Chapter 7

Vietnam, 1700–1885

Disunity, Unity, and French Conquest

One dominant feature of the premodern history of Southeast Asia was the cultural and religious variety of its royal governments. Not surprisingly, the Vietnamese monarchy differed from the monarchies of Inwa and Ayutthaya. The imported political theories that Vietnamese rulers tried to apply in their country had originated in China, not India. The Vietnamese people's limited but significant sinicization had begun during the more than one thousand years that northern Vietnam had been a colony of the Chinese empire, before Vietnam became independent in the tenth century C.E. During those centuries, the ethical and political doctrines we call Confucianism, based on the teachings of the philosopher Confucius, had spread among Vietnamese scholars, some of whom—like Indians at twentieth-century Oxford or Cambridge—may have studied at schools in China.

Tensions in Vietnamese Politics

The Confucian ideal of the monarchy, domesticated in Vietnam above all by the country's single greatest architect of government, Le Thanh-tong (r. 1460–1497), pictured the monarch as a "son of Heaven" or sage who mediated between nature and humankind. As such, he supposedly governed by means of his moral virtue, in an ideally faction-free environment that fused the two processes of "administration" and "moral indoctrination" *(chinh giao)*. But few

flesh-and-blood rulers could live up to this ideal. Inevitably, divided authority was the norm in Confucian Asia. Regional warlords in China, shoguns in Japan, and *yangban* aristocrats in Korea all shared and contested their monarchies' power. In eighteenth-century Vietnam there was also a split between the ultimate embodiment of political legitimacy (the Le dynasty, 1427–1788) and actual power, vested in regional ruling families.

From 1528 to 1802, real political control in Vietnam was subdivided. The Trinh family lords *(chua)* governed the northern region of "Tonkin" (as Europeans knew it) from Thang Long, later Hanoi. The Nguyen family lords governed the southern region of "Cochinchina" (as Europeans called it) from a series of capitals that shifted eight times between 1558 and 1738 before a final one was chosen (Phu Xuan, later Hue). But the Le monarchs in the north, although relatively powerless, survived the fragmentation. The great counterweight of Confucian stress on the value of one civilizing political center, upheld by literati and reinforced by the memory of the Le emperors of the 1400s, ensured that Vietnam's political system remained dualistic until the 1700s. The north's Trinh lords merely supervised the Le imperial court's classical Six Ministries *(luc bo)* of government (civil appointments, taxes, the administration of schools and examinations, the armed forces, justice and punishments