code which has been preserved to our days. The penal codes under the Lý and Trần dynasties were taken to China by the Ming and were all lost. The issuing of paper money introduced under Hồ Quý Ly was abandoned and copper coins were again put into circulation. A decree in 1439 made coins minted by the kingdom legal tender to be accepted as means of payment.

The organization of the mandarin system should give us an idea as to the degree of perfection in terms of administration reached by Vietnam toward the end of the Middle Ages in Europe. The civil hierarchy was divided into nine ranks, each of which had two grades. The system thus enabled the classification of the mandarins into eighteen hierarchical classes, with corresponding authorities and privileges. The mandarins were allowed to retire at the age of 65, and other civil servants of lesser ranks at 60.

As we can see, since the 15th century Vietnam has known a well-structured administration and its society was remarkably well organized. The practice of permitting the recruitment of mandarins by competitive examinations was introduced in the 11th century and was preserved well into the early 20th century. The national literary examination system, which we are going to discuss in the next chapter, would provide us with a better idea of the democratic nature and the advanced evolution of the Vietnamese society.

8

The merit system through examinations in the traditional Vietnamese society

The Vietnamese society under monarchic regimes possessed a characteristic which was in sharp contrast with its contemporary Western societies: the highest administrative offices in the country were not inherited within a privileged class, the so-called aristocracy, but open to the most deserving people chosen among the population by means of national examinations.

It is a competitive examination system for the recruitment of mandarins of all levels for the service of the country. It should be noted that Vietnam did not invent the system itself but had borrowed the model from the Chinese. However, this mode of selection of the elite has become established for so long in the Vietnamese customs that it has turned into a scrupulously-guarded tradition and has left indelible

imprints on the Vietnamese mentality. This examination system was first introduced in 1075 under the reign of Lý Nhân Tông and has been preserved until the 20th century. Carefully regulated in every detail like a well-oiled machine, it shows the advanced evolution and the surprisingly democratic character of the Vietnamese society under an allegedly absolute monarchy.

This institution, in existence for over eight centuries, enabled Vietnam to recruit its administrators among the most learned talents originating from the common people. We can thus say that the recruitment of civil servants by means of fair, democratic and competitive examinations has existed in Vietnam since the Middle Ages.

In the beginning, the examinations were not organized on a regular basis. It was the king who decided and decreed the opening of a session whenever the country had the need to recruit mandarins. As a result, after the first examination organized in 1075, only five more were held through the end of the 12th century. Under the Trần dynasty in the 13th century, King Trần Thái Tông decided that examinations would be organized every seven years. Beginning with the 15th century, under King Lê Thánh Tông, the exams were held every three years.

The examinations were organized in three successive phases: first the *thi hương* which was conducted in the provinces and was open to anybody who had successfully passed a preliminary test given by a mandarin in charge of education in the province.

Members of the jury were appointed by the court, their number varied depending on the importance of the examination. The head of the jury and examiners were charged with selecting the topics, and had full authority in correcting the submitted works and announcing the results. The exams lasted several days and consisted of four successive eliminatory test series, that is, a candidate must pass one series in order to be eligible to take the next one.

Those who passed the first three test series are proclaimed *tú tài* (holders of a bachelor's degree), whereas the candidates who passed all four series are called *cử nhân* (licentiate). The morning of the opening day, the candidates were to report well before dawn at the examination field prepared for the occasion, each of them bringing along his own tent, brushes and paper, as well as enough food for the long day. The examination field was carefully fenced off and was accessible through four entrances lighted by gigantic torches. At the sound of drums, the jury appeared and the candidates were admitted to the confined area. They each chose a place, planted their tents and waited until the sun rose. The exam topic was handed out a short while after daybreak. The candidates then tackled their assignment, which must be completed and submitted at sunset before they left the premises to wait for the next session. After several days of extreme tension during which announcements of partial results were followed by new examination sessions, the day arrived when final results were announced in a particularly formal ritual. The results were posted in front of the entrance gates, the successful candidates were called one by one by soldiers

and invited to appear before the members of the jury. Each laureate was presented with a mandarin ceremonial garb and all were invited to a banquet given by the governor of the province.

The next phase is the *thi hội*, organized in the capital the year following the preceding examination, and is open only to licentiates. The candidates were to take four new series of examinations, and only those who successfully passed all four series were qualified for the ultimate phase: the *thi đình*, which consisted of a long dissertation which served to select the best candidates. *Đình* designates the forecourt of the royal palace, as the candidates were invited to take the examination in the palace's court, in the presence of the king who also presided over the jury. The best candidates chosen in this latest phase received the title of *Tiến sĩ* (Doctor), whereas the others, whose names appeared on a complementary list, were called *Phó bảng* (Vice-Doctor). Thus the *thi đình* was not exactly a separate exam, for it only aimed at dividing the successful candidates of the *thi hội* into *tiến sĩ* or *phó bảng*.

The first laureate of this last examination, i.e. the candidate with the highest grade, was awarded the prestigious title of *Trạng Nguyên*. It was traditional – at least in popular tales – that the king would give the hand of his daughter to this new *Trạng Nguyên*. The laureate with the second highest grade received the title of *Bảng Nhân*, and the third, *Thám Hoa*. Those who did not earn any of those three distinctions were of course *tiến sĩ*, or, if they were on the complementary list, *phó bảng*. Under the latest Nguyễn dynasty, the practice of conveying the

distinctions of *Trạng Nguyên*, *Bảng Nhãn*, and *Thám Hoa* to the first three laureates was abolished. This was done to prevent the king's prestige from being overshadowed by the population's admiration and esteem for the *Trạng Nguyên*.

The number of candidates selected in the examinations varied greatly depending on the year or the need of the country for mandarins. From the first examination in 1075, under King Lý Nhân Tông, to the last one in 1918, under the reign of Emperor Khải Định, 187 sessions of *thi đình* – for the doctorates – had been recorded. During the eight-century history of this examination system, 2,971 successful candidates had been proclaimed doctors, or an average of less than 16 candidates per examination having earned the highly-coveted title of *tiến sĩ*. The system ended only in the 20th century when the colonial authorities abolished it, in 1915 for Tonkin (North Vietnam) and in 1918 for Annam (Central Vietnam), and replaced it with the new examination and selection system based on the French model.

The *tiến sĩ* or doctors, who represented the elite of the nation, were appointed to high mandarin posts in the central administration or in the provinces. Quite often, high mandarins were also given the command of the army, and thus it was not uncommon that these doctors were also brilliant military commanders or strategists such as Nguyễn Trãi, the advisor to Lê Lợi. This extremely elaborate national examination system, introduced – let us not forget it – since the 11th century and preserved until the 20th century, had enabled the

most brilliant people – even those originating from the modest classes of the population – to attain the highest step of the social ladder. All along the country's history, we have seen that, thanks to their intelligence and determination, children of peasants or of poor families have moved upward to become high dignitaries of the nation.

The system is not devoid of shortcomings, however. For example, in their examination, the candidates were forbidden to use words which coincided with the first name of the king, of his predecessors or of his royal relatives. When we realize that Vietnamese first names are chosen among common substantives, we can readily imagine how difficult it was to have to avoid the prohibited words. Each candidate had to memorize a long list of names to be systematically avoided, since a single inadvertence would result in a disqualification without appeal. Above all, the examinations were mainly literary contests, requiring knowledge in literature and philosophy, and a talent for composing poems in rhythmic prose and verses according to rigorous classical prosody. The candidates were asked to draft administrative acts and write commentaries on historical or general topics. Education was basically restricted to Chinese classics, the *Tứ Thư* (the Four Classics), and *Ngũ Kinh* (the Five Canons). A reform under Hồ Quý Ly in the 14th century did in fact introduce an arithmetic test, but it was subsequently abandoned.

This examination system was still in use when the French arrived in Vietnam. They were quite impressed by this secular procedure used by the country to select its

mandarins. Among them, an admirer of the Vietnamese scholar's ideals must admit that, even though education was nowhere else so highly regarded as in Vietnam, "*nowhere else does education emphasize topics that are less scientific and less useful.*"⁵

But at least, the rules were the same to everybody, be it sons of high mandarins, members of the royal family, or children of ordinary citizens. Everybody was subjected to the same selection criteria. A former High Resident of France in Hue attended one such examination at the end of the 19th century. He was surprised by the independence of the jury, as the son of the Prime Minister and that of the Viceroy of Tonkin were dropped from the examination which was as rigorous as it was impartial. Of the 1,300 candidates, only 29 passed as licenciates and 57 received bachelor's degrees.⁶

Thus for centuries, the great achievers in the Vietnamese society owed their brilliant career in public administration to hard work, intelligence and success at examinations, and not to their origin as a member of the ruling class or through heredity within an aristocratic class. This characteristic of the Vietnamese society did not fail to surprise Western observers and colonialists who came to Vietnam at the end of the 19th century. Two French authors, in two works published in 1874 and 1884, had mentioned the notion of "university demo-

⁵ J.-L. de Lanessan, *L'Indochine française*, Paris, Félix Alcan, 1889, p. 230.

⁶ Baille, *Souvenirs d'Annam* (1886-1890), Paris, Plon, 1891, p. 2-3.

cracy" when talking about the Vietnamese society ⁷. Thanks to the system, remarked another observer in 1885, "*accession to the highest posts of the Empire was open to everyone alike. That is why we did not find this class hatred which presently constitutes a big peril in Europe.*" ⁸

It was perseverance in learning and not birth right which determined social success. Furthermore, in the traditional Vietnamese society, a place of honor was always reserved for the scholar who, as a rule, enjoyed the highest social prestige in comparison with the other classes: *sĩ, nông, công, thương* (the scholar, the farmer, the craftman and the trader, who ranked last in the social prestige scale).

With the Vietnamese society having been thus conditioned for more than eight centuries, it is easy to explain why success in education is always an obsessive high priority among the Vietnamese. The dearest wish of a Vietnamese, whether worker or craftman, trader or peasant, is to see his children reach as far as possible in their studies. All decent Vietnamese parents are prepared to make every sacrifice in order to help their children succeed in their studies. It is no surprise that you yourself are also among the studious ones.

⁷ C.-E. Bouilleveaux, *L'Annam et le Cambodge*, Paris, Palmé, 1874, and H. de Bizemont, *L'Indochine française*, Paris, 1884.

⁸ L.-E. Louvet, *La Cochinchine religieuse*, tome I, Paris, Challamel, 1885, p. 109.

9

Divisions and reunification. Two centuries of civil war (16th-17th centuries)

The North against the South

The beginning of the 16th century marked the decline of the Later Lê dynasty. The extinction of this dynasty was followed by a long period of troubles and ceaseless civil war between several rival clans that divided the North and the South of the country among themselves. Taking advantage of the incompetence of the last sovereigns and of troubles which pervaded the country, a general, Mạc Đăng Dung, usurped the throne in 1527 and founded the Mạc dynasty, which ruled the country until the end of the century. But a large number of the deposed dynasty's followers opposed the advent of Mạc Đăng Dung and engaged in a struggle against the usurper.

Thus a military chief, Nguyễn Kim, efficiently supported by Trịnh Kiểm, brought together a large number of legitimist partisans to control a region in the southern part of the country where, in 1532, they installed a son of the last Lê sovereign as king. Vietnam was thereafter divided into two parts: the North belonged to the court of the Mạc, and the South was the domain of the Lê court.

In the South, after the death of Nguyễn Kim, real power fell into the hands of Trịnh Kiểm. The two camps were at war during several decades, but neither was able to gain the upper hand. Finally, at the end of a big battle in 1592, troops commanded by Trịnh Tùng, warlord of the South and Trịnh Kiểm's successor, managed to take over the capital of Thăng Long and to overthrow the Mạc. From then on, the Trịnh warlords held all powers, enthroning or deposing whomever they pleased among the last kings of the Lê dynasty.

At the same time, in the South, another clan was forming around Nguyễn Hoàng, son of Nguyễn Kim, former Trịnh Kiểm's ally. The Nguyễn built an army, occupied the region of Thuận Hóa and entered into war against the Trịnh. Replacing the conflict between the Mạc in the North and the Trịnh in the South is now a war between the Trịnh, who had become masters of the North, and the Nguyễn, the new rulers of the South.

The Trịnh and Nguyễn lords engaged in violent and bloody battles for half a century, with neither camp succeeding in supplanting the other. A truce was then settled, which would last for more than a century.

The Nguyễn's expansionist policy and enlargement of the Vietnamese territory

Taking advantage of the period of peace, the Nguyễn consolidated their power and built an independent kingdom south of the Gianh River, which served as border between the two kingdoms. They established their capital in Phú Xuân (later to become Huế) and resumed the traditional policy of a southward march. Indeed, every time Vietnam enjoyed a relative peace with its northern neighbor, or a truce in the civil war in this case, it never failed to resume its thrust toward the south at the expense of Champa. After successive annexations, the Nguyễn chipped away at the Cham territory which kept on shrinking in size. At the end of the 17th century, what was left of Champa was integrated into the Vietnamese territory. The latter was enlarged to include the present province of Bình Thuận, in southern Central Vietnam. Across the border lay the Khmer Empire.

Founded in the 1st century, the Khmer Empire reached its heyday at the end of the 9th century, when numerous gigantic palaces were built, such as those in Angkor with their impressive splendor. The 15th century marked the beginning of the empire's decadence.

After swallowing Champa, the Nguyễn set their sights on the vast and fertile lowlands that extended to the Gulf of Siam. During the 17th century, a large number of Vietnamese families, fleeing from poverty and civil war in their homeland, came to settle in this region and cultivated the land being abandoned by the scattered Khmer population. The Nguyễn thus consis-

tently established their rule over increasingly large regions. Furthermore, their occasional interventions in Cambodia – which was periodically shaken by dynastic crises – were also rewarded with territorial cessions. Thus, at the beginning of the 18th century, the Nguyễn were able to extend their control to the Gulf of Siam, which encompassed all the rich alluvial land now part of southern Vietnam.

Internally, however, the country remained divided into two independent and rival territories. In addition, toward the year 1770, another clan, the Tây Sơn, began to emerge around three brothers, Nguyễn Nhạc, Nguyễn Lữ and Nguyễn Huệ, who came from Tây Sơn, a village in the An Khê region, between Qui Nhơn and Kontum. Therefrom derived the clan's name. The Tây Sơn brothers professed a revolt against feudalism and social inequities, robbing the rich and distributing the loot to the poor. In the same vein, promising to liberate the peasants from injustice and from the yoke of feudal lords, they were able to group around them a significant force of peasants and traders. Based in Qui Nhơn, their revolutionary movement headed like a storm toward the North.

The rise of the Tây Sơn

The Nguyễn lords were, therefore, caught between two warring fronts: the Trịnh in the North and the Tây Sơn at their southern flank. They were finally defeated in 1775 and had to flee by sea route to the new southern land where they took refuge in Saigon, a small area built

on old Khmer territory which they had previously conquered. Among the fugitives was the fifteen-year-old Nguyễn Ánh who later became Emperor Gia Long. The Nguyễn, however, did not give up easily. They reorganized their army and prepared themselves for the day of revenge. The country, devastated by a savage and protracted civil war, fell prey to total anarchy.

Following their victory over the Nguyễn, the Tây Sơn maintained a truce with the Trịnh in the North in order to consolidate their power within the conquered territory. In 1778, Nguyễn Nhạc proclaimed himself emperor, and founded the Tây Sơn dynasty. Military affairs were entrusted to the youngest of the three brothers, Nguyễn Huệ, who proved to be a military genius, a clever strategist and a courageous general who never shied away from dangerous tasks while commanding his troops. Endowed with an extraordinary self-control, he never lost his head in perilous situations and always came up with a solution to master every adversity. He truly deserves his fame as an unbeatable and invincible war commander.

Nguyễn Huệ launched four expeditions in the South, attempting to root out once and for all the descendants of the Nguyễn lords. The latter, once again, were being harassed and driven into their last refuge. Gia Định fell to the Tây Sơn, and Nguyễn Ánh, forced to flee by sea route, found refuge on the Phú Quốc Island. But the Nguyễn were indeed a tough nut to crack. In 1780, they reconquered Gia Định, but the forces supporting them were too weak compared with the Tây Sơn. Nguyễn Ánh entered into an alliance with Siam which,

in 1784, supported him by sending an army of twenty thousand men and a fleet of 300 war junks. Nguyễn Huệ immediately launched a campaign against Gia Định and defeated the Siamese army. Nguyễn Ánh, this time, must take refuge in Bangkok, the capital of Siam.

Nguyễn Huệ then felt he had mustered enough strength to resume hostilities against the Trịnh in the North. In 1786, he took his army northward to Thăng Long, the capital, destroying one by one the fortresses of the Trịnh. The fighting in the capital was violent and bloody. In the town abandoned by the Trịnh, only the king was left behind. Nguyễn Huệ did not want to remove the sovereign who, up to that time, was merely serving as a puppet for the Trịnh lords. To win the sympathy of the victorious general, the king offered him his sixteen-year-old daughter, Princess Ngọc Hân, in marriage.

King Lê, seriously ill, died in the same year. A member of the royal family, with the consent of Nguyễn Huệ, was put on the throne under the name of Lê Chiêu Thống.

In the meantime, Nguyễn Nhạc, the eldest Tây Sơn brother, worrying about the mounting influence of Nguyễn Huệ, left Qui Nhơn precipitously for Thăng Long. He assured King Lê Chiêu Thống of his disinterest and recommended a friendly relationship between their two "states". Accompanied by Nguyễn Huệ, Nguyễn Nhạc then went back to the South.

The moment seemed propitious for the Lê monarchy to restore their power in the North. But the decaying court, the weakness and indecisive attitude of

King Lê Chiêu Thống helped the return to power of the Trịnh lords, who demanded that their privileges be restored. Lê Chiêu Thống had to secretly seek the assistance of Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh, a skillful and ambitious general of Nguyễn Huệ. Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh, commanding some ten thousand men, marched into Thăng Long and succeeded in ousting the Trịnh. But as it soon turned out, he himself wanted to be the real master of the North.

In the course of latent dissensions between the Tây Sơn brothers, which sometimes broke out into open conflicts, Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh conspired to overthrow the Tây Sơn. To this end, he allied himself secretly with Nguyễn Văn Huệ, a long time general of Nguyễn Nhạc. Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh, however, committed the grave error of advising Lê Chiêu Thống to send a messenger to Nguyễn Huệ in order to demand the restitution of the Nghệ An province. It was clearly too much for Nguyễn Huệ, who, in 1787, dispatched Vũ Văn Nhậm to the North to stamp out the ever-growing ambition of Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh. At the end of the year, the powerful Tây Sơn army marched on Thăng Long, repressing along the way all troops of the court of the North. Lê Chiêu Thống and his family succeeded in fleeing and finding shelter in the Bắc Giang region. However, in China he failed to obtain the support of the Qing Emperor in his quest to recover his lost power.

Nguyễn Huệ, on the other hand, was suspecting Vũ Văn Nhậm of harboring personal ambitions. He went again to the North in 1788. Once in the capital, he ordered the assassination of Vũ Văn Nhậm, established

the Tây Sơn rule on the northern part of the country, entrusted Ngô Văn Sở with the command of the region and went back to Phú Xuân.

The Đống Đa victory

Ceaseless internal strife and the resulting chaotic political situation in Đại Việt did not fail to attract China's attention. After its stinging and humiliating defeat in Chi Lăng in 1427, China had for over three centuries abandoned all ambitions on Đại Việt. But now, the time seemed ripe for a new military intervention. Purporting to respond to the call for assistance from Lê Chiêu Thống, King Qianlong (Càn Long) of the Qing (Thanh) dispatched an expeditionary army corps of two hundred thousand men led by Sun Shiyi (Tôn Sĩ Nghị), who crossed the border by taking three different routes. In the face of this powerful Chinese army, and aware that any resistance would be disastrous for the Vietnamese forces, Ngô Văn Sở ordered his troops to withdraw from the capital.

Lê Chiêu Thống returned to Thăng Long on the tail of the occupying army. The Chinese put him back on the throne, but they actually ruled the country as conquerors. The king was forced to sign every act in the name and on behalf of King Qianlong and was ordered to report daily at the camp of Sun Shiyi. The common people of the North as well as mandarins loyal to the Lê dynasty, deeply affected by such humiliation, were secretly waiting for the Tây Sơn to come back and take revenge.

In the South, the young General Nguyễn Huệ decided to assume his responsibilities before the nation and to liberate the country from Chinese rule. On December 22, 1788 in Phú Xuân, before an altar, Nguyễn Huệ solemnly offered a religious sacrifice to Heaven and Earth and proclaimed himself emperor under the title of Quang Trung. After the ceremony, he took command of a ten-thousand-man army of well-trained soldiers, experienced in fast attacks and deployments, and headed north.

At the end of the year, they reached northern Vietnam and were joined by Ngô Văn Sở's troops at Tam Diệp Mountain. As the new lunar year was approaching, the emperor let his troops celebrate Tết several days in advance, as he was planning a long campaign, which would last beyond New Year's Day and would end up with a march into Thăng Long on the seventh day of the new lunar year.

To flatter the arrogance of the occupying army, Nguyễn Huệ sent a delegation to Sun Shiyi to present three petitions that respectfully request the withdrawal of Chinese troops. The Chinese general tore the letters to pieces, decapitated the head of the delegation and threw the other members in prison while threatening to severely punish the Vietnamese army. But secretly Quang Trung and his troops were moving steadily toward the capital.

The first days of the year Kỷ Dậu (1789) were approaching. The Chinese celebrated the New Year noisily. In the night before the third day of the new year, an attack on Hà Hồi fort took the Chinese garrison

completely by surprise. The Chinese soldiers, suddenly pulled out of their sleep and panic-stricken, surrendered without any resistance.

At dawn on the fifth day, Quang Trung, mounted on an elephant and surrounded by another hundred elephants trained for combat, launched an attack on Ngọc Hồi fort. The Chinese sent their cavalry to intercept the advancing Vietnamese troops, but they were badly battered by Quang Trung's ferocious war elephants. The Chinese soldiers were forced to retreat into the fort to reorganize their defense. Quang Trung's troops, protected by gigantic wooden shields covered with a layer of straw and mud mixtures, launched a night attack on the citadel. The Vietnamese broke down the entrance gate, engaged in fierce hand-to-hand combat with Chinese soldiers in the midst of fires which illuminated the night. Overwhelmed, the Chinese garrison took flight, and in the panic, their soldiers fell into the very same traps they had set for the defense of the citadel.

After taking Ngọc Hồi, Quang Trung's troops moved to Thăng Long, destroying on their path two other enemy forts at Văn Điển and Yên Quyết. The Qing army had by then lost more than half of its forces. Several Chinese generals were killed during the fightings, such as Trương Triều Long, Thượng Dục Thăng and Admiral Hứa Thế Thanh. The second in command, Sầm Nghi Đống, was encircled with his garrison at Khương Thượng. He fought to the end while waiting in vain for reinforcement troops, but rather than surrender, he hung himself from a tree.

The fighting raged throughout the night around Đổng Đa, at the very gate of Thăng Long. Sun Shiyi received news of the disaster in the middle of the night. Reconnaissance soldiers reported to him that Quang Trung's army was pouring in from all sides. Without even saddling their horses, he and his escorts fled by crossing a floating bridge on the Red River. The panic-stricken Chinese soldiers followed their commander-in-chief in droves. Under their weight the bridge collapsed, sending thousands of soldiers into the river who subsequently drowned in the icy water. Countless corpses cluttered the river. Sun Shiyi's escort left behind combat flags, seals and insignia in their rush to join their master in his flight to the border.

In the afternoon of the New Year's fifth day, Quang Trung made a triumphant entry into the capital, two days earlier than planned, after having accomplished the feat of destroying a Chinese army of two hundred thousand men in seven days. In that year of 1789, a few months before the fall of the Bastille fortress during the French Revolution, Quang Trung had achieved an exploit worthy of being included among the greatest military victories of all times.

Emperor Qianlong wanted to take his revenge immediately. He appointed Phúc Khang An as the new commander-in-chief to replace Sun Shiyi, and prepared to send a new army to the South. Quang Trung, despite his brilliant victory, knew it would be imprudent to prolong the war with the Chinese. He therefore sent emissaries to Phúc Khang An to make peace proposals. The latter, little inclined to engage in a new adventure

with a Vietnamese army now in its greatest shape, advised Qianlong to accept the offer and to grant Quang Trung his investiture as King of Đại Việt.

Quang Trung, however, did not live long to enjoy this peace with China. Three years after the peace treaty, he was stricken by a sudden illness and died in 1792. He was only forty years old. His death opened the way for the return of his arch rival: Nguyễn Ánh.

The return of Nguyễn Ánh

In 1777, Nguyễn Ánh met a French missionary, Pigneau de Béhaine, Bishop of Adran (France), who, in his travels, had ended up in Hà Tiên, a small town on the Gulf of Siam, on the newly exploited land of southern Vietnam. Nguyễn Ánh, having sustained defeat after defeat at the hands of the Tây Sơn, was looking for military support to take his revenge. Pigneau de Béhaine suggested that he seek assistance from the French. The Bishop subsequently sailed to France, accompanied by the young Prince Cảnh, son of Nguyễn Ánh, who was entrusted with a letter of Nguyễn Ánh for the King of France. The Bishop and the young prince arrived in Pondichéry (a French overseas territory in India) in February 1785. It was a long journey, for, in those days, the means of transportation were not the fastest.

Nguyễn Ánh had certainly known many trials and tribulations in his turbulent life. Defeated by the Tây Sơn on countless occasions and incessantly hunted down, he never failed to pick himself up every time in order to prepare his revenge. For years, he wandered in the

swamps of Cà Mau and all over southern Vietnam, then ended up in Bangkok in May 1785. There, together with a small group of companions, he waited for his time while preparing a revenge for the umpteenth time. Meanwhile, he actively helped the Siamese King to fight back an invasion from the Burmese in 1786 and to chase off the Malayan pirates who infested the Siamese coast.

Taking advantage of the dissensions between the Tây Sơn brothers, Nguyễn Ánh returned to Vietnam. In effect, Nguyễn Huệ, highly dissatisfied with his brother, headed his troops in an attack on Qui Nhơn, the stronghold of his brother Nguyễn Nhạc. The latter was forced to recall part of the garrison in Gia Định in order to defend his capital. Nguyễn Ánh recruited his troops and launched a successful attack on Long Xuyên in 1787. The following year, while Nguyễn Huệ was busy fighting against the Chinese invasion in the North, Nguyễn Ánh took over Gia Định. This time, Nguyễn Ánh was determined to keep the southern bastion under his firm control. He went to work immediately, reorganizing his army and putting in place an administrative machinery in the conquered territory.

Meanwhile, Pigneau de Béhaine arrived at the court of King Louis the XVIth where the young Prince Cảnh caused great excitement. In November 1787, the King of France signed a treaty at Versailles, promising to dispatch four war vessels and 1,750 officers and soldiers in return for the transfer of the port of Tourane (Đà Nẵng) and the exclusive right to free trade within the country which would ban all other European nations. In the end, however, the treaty was never carried out as

the revolution was raging in France and the French monarchy had other more pressing worries. The Bishop of Adran returned to Vietnam, but as French aid was not forthcoming, he used his own money to recruit European mercenaries in order to help Nguyễn Ánh win back his empire.

Starting in 1790, the impetuous Nguyễn Ánh launched a series of attacks against towns that were under the Tây Sơn's control. The premature death of Quang Trung in 1792 certainly fit well into his plan, but it would take him another ten years to realize his dreams. In 1799, he succeeded in capturing Qui Nhon. Two years later, after a fierce battle, he conquered Phú Xuân, the Tây Sơn's capital. Six war vessels under the command of French officers Vannier and Chaigneau participated in this battle. The following year, he finally conquered the northern part of the country, thus putting an end to the Tây Sơn dynasty.

Nguyễn Ánh proclaimed himself emperor in 1802 under the name of Gia Long, thereby founding the Nguyễn dynasty. He established his capital in Phú Xuân, which would become Huế. He also renamed his unified kingdom Việt Nam, marking the time the country first received its current name.

Twenty-seven years had elapsed since the Nguyễn clan first suffered a bitter defeat at the hands of the Tây Sơn and was forced to flee toward the South with the then fifteen-year-old Nguyễn Ánh. Throughout these years, Nguyễn Ánh was able to overcome every reversal of fortune and to survive every imaginable disaster. More than once, he had been relentlessly pursued by the

Tây Sơn and had to hide in some remote island. His flights even took him to Siam, where, together with his loyal companions, he cultivated the land while waiting for his time. But with the tenacity and the enthusiasm of an empire founder, after every setback, he resumed a tireless and patient reconquest of the lost territories. It was only after a quarter of a century of hard and relentless struggle that Nguyễn Ánh, then forty-two years old, finally saw, unified under his rule, the largest territory Vietnam has ever known, extending from the Chinese border to the Cà Mau tip. Throughout many centuries, the country's territory had been enlarged, first, by the annexation of all of Champa and subsequently, by the integration of the Mekong delta won from Cambodia.

The French colonization and Independence (19th and 20th centuries)

The conquest of Indochina

The beginning of the 17th century opened the golden era for international trade. Europeans flocked to South-East Asia. Among those Europeans were traders and missionaries from France, England, Portugal, Spain and Holland. French officers, through the mediation of Bishop Pigneau de Béhaine, fought alongside Nguyễn Ánh. Many of them, such as Philippe Vannier, Jean-Baptiste Chaigneau, de Forsans and the physician Despiau, were subsequently granted titles and privileges, and promoted to mandarins at the court of Gia Long. Under the latter's reign, merchant vessels flying French flag frequently docked at the port of Đà Nẵng, south of the capital Phú Xuân.

Gia Long died in 1819 at the age of 59. His son, Minh Mạng, succeeded him and ruled the country for twenty years, from 1820 to 1840.

In 1802, the year Gia Long became emperor, Napoleon Bonaparte in France was proclaimed Consul for life. Two years later, a *senatus-consultum* (a decree by the Senate) of May 10, 1804 confirmed Napoleon as Emperor of the French people. The reign of Gia Long thus corresponded roughly to the rise and fall of Napoleon the First. The Napoleon era ended with the Waterloo defeat in 1815, and Napoleon died in Sainte-Hélène two years after Gia Long's death.

Minh Mạng did not have the same sympathy toward the Europeans as his father did. He simply ignored the French offer to establish official relations. Minh Mạng's suspicion *vis-à-vis* the French kept mounting as Christianity – through the activities of missionaries who tirelessly travelled throughout the country – was gaining more and more influence in his kingdom. The Vietnamese monarchy was understandably worried about this foreign religion stemming from Europe, which preached submission to an authority superior to that of the sovereign who is viewed as the holder of the celestial mandate, and which incited the faithful to abandon the cult of ancestors, an age-old practice which was the very foundation of the oriental society. Christianity, in the view of the Vietnamese monarchy, was a serious threat to a society strongly influenced by Confucian values and based on absolute loyalty to the sovereign. The worries and the strong irritation of the court of Minh Mạng *vis-à-vis* this threat

helped explain the harsh prohibition and persecution measures taken by the court against Christianity. A royal decree imposed the death penalty on those who ignored the interdiction and sheltered missionaries or Christian believers.

As the Western imperialist threat was becoming real, Minh Mạng, and then his successors Thiệu Trị (1841-1847) and Tự Đức (1847-1883), took more and more drastic measures to prevent foreigners from having access to the territory. In the view of the court of Hue, the missionaries' evangelical activities and the resulting intrusion of the West into the country's internal affairs were no longer a nuisance but a real menace to social stability and a threat to their rule. Tự Đức, determined to close the country to all foreign influences, obstinately rejected all attempts to establish trade relations by the French, British, Spanish and American missions.

Meanwhile, the Opium War had begun in China. In order to force China to open its borders to international trade, the British, very soon to be followed by the French, resorted to a military intervention in 1839. In the face of the Western powers' military superiority, China was obliged to make territorial concessions and open its borders. In France, the beginning of the Second Empire in 1852 was followed by an intensification of a policy of expansion and conquest of overseas territories. The killing of missionaries and the persecution of Christians gave them an opportune pretext to intervene in Vietnam.

Napoleon III decided to occupy a base on Vietnam's coast, following the example of the British

who had won sovereignty over Hongkong in 1842. On September 1st, 1858, a French squadron, under the command of Admiral Rigault de Genouilly, attacked Đà Nẵng, an event which marked the beginning of the French occupation of Indochina. French troops took Đà Nẵng, but faced with the Vietnamese offensive preparation for the defense of their capital, Rigault de Genouilly abandoned the idea of attacking Hue and decided to move south instead.

In February 1859, the French squadron reached Vũng Tàu, moved up along the Saigon River and fired at Vietnamese fortified positions alongside the river banks. The fortress of Saigon succumbed to the violent firepowers of the French fleet and to assaults by French troops. After the take-over of the town, a large part of the fleet left Vietnam for China to participate in a new French-British joint expedition, which eventually led to the Beijing Treaty, forcing China to make further humiliating concessions. After its triumph in China, the French fleet, under the command of Admiral Charner, came back to resume its conquest in the Mekong delta.

The large extent of the defeats in the South forced the court of Hue to ask for the opening of negotiations. The Peace Treaty of June 5, 1862, the so-called Treaty of the year Nhâm Tuất, ceded to the French Gia Định, Biên Hòa and Định Tường, the three eastern provinces of the Mekong delta. In addition, Vietnam agreed to pay four million francs as war damage reparations over a period of ten years. In 1863, the court of Hue sent to Paris a delegation headed by Phan Thanh Giản to request from Napoleon III the restitution of the three provinces,

but to no avail. France was not prepared to make any concessions. She was even planning to conquer the remaining three western provinces. In 1867, the provinces of Vĩnh Long, An Giang and Hà Tiên also fell. Phan Thanh Giãn, Governor of Vĩnh Long, humiliated over the loss of his province, committed suicide by poison.

Faced with such a critical situation, a great number of patriots, worried about the fate of the country, attempted to unite their forces to push back this storming French invasion. Popular uprisings conducted by Trương Định, Nguyễn Trung Trực, Thủ Khoa Huân and Võ Duy Dương succeeded in scoring some memorable victories owing to the courage of the resistance fighters, but they all proved to be short-lived, with no determining effect on the inexorable course of events.

After the conquest of all of South Vietnam, the French planned to extend their rule to the North. Looking at the Red River as a practical springboard for commercial relations with Southern China, French trading interests realized that they must get free access to the harbors and navigational roads of North Vietnam. The French Admiral Dupré contended that the penetration into Tonkin was "a vital necessity for our domination in the Far East". In 1873, French forces launched their attack on the capital of the North. General Nguyễn Tri Phương, commander of the town, and his son conducted the defense of the city from the ramparts, the former at the east gate and the latter at the west gate. The son was hit by projectiles from French forces and died at his combat post. Nguyễn Tri Phương, seriously

injured, was taken prisoner. He opted for death and refused to take food or to receive treatment. After the takeover of Hanoi, French troops moved on to conquer neighboring provinces which fell one by one, virtually without resistance.

In the face of such devastating events, Emperor Tự Đức sent a delegation to negotiate with Admiral Dupré, representative of the French government. On March 15, 1874, a new treaty, the so-called Treaty of the year Giáp Tuất, was signed, according to which Vietnam must cede to France all six provinces in the South, open the town of Hanoi for international trade and accept the free propagation of the Christian faith. As of that date, the whole southern part of Vietnam became a French colony. A French High Resident was appointed to the court of Hue to represent French interests in the country and oversee the implementation of the peace treaty.

But the French were far from being content with only the possession of the southern part of the country. In 1882, two war vessels and eight hundred marines and infantrymen, under the command of Henri Rivière, left Saigon for Hanoi. They issued an ultimatum to the government of Hoàng Diệu, demanding that the town be left to the French and that all Vietnamese mandarins report to the French consulate. This extreme arrogance was of course too much for the Vietnamese mandarins, who would rather die than accept a capitulation. Rivière launched an attack on Hanoi, which fell after only one day of fighting. Governor Hoàng Diệu, like Phan Thanh Giản and Nguyễn Tri Phương before him, committed suicide, hanging himself from a tree.

The following year, the French army conducted attacks on the entire territory. The court of Hue must once again make further concessions and sign the Treaty of 1883, or Treaty of the year Quí Múi, turning Vietnam into a French protectorate. France had then the power to decide over the foreign policy of the entire country. The court of Hue was allowed to administer the provinces of Central Vietnam (Annam); in the North (Tonkin), a French Resident was in charge of the region's administrative management while the South remained a full-fledged French colony. The treaty had barely been signed when resistance groups in the Northern provinces resumed the fighting. The French authorities, determined to establish their protectorate, mobilized all their forces to stamp out the resistance and pacify the territory.

The situation was indeed not particularly bright. One might wonder how a country, which had always so bravely repelled foreign invasions in the past centuries and withstood victoriously the fearsome Mongols in the 13th century, could capitulate so easily before the French assaults? How could a country with such vast war experience and such outstanding military talents be defeated so pitifully by a relatively small expeditionary army corps? The reason was that Vietnam, which had known a brilliant civilization, had sunk into a disastrous inertia. While the Western world in the 19th century was going through a technological and industrial transformation, which resulted in a tenfold increase in their economic and military power, Vietnam and China refused to see what was happening in the Western world. Their position on foreign relations was out of date and no longer suitable. It is true that throughout the

centuries, the Vietnamese army had been a fearless army led by brilliant commanders, but their weaponry and technical warfare were sorely behind the times. Brave soldiers, still equipped with spears and crossbows and some rudimentary canons, were no match for the firepower of modern weapons or the rains of projectiles from French war vessels. The failure of Vietnam was all the more understandable as China itself – an old civilization with many valuable inventions useful to mankind – had equally been forced to bow humiliatingly to the demands of the Western conquerors, as well as to open its borders to the invasion of "white barbarians".

In 1868, Japan, conscious of the pressing necessity to modernize the country, proclaimed the Meiji era. This opened up a new era of progress and radical reforms while the mandarins of the court of Hue continued to ignore the changing world around them. Nevertheless, some more lucid and far-sighted Vietnamese had felt the need for fundamental groundbreaking reforms to save the country. Nguyễn Trường Tộ, for instance, after a journey to the West, reported to Emperor Tự Đức the incredible scientific and technical progress he had witnessed and submitted to the emperor a series of proposals to modernize the country. These proposals, however, were considered far-fetched and incredible and were thus rejected.

Meanwhile, France was establishing its rule on the entire peninsula of Indochina. The Treaty of Phnom Penh, in 1863, placed Cambodia under French protectorate. In 1888, a Franco-Laotian Convention established a French protectorate in the territory of Laos. The Union

of Indochina, created in 1887, consisted then of Cochinchina, a French colony, and Tonkin and Annam, two French protectorates in Vietnam, to which were now added the protectorates of Laos and Cambodia.

Stormy weather at the court of Huế

During all these troubled years, the court of Huế was equally exposed to violent political intrigues and turbulences. Emperor Tự Đức died childless in 1883. In accordance with his will, his nephew Dục Đức became his successor.

But Dục Đức was emperor for barely three days as he was overthrown and put in prison by two all powerful mandarins, Tôn Thất Thuyết and Nguyễn Văn Tường. The poor emperor, deprived of food, died from hunger in his cell. Thuyết and Tường placed a brother of Tự Đức, Emperor Hiệp Hòa, on the throne. The new emperor very soon committed the error of listening to the advice of a conciliatory wing at the court which wanted to open talks with the French to safeguard what was left of his power. Tôn Thất Thuyết and Nguyễn Văn Tường, partisans of a hard line policy toward the French, got hold of a proof of "treason" by the emperor (a letter from the emperor addressed to the French High Resident) and forced him to take his own life by poison at the end of the same year.

The uncompromising wing under Thuyết and Tường now held all powers, rooting out progressively all "pacifist" members of the court. An adoptive son of Tự Đức was then enthroned under the name of Kiến Phúc.

This new emperor, only 15 years of age, survived only six months on the throne and was poisoned in April 1884. A new twelve-year old emperor, Hàm Nghi, acceded to the throne, bringing the number of sovereigns installed at the court of Huế since the death of Tự Đức a year earlier to four. Of these, three died under quite tragic circumstances.

The French soon got wind of the movement of revolt fomenting in Huế. One day in July 1885, the French General de Courcy, heading an army corps of one thousand soldiers, burst into the capital, convened the emperor and the court in order to set the record straight on the implementation of treaties signed with France.

Tôn Thất Thuyết, knowing that he would be arrested during one of the scheduled negotiation sessions with de Courcy, ordered a night attack of the French positions. De Courcy's troops responded violently, bombarding the Forbidden City and the emperor's palace. Emperor Hàm Nghi, escorted by Tôn Thất Thuyết, fled and went underground, subsequently leading a resistance war against the French.

In Huế, the French authorities installed on the throne a new emperor, Đồng Khánh, who had to go to the palace of the High Resident of France for the enthronement ceremony. Meanwhile, pockets of resistance forces loyal to Emperor Hàm Nghi erupted throughout the country. The royalist movement for independence (Cần Vương Movement) sparked off an insurrection which lasted twelve years. Also known under the name of "Scholars Revolt", the movement

attracted a great number of patriotic mandarins and scholars, among them Phan Đình Phùng, Cao Thắng and Nguyễn Thiện Thuật, as well as Tôn Thất Đạm and Tôn Thất Thiệp, the two sons of Tôn Thất Thuyết. Hoàng Hoa Thám was the last of the resistance fighters to continue the struggle, almost alone, long after Emperor Hàm Nghi was arrested by the French. He was finally captured by the French in 1913.

Betrayed by a bodyguard, who had been bought by the French, Emperor Hàm Nghi himself was captured in 1888 and exiled to Algeria. He was only sixteen years old. In the same year, Emperor Đồng Khánh died at the age of twenty-five, only three years after he ascended the throne. A ten-year-old prince, son of the former short-lived Emperor Dục Đức – who as you may remember, died of hunger in prison – was placed on the throne with the consent of the French authorities. Until that time, the prince had lived with his mother, confined in a cell in the royal palace. The young Emperor Thành Thái, well aware of his role as monarch without real power, did not wait long to show his intention to free himself from the authority of the colonial power. After an abortive flight attempt, the emperor was forced to abdicate and sent into exile on the island of Reunion.

The tragic century

The beginning of the 20th century witnessed a revival of the nationalist movement, spearheaded by two patriotic scholars: Phan Bội Châu and Phan Chu Trinh. The Vietnamese nationalists who undertook the fight for independence all realized that for Vietnam to come out

of backwardness, it was absolutely necessary to follow a path of modernization and radical reforms. The modernization of industrial and commercial techniques, as well as that of political thought, was viewed as a necessary condition for independence and economic development. Enthusiasm for the reformist movement reached its peak in 1905 when the Japanese Naval Forces defeated the Russians in a resounding victory at the straight of Tushima. It was the first time an Asian nation had defeated a Western power, and this was possible because the Japanese had been embracing modernization since the 19th century.

In Vietnam, the Duy Tân (modernization) wave was spreading widely, illustrated by the Đông Du (Go East) movement initiated by Phan Bội Châu, who raised funds around the country in order to send hundreds of young people to study in Japan. These students were to receive a modern education and to acquire Western scientific knowledge in order to help modernize the country once they have finished their studies. When Japan was no longer willing to take Vietnamese students, this young generation, eager to learn, was then sent to France, and so westward travels took over eastern journeys!

At the same time, great efforts were being made to bring education to the populace. In North Vietnam, a private school, Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục, was created under the aegis of Phan Chu Trinh. The school promoted the teaching of the national written language, the *quốc ngữ*, to replace the *nôm* characters. The learning of Chinese classics were then replaced by that of Western

modern thoughts: works of French Enlightenment authors such as Montesquieu, Voltaire and Rousseau were introduced at this time and new ideas of freedom and democracy found in those works aroused great enthusiasm among educated people.

After the deposition of Emperor Thành Thái, his eight-year-old son, Prince Vĩnh San, was enthroned under the name of Duy Tân in 1907. The power remained of course in the hands of a Council of Regents, tightly controlled by the French High Resident. After he reached adult age, Duy Tân made contacts with nationalist patriots who were secretly preparing to regain national independence. One night in 1916, Duy Tân surreptitiously left the palace to join the partisans. But the plan failed, and the leaders of the resistance movement were captured and sentenced to death. The emperor himself was exiled to the island of Reunion.

A son of the former Emperor Đồng Khánh then came to the throne in 1916, under the name of Khải Định. He stayed in power compliantly until his death in 1925. His son Vĩnh Thụy, only nine years old, was enthroned under the name of Bảo Đại in 1926. He was to become the last emperor of the Nguyễn dynasty founded by Gia Long. His reign ended in the whirlwind of the Second World War.

After the war broke out in Europe, the Japanese army moved into Indochina. In the big confusion that gripped the country, Vietnamese revolutionaries stepped up their activities, attempting to seize power as France was tied down in both the war in Indochina and the German occupation at home on French territory. On

March 9, 1945, the Japanese blew to pieces the French colonial administrative apparatus. The true intention of the Japanese, however, was the liberation of Vietnam from French rule in order to integrate it into the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere" under the leadership of Japan.

Emperor Bảo Đại declared the abolition of the protectorate and claimed for the country its right to independence. A nationalist government led by Trần Trọng Kim was formed and was enthusiastically greeted by the entire nation in hope of a new era of independence.

Japan surrendered on August 13, 1945 after two atomic bombs were dropped in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Taking advantage of the political vacuum in the country, the Việt Minh front seized power, as they were able to mobilize enthusiastic crowds during the mass demonstrations for national independence. Emperor Bảo Đại abdicated in favor of a provisional government of national union presided by Hồ Chí Minh. During a mass demonstration on September 2, 1945 in Hanoi, Hồ Chí Minh proclaimed national independence and the founding of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. The government of national union, which actually consisted of revolutionaries and patriots of all tendencies, nationalists as well as communists, signed the Treaty of March 6, 1945 with France, according to which France recognized the independence of Vietnam within the Indochinese Union, but continued to retain a privileged role.

On the Vietnamese side, the alliance between the nationalists and communists was only a false coalition, and very soon, internal conflicts broke out between rival groups. The Việt Minh forces, better organized and trained, generally had the upper hand and decimated the ranks of nationalist political parties.

The ceasefire concluded with France did not last long. On the night of December 19, 1946, the Việt Minh and French forces began to fire the first shots. A full-scale war ensued, known as the Indochina War, which lasted eight years and ended with the conclusion of the Geneva Agreements in 1954.

The struggle for national independence had mobilized and brought together the entire country, and while the struggle was led by the Việt Minh communists, a large number of non-communist patriots also took part in it. The latter were mainly interested in lending their support to a national undertaking aimed at overthrowing French rule and freeing the country from colonialism. Meanwhile, the aim of the Việt Minh was to impose a communist system in Vietnam. To conceal their real intention, the Vietnamese communists dissolved the Indochinese Communist Party, founded in 1930, and replaced it with the Việt Minh Front, an abbreviation for Việt Nam Độc Lập Đồng Minh Hội, League for the Independence of Vietnam. This was, of course, a maneuver to conceal their marxist background in order to promote national unity for their own purposes. Only gradually did they reveal their firm intention to follow a hard marxist-leninist line and to impose a communist regime, at first in the communist controlled territories,

then in North Vietnam and finally, in 1975, in the entire country.

Those who refused to support the struggle for the founding of a Marxist state joined together in a nationalist camp headed by former Emperor Bảo Đại. The French, reluctantly but in effect anxious to find a solution to the Vietnamese problem, signed the Hạ Long Bay Agreement with Bảo Đại in January 1948, recognizing the independence of a Vietnamese state, but only as a member of the French Union. But France remained reluctant to the idea of having to relinquish their prerogatives in Indochina, mostly in Cochinchina, which had been a French colony for over 80 years. In fact, only an internal autonomy was recognized, while the country's foreign policy continued to be subjected to the approval of the High Council of the French Union. France also continued to maintain control over the army and the conduct of the war against the Việt Minh.

The war ended with the French military defeat at Điện Biên Phủ and the signing of the Geneva Agreements in 1954, which divided the country in two states: the Democratic Republic of Vietnam north of the 17th parallel, which was a communist satellite state that constituted an integral part of the Soviet socialist bloc; and in the south, a non-communist regime, the Republic of Vietnam. The respite, however, was short-lived as the North very soon launched a subversive armed struggle in the South, with the creation of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam, aiming at destabilizing the Southern regime and reunifying the country by force.

This new civil war had dragged the country into a bloody and devastating conflict for another two decades. South Vietnam, unable to defend itself with its own means, had to be supported militarily and economically by the United States.

However, faced with a North Vietnamese regime which wielded a powerful military apparatus and was determined to impose Marxist-Leninist laws on the entire country, the South, quite often submerged in anarchy, was unable to find capable leaders to unite the people and mobilize all its forces in the struggle for its own survival. From the American side, public opinion was getting weary of the protracted war. As a result, the war was becoming more and more unpopular and a controversial issue in the United States. For the American people, the death of American soldiers on remote foreign soil was of course too much to bear. Meanwhile, the North Vietnamese leaders, through draconian discipline and propaganda, were capable of exacting endless sufferings, deprivations and sacrifices from their own people. Intensive bombings on the entire territory of North Vietnam did not succeed in breaking the determination of the leaders of Hanoi.

The Paris Treaty in 1972 gave the United States the possibility to withdraw from Vietnam without losing face. Barely three years later, a general offensive enabled North Vietnam to overthrow the South Vietnamese regime and seize Saigon. The war ended on April 30, 1975 with the capitulation of the South. A year later, the country was unified to become the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

Taking into account the duration of the wars and assuming we could measure the related true toll and sacrifices, the Vietnamese people have indeed endured and suffered one of the most tragic fates in the 20th century.

11

Vietnam today, an update (from 20th to 21st century)

The Vietnam War ended with the fall of South Vietnam in April 1975 and on July 2, 1976, the country was reunited and renamed the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Aligned with the then Soviet Union within the communist countries bloc, Vietnam was then confronted with a whole host of difficulties which were further aggravated by the U.S. embargo.

The economy of the former South Vietnam was subjected to a forced collectivization. Ranking military and government officers were incarcerated in so-called reeducation camps, factory owners and private businessmen fell victim to property confiscations and were forced to move to uninhabited "New Economic Zones".

Hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese fled the country in makeshift boats. These *boat people* found asylum in several Western countries, mostly in the United States, Canada, France, Australia... Domestically, the new authorities had to face a crippling economic crisis tagged along with a galloping inflation.

Đổi Mới (Renovation) Politicking

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent collapse of the soviet bloc exacerbate the isolation of the country, forcing it to move closer to Communist China and at the same time adopting new economical and political directions.

Beginning with the second half of the 1980s, Vietnam engaged in its own version of *perestroika*. Proclaimed in 1986, Đổi Mới (Renovation) politics represented a turning point in economic policy, officially proclaimed as "market economy with socialist orientation", and the country moves toward integration into the global economy.

Consequently, the state proceeds with privatization of industrial and agricultural enterprises, deregulates the economy, encourages foreign investments, but without giving up its control over strategic industries.

The political regime remains however authoritarian. The Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP), as the sole political party in the country, wields absolute power conferred by the constitution. Its Article 4.1 reads: "*The*

Communist Party of Vietnam – the vanguard of the working class, concurrently the vanguard of the laboring people and Vietnamese nation, faithfully representing the interests of the working class, laboring people and entire nation, and acting upon the Marxist-Leninist doctrine and Ho Chi Minh Thought, is the force leading the State and society."

The Central Committee of the VCP elects the Party's Secretary General, who is in effect the most powerful person of the state, even above the State President. It also plays a determining role in the designations of the State President, the Prime Minister and the Chairman of the National Assembly, who are officially elected by the National Assembly.

Economic liberalization has indeed helped the country to gradually revitalize itself. In July 1995, Vietnam became member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) which gathers main countries in the region. The U.S. economic embargo was lifted in 1994 and diplomatic relations with the United States was established in 1995.

Vietnam is currently the world third largest rice exporter, second in coffee producing behind Brazil. As a newcomer in the oil industry, it is now ranked third among oil producing countries in Southeast Asia. Oil exporting makes up 20% of foreign trade earnings.

The major trading partners for Vietnam's exports are the United States (20%), Japan (10.7%) and China (9.8%). In 2015, the United States ranked 7th in terms of foreign direct investment.

According to the World Bank, Vietnam has a GDP (Gross Domestic Product) of US\$ 191.5 billion in 2015, ranked 50th in the world ⁹, with a current annual economic growth rate between 6 and 7%. Some twenty-five years earlier, its GDP was at a very low level of US\$ 6.3 billion.

Another index shows more accurately the life standard of the people. Once again according to the World Bank, Vietnam's per capita income in 2014 was at US\$ 2,052, ranked 7th among the ten ASEAN countries,¹⁰ only higher than those of Laos, Myanmar (Burma) and Cambodia. In the same year, per capita income in Singapore, the richest country in the area, amounted to over US\$ 56 thousand. In a neighboring country, Thailand, with US\$ 5,977, the Thais are enjoying a three time higher income.

The country is plagued by an endemic corruption. In its annual Corruption Perceptions Index 2015 published by Transparency International ¹¹, Vietnam ranked 112th among 168 countries. Economic progresses

⁹ In comparison, a neighbor country, Thailand, with a GDP of US\$ 395.3 billion, was ranked 27th globally, whereas France, world's 6th largest economy, had in 2015 a GDP of US\$ 2,421 billion.

¹⁰ ASEAN member countries at present: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

¹¹ An NGO (Non-governmental Organization) specializing in the fight against government and public institutions corruption. The Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) has since 1995 ranked most countries in the world according to a scale from 0 (most affected by corruption, as Somalia) to 10 (exemplary, as Scandinavian countries).

however are tagged along with the worsening of social inequalities and the deterioration of the environment, due to an accelerated and uncontrolled urbanization, a reckless exploitation of natural resources, particularly in forestry, as well as too little effort in fighting against pollution and waste treatment.

Furthermore, human rights violations and repression against dissidents by the Vietnamese government represent a friction spot in the U.S.-Vietnam relationship.

Tension with China

The arrival of the French in Vietnam in the 19th century spelled the end of every Chinese ambition on Vietnam for a long while. In the 20th century, a conflict underway is pitting Vietnam against the People's Republic of China on the question of the Paracel (Hoàng Sa) and Spratly (Trường Sa) Islands. Those small coral islands are located in the South China Sea (East Sea for the Vietnamese) off the Vietnamese coasts and belong to Vietnam since the 17th century. But they are also being claimed by several nations in the region owing to their strategic and economic importance (fisheries, underwater resources).

In January 1974, following the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in 1973, as the U.S. was no longer militarily involved, the Vietnam War between the North (the Democratic Republic of Vietnam) and the South (the Republic of Vietnam) was raging and entered a decisive phase, the Chinese took the opportunity to

surreptitiously occupy some islands of the Paracels. The South Vietnamese Navy responded quickly by sending 4 warships (3 frigates and a corvette) to expel the Chinese vessels.

The sea battle took place on January 19, 1974. The South Vietnamese frigate HQ-10 was hit and sunk. Her captain, Lt. Commander Nguyễn Văn Thà, decided to remain on board and went down with his ship. The three other ships also suffered heavy damages. Altogether, 74 navy officers and soldiers lost their lives. On the Chinese side, one corvette was sunk, three other ships had been seriously damaged. The Chinese reported 18 deaths, but the number should have been much higher. In the end, the South Vietnamese forces were subdued and the Chinese invaders gained control of the islands.

Toward the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 and after the reunification of the country, the newly installed communist regime came into conflict with its neighbor Cambodia ruled by the Khmer Rouge, which were backed by the People's Republic of China. In the same time, sporadic border skirmishes between China and Vietnam occurred repeatedly since 1974.

In December 1978 the Vietnamese Army invaded Cambodia and triggered an immediate reaction from the Chinese. On February 17, 1979 a Chinese force of about 120,000 troops crossed the border and captured some of the cities of the bordering provinces of Cao Bằng and Lạng Sơn. The Vietnamese, whose troops in large number remained committed in Cambodia, delivered however a fierce resistance and caused high losses on both sides.

The fighting did not last long. On March 5, 1979, China declared that their objective of "teaching Vietnam a lesson" had been achieved, and started to withdraw its forces. Both sides claimed victory in that war. Foreign observers estimated that some 25,000 Chinese fighting troops have lost their lives, but the Vietnamese suffered serious losses in economic terms.

In 1988, a new conflict between China and Vietnam broke out when Chinese forces landed on three uninhabited coral reefs of the Spratly Islands group. The Vietnamese sent their fleet confronting the Chinese. The ensuing battle, known as the Battle of the Gạc Ma Reef, took place on March 14, 1988. As a result, the Chinese took possession of the reefs and some other small neighboring islands. Vietnam lost 64 lives and 3 warships. On the Chinese side, some 24 deaths and damaged vessels were reported.

Since then, the Chinese keep strengthening their presence on the archipelagos, enlarging artificially several islands and building runways for fighter planes. The Americans, fearing a Chinese stranglehold in this vast maritime region, regularly send their ships into the area to ensure free navigation in this strategic zone.

Forty years after the end of the war during which the Vietnamese communists had been fighting against the American presence in South Vietnam with weapons supplied by the Chinese, Vietnam is now becoming effectively an ally of the U.S. in view of the Chinese threat. The American presence in the region this time, irony of history, could be a protection shield against Chinese expansionist ambitions.

As in the last millenniums, the Chinese would never renounce their expansionist ambitions. The threat of a Chinese invasion will always be weighing on Vietnam.

12

The land and the people

Vietnam, with an area of some 128,000 square miles, has in 2016 a population of about 92.7 million. The country is an elongated strip of land edged by 300 miles of seacoasts and swollen at both ends by the Red River delta and the Mekong delta. The central part of the country is a long coastal strip extending along the edge of the Trường Sơn mountain range. In the vicinity of Huế, for instance, the distance between the sea and the Laotian border is a mere 25 miles.

Due to its geographic characteristics, North Vietnam can be divided into three distinctive regions: the mountainous High Region (Thượng Du), with limestone mountain ranges deeply carved by the waters of the Red River, the Thái Bình River and their tributaries; the Plain Region (Trung Du), consisting of low mountains and hills; and finally the Lowland Region (Trung Châu), a narrow plain of barely 950 square miles formed by alluvium deposits of the Red River, where most of the inhabitants of North Vietnam live.



Almost all mineral resources of the country are located in the North. Its subsoil contains important reserves of coal, iron, zinc, phosphate and bauxite. However, until recent years, there have been few industrial activities because of the long war, on the one hand, and of inefficient economic management, on the other.

In Central Vietnam, the Trường Sơn mountain chain, like a spine, runs along the central part of the country. In this narrow strip, the mountains often extend out to the sea coast, leaving barely enough space for small stretches of coastal plains. On this strip of land surrounded by the sea, on one side, and mountains, on the other, the population must work very hard to eke out a living. In the southern part of Central Vietnam, the mountain chain gets broader and ends up with an area of high plateaus covered with red soil coming from the dissolution of basalt.

Beyond these plateaus is a vast plain extending to the southernmost part of the country, the Cà Mau tip. This large plain was formed by alluvial deposits from the Mekong (Cửu Long) and other rivers such as the Đồng Nai, Vàm Cỏ, and the Saigon River. The fertile soil permits an abundant rice production and the Mekong delta is traditionally regarded as a rice granary.

Vietnam, which is entirely located in the tropical zone, has a warm and humid climate, with distinct regional characteristics. North Vietnam has four fairly distinctive seasons during the year, with a torrid summer (95° Fahrenheit in the shade is not unusual) and a cold winter made more unpleasant by a biting wind blowing

from the northeast and by frequent icy drizzles. Around July and August, heavy rainfalls on the High Region raise the water level of the Red River, which in turn causes frequent floods in the Lowland Region, requiring ceaseless efforts from the population to save their crops and homes.

The climate in the South is markedly influenced by the monsoon. The seasons are conditioned by the half-yearly change in wind direction and not by the rotation of cold and heat. The climate is practically hot all year round. In Saigon, average temperatures vary between 79° Fahrenheit in the winter and 84° Fahrenheit in the summer. Due to the nature of the wind, there is practically no rainfall in the winter: the dry season lasts from November to April. The summer monsoons, coming from the southwest or the sea, cause heavy rainfalls from May till October, making Vietnam a humid country. Thus the hottest month of the year is not July or August, but April, when the climate gets stuffy and the heat reaches its highest intensity due to a lack of rainfall.

The climate and the fertility of the soil determine to a great extent the character of each region's inhabitants. The peasants in South Vietnam, who enjoy favorable conditions provided by a fertile soil, which is easily exploitable and practically spared from natural calamities, can produce more than their counterparts in Central or North Vietnam. On the other hand, peasants in the central region must work much harder, as the soil is arid and yields much less, while facing a double threat: droughts which recur every year, and floods caused by

inundated rivers during the rainy season. In addition, once in a while, a typhoon coming from the Pacific sweeps along the coast, causing irreparable damages to the area and the crops. Because of the tough living condition, most peasant revolts in the course of history had broken out in this region. It is also the traditional birthplace of several of the country's great revolutionaries.

The peasants in the North are not any more fortunate either. In the crowded Red River delta, where population density figures are among the highest in the world, the fate of the inhabitants closely depends on the solidity of the dikes which are threatened every year by the rising river water level.

The fight against droughts and floods requires a close cooperation of all the inhabitants. A tightly organized social system is needed to supervise the irrigation works, the construction and maintenance of the dikes, and to coordinate collective efforts to protect the population against natural calamities. Thus the necessity of a strong social organization and a centralized administration was soon born. Since its earliest age, the Vietnamese society is strongly imbued with community traditions. This characteristic is more evident in the North than in the South, where the natives are accustomed to a relatively easier life and thus are more inclined to think and act individually.

The metropolis in the North, Hà Nội, earlier known as Thăng Long, is the historic capital of the country. It was chosen by Emperor Lý Thái Tổ in the 11th century as the capital of a Vietnam which had just

gained its independence. The city is the home of numerous historical vestiges, above all, the temples built in memory of Confucius and his disciples, or those dedicated to the worship of national heroes, and the ancient pagodas built during the glorious centuries of Buddhism. The French of the colonial days have equally bequeathed white villas along wide, quiet and shady streets.



The Hoàn Kiếm lake in Hà Nội

The town is not in lack of poetic charm, with its lakes and numerous green areas. In the fall, a sheet of light fog descends every morning on the Hoàn Kiếm Lake (Lake of the Returned Sword). On the small island in the middle of the lake, the silhouette of the mythical turtle seems to make its appearance. According to a legend, during the time Emperor Lê Lợi was leading the liberation movement against the Ming in the 15th century, a giant turtle one day emerged from the water and offered him a magic sword to help him combat the

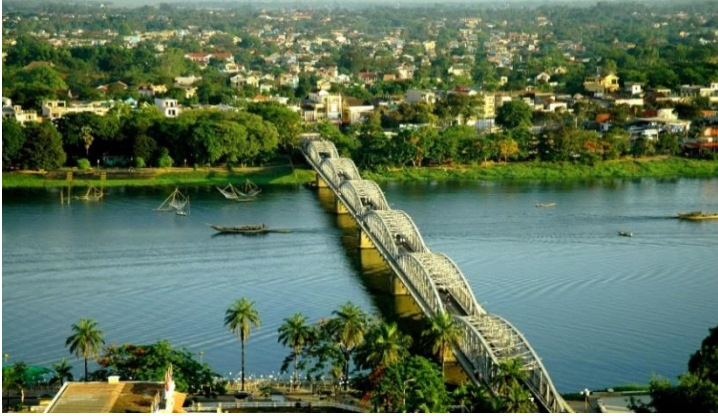
Chinese invaders. After the country had been liberated and his mission accomplished, Lê Lợi became emperor, and on one of his leisure boat rides on the lake, the turtle appeared once again, snapped away the sword and disappeared under the calm water. The sword was thus recovered by its owner.

In the last few years, following the fascinating example of Saigon's vibrant lifestyle and aided by a timid Vietnamese style "perestroika", the austere city of Hanoi had begun to wake up slowly from its lethargy. Small private trading activities, as well as more colors in the way of dressing among local residents, are beginning to appear, in sharp contrast to the customary grey of earlier days.

The main town in Central Vietnam is Huế, formerly Phú Xuân, renowned for the peaceful Perfume River with its slow moving stream. The Nguyễn warlords, in their rivalry with the Trịnh in the 17th century had chosen Phú Xuân as their capital. The Tây Sơn, after having succeeded in overthrowing the Nguyễn, equally built their power base and ruled the country from Phú Xuân.

As Gia Long united the entire national territory and inaugurated the new Nguyễn royal dynasty, he ordered the construction of the new city of Huế on the north bank of the Perfume River, close to the citadel of Phú Xuân.

Huế became the capital of a unified Vietnam and the seat of government of the country's last dynasty.



Trầng Tiên bridge across the Perfume River in Huế

The citadel of Huế is delimited by three belts of walls forming three non-concentric squares laid out on a central northwest to southeast axis, each of which encloses a distinct area. Within the outer walls are the seats of government departments and other public offices of the central administration, as well as the royal garden and the "Pond of Meditation" (Hồ Tĩnh Tâm).

The walls forming the second square mark the boundary of the royal city where hundreds of structures had been built according to a strict design, spread out on both sides of the central axis: among them can be found the Imperial Palace and temples dedicated to the worship of past sovereigns. Finally, in the heart of all this complex is the Forbidden City, fenced off by a purple wall, where the emperor and his closest family members lived.



The citadel of Huế

Scattered around Huế, tombs of past sovereigns had been built on hills overlooking a green and beautiful landscape, combining human works and nature in a perfect harmony. The main tombs are those of Emperors Gia Long, Minh Mạng, Thiệu Trị, Tự Đức and Khải Định. As a rule, the monarchs, while still alive, personally chose the sites of their burial and supervised the construction of the royal tombs.

The royal necropolis is far from being a simple burial place to accommodate the mortal remains of the sovereign. Each site includes beautifully designed gardens, temples and pavilions, which the emperor used to visit with his entourage for rest and entertainment. Emperor Tự Đức, for instance, had a wooden pavilion built on the bank of a waterlily pond and used to go there to meditate or to write poems. The arrangement of the sites shows the serenity with which Oriental people

visualize death, for in the burial sites can be found a quiet joy of living and not a mournful atmosphere. The construction works are perfect examples of traditional architecture but are never grandiose. Their shapes, with severe but harmonious lines, convey at the same time a feeling of serenity and of modesty, replicating the communion between man and nature.

Except for these relatively modest construction works, Vietnam, despite its long history, did not leave any monumental architectural works like most other old civilizations: no pyramids, no Great Wall like China, not even a construction work comparable to the temples of Angkor. The fact is, in its long history, Vietnam had been continuously confronted with devastating wars and invasions, or otherwise bogged down in internal strife. During short periods of peace, the Vietnamese had to channel all their efforts to healing the wounds and revive lamed economic activities. They could hardly afford an ambitious architectural project. The emperors, during the years of peace, were more concerned with the reorganization of the social and economic life, and the consolidation of the administrative apparatus of the country. None of them had ever contemplated to mobilize the people to undertake large scale construction works, which would lend prestige to the dynasty, but at the same time, would have exacted immeasurable sufferings and years of hard labor from the populace. The pyramids no doubt had caused a heavy toll on human lives in the deserts of Egypt. In the old history of Vietnam, there were sovereigns known to be lazy or incompetent, but no true tyrants obsessed with personal grandeur.

The National Route 1, once known as the Mandarin Route, which runs along the coast of Vietnam, is a history-charged trail and is also the symbol of national unity. Originating from the north, this route runs through the central region and keeps stretching further, along with the expansion of the national territory, through various stages during the *nam tiến* (Southward March) movement. The route runs alongside beaches with fine and white sands, under a clear blue sky, passing by the peaceful coastal towns of Qui Nhơn, Nha Trang, Phan Rang and Phan Thiết, where ruins of the temples of the old kingdom of Champa can still be seen.

This route leads us to its final destination in Sài Gòn (Saigon), capital of the South, which was originally only a small market town in an unexploited area on Khmer territory. The first settlers, who arrived in the 17th century, were adventurous Vietnamese who fled the civil war in Central and North Vietnam. The Nguyễn lords made the town their capital during their fight against the Tây Sơn. The French colonization had completely transformed the town, making Saigon the jewel of the French empire and one of their most successful undertakings in the colony. The city, with its broad avenues bordered with tamarind trees, its catholic neo-gothic cathedral in red bricks, and its sumptuous public buildings designed to convey a tangible proof of the aura of Western civilization, was a proud achievement of the French colonialists who considered it as the Pearl of the Orient, and wanted to rediscover in it the charm of a French provincial city.



The Saigon cathedral

Saigon, an economic capital of the former Indochina Union, has acquired in the course of its existence a well-developed commercial spirit and a somewhat anarchistic dynamism. It became the capital of South Vietnam when the country was divided into two states in 1954 as a result of the Treaty of Geneva, and continued to develop and prosper with American aid in the midst of the troubles and the torments of a constantly intensifying war. The city was renamed Ho-Chi-Minh City after the communist take-over of South Vietnam in 1975, reflecting a personality cult dedicated to the old revolutionary who led the country in the way of Marxism-Leninism.

In addition to the Vietnamese, who constitute the majority of the population, there are also ethnic minorities living mainly in mountainous regions in North Vietnam as well as in the High Plateaus of Central

Vietnam: the Mán, the Mèo, the Nùng, and the Hmong, originally from Southern China, had settled on the highlands near the Chinese border since the prehistoric age. They live in tribes and are usually economically self-sufficient.

The Thais, consisting of White and Dark Thais, are immigrants coming from Thailand or Laos; they constitute the most important minorities in North Vietnam. On the High Plateaus of Central Vietnam live Rhade, Jarai, and Stieng tribes. The Montagnard tribes, who have their own dialects, customs and cultures, live peacefully alongside their Vietnamese countrymen whom they called "people of the delta". Finally, in the coastal areas which once belonged to Champa, there still remains an important Champa minority; likewise, a Khmer minority lives in the plains of the Mekong delta, another territory absorbed by the Vietnamese during their southward march.

Despite important regional disparities and a past heavily charged with divisions and internal dissensions, which no doubt substantially represent the main obstacles for the unity of the country, Vietnam has always known how to defend their territorial integrity and rebuild their unity even after long periods of disorder and civil war. An important factor contributing to the national unity is obviously the language. There are of course regional accents and some light disparities in the vocabulary, but it is the only language being spoken and understood in the whole country, and this, presumably since the birth of the nation. In this respect, Vietnam is highly fortunate in comparison with some

other countries such as India, where the existence of a great number of languages and dialects has made it very difficult, if not impossible, to forge a national language. In China, the pronunciation of Chinese is totally different from one region to another, and the spoken language cannot be understood outside of a given region. It is only recently that the spoken language in Beijing has been imposed as the official language. The existence of a common language, recognized by everybody since the birth of the nation, has certainly helped the Vietnamese acquire a strong national consciousness which, in turn, has helped them overcome formidable challenges in their history.

In the eyes of many foreign observers, the Vietnamese are an enigmatic paradox, possessing contradictory characters. They are flexible and stubborn, frail and indestructible, pragmatic and utopian. They were invaded and conquered by their Chinese neighbors in the north but have succeeded in resisting every assimilation attempt to preserve their identity and independence. But on the other hand, they were themselves conquerors, undertook their march southward, and succeeded in assimilating culturally the conquered people. Shaped by the daunting challenges which they must overcome to survive, the Vietnamese have acquired a strong endurance which allows them to accept stoically the most severe hardships. But this stoicism is by no means synonymous with surrender. With patience, they will rebuild from the ruins, and with stubbornness, they will continue to struggle to the very end.

13

How to remain Vietnamese

After this brief journey into the past of the Vietnamese people, you have probably learned a few more things about this country which you have left a long time ago, or which you have perhaps never known. Maybe you are now a little closer to it.

Nobody can escape from his origin for, implicitly, it affects our disposition, our character and our outlook on life. Our past and our future are tied together, says a French writer, Gérard de Nerval, in his novel *Aurélia*¹². But our past is not only our childhood, it is also the past of our parents, the heritage of generations of forebears who have built the country. It is certain that the degree of influence of this heritage varies depending on the individual and on whether we accept it entirely or deny it deliberately. It is possible that the desire to integrate fully into a new society can lead to complete denial of

¹² *Aurélia ou Le Rêve et la vie* (1855).

one's origin. However, it is possible to assimilate the values of a foreign culture while respecting the ancestral cultural heritage that exists in each and every one of us. In this respect, the example given by a member of the French Academy can be enlightening for us.

One afternoon in late November 1990, the French Academy greeted a new member, H el ene Carr ere d'Encausse. As you may or may not know, the French Academy is a prestigious institution for the defense and the illustration of French culture and the French language. The new member, however, was not French. Although born in France she is the daughter of a Russian immigrant family, which fled Russia during the turmoil of the Bolshevik proletarian Revolution. In her early school years, she had to come to terms with her strange sounding name, inherited from her father who had come from Georgia, in the Caucasus. The name sounded strange and barbaric to the ears of her French classmates. (She later married Louis de Carr ere d'Encausse and took the very French name of her husband).

In her acceptance speech, H el ene Carr ere d'Encausse recalls that, as a child, every year she used to wait with anxiety for the return of the fall and the beginning of the school year. *"In those classes where floated a sweet smell of chalk and ink"*, on the first day of school, it was an ordeal for her when the teachers began the year with the ritual roll calling.

As her name was called, the young H el ene wanted to hide underground for, at the sound of this unpronounceable name coming from the remote Caucasus, all the heads turned toward her, expressing

amazement, or even disapproval, tacitly telling her that, with such a name, she had no place among the proud descendants of the Gauls. Every year, it took her days, if not months, to erase little by little the strange impression created on the teacher and her classmates by her strange-sounding name. And little H el ene was dreaming of a miraculous power that would allow her to exchange her cumbersome and barbarian family name with the more enviable name of Dubois or Durand for example, so that she can rightfully claim that she belongs to the same community as her classmates.

Unable to obtain, by miracle, a patronymic integration, the foreign child took possession of France by absorbing with a passion what she felt was essential: literature and history. Thus was chosen her way to integrate, by avidly learning and adopting the culture of her host country, a country that has been chosen and, therefore, passionately loved.

Despite the strong desire to be integrated into the host country, the young Russian immigrant never renounced her origin. Her parents preserved in their heart the love and pride for their ancestors' country. H el ene grew up in the midst of two cultures which, fortunately, complemented each other in her education. Her parents made sure that she did not forget her origin while she was acquiring a perfect French education. She thus launched herself, with equal ardor, into studying the culture of her country of origin. Needless to say, she must give twice the amount of efforts to pursue this double ambition. She never complained about those Thursdays off when, instead of meeting her classmates

for fun, she was taking courses in Russian history, language and literature with her parents. Little by little, she began to feel perfectly at ease in both cultures, in both families, one of the heart and the other of the mind.

Her vocation seems to have been determined in those early years: unable to return freely to her country of origin, she would explore Russia and the Soviet Union as a historian, something she did to discover her parents' lost country. H  l  ne Carr  re d'Encausse thus became a renowned historian, a respected authority in Sovietology and an *Academicienne*, only the third woman in the long history of the French Academy to be admitted as a member since the Academy's creation in the 17th century.

H  l  ne Carr  re d'Encausse was fortunate enough to have parents who had the care – and the time – to patiently teach the young girl the language and history of the country of her origin while she was still very young. It was probably because she had spent her childhood in such a family atmosphere that she could develop this love for the country of her ancestors, a country she had never known.

You grew up and are now living abroad. Your future is associated with the country where you currently live in. It is only natural that you feel close to it and love it. It is only normal that you want to integrate into the society in which you live and to become its citizen. The best way to integrate into a country, as H  l  ne Carr  re d'Encausse demonstrated, is to learn about its culture and to adopt the values of its civilization. But this should not prevent you from keeping in your heart the love for

your country of origin and the respect for its culture. Indeed, neither the West nor the East has ever rejected the idea of learning and possessing more than one culture. In our view, this is a very human attitude which can only enrich your inner life. Only when you are sure of your own roots are you capable of receiving contributions from another culture, and, by the same token, you can avoid many detrimental mistakes: for instance, to adopt indiscriminately some excesses or negative aspects of a way of life, because you think that they represent the civilization you want to assimilate.

Unfortunately, ignorance is often the very cause of indifference. Or worse, it can even lead to a certain contempt for the country founded by your ancestors, as well as for the fate of people who live there. The young Vietnamese generation who grew up outside of Vietnam has proved very ingenious and inventive. It is also generous and kind-hearted. But while you live in your adopted country, try to preserve in your mind an image of your lost country. We are convinced that the day will come when you will set foot on your motherland and experience the emotion that grips a person who comes back to the house where he was born.

You will discover those foggy mornings in Dalat, and those rainy afternoons in Saigon. Or walk along white and straight beaches, under an extraordinarily bright sky, as blue and clear as the sea. You will take time to drive along the Mandarin Route when the setting sun shines its last rays on tree tops on mountain slopes. And cross the Mekong River, standing on the foredeck of an old ferry boat and feeling the wind strike your face

while bringing the fragrance of ripe paddy from the nearby fields. You will then realize that the land of Vietnam will never leave you indifferent. Nor is it indifferent to you.

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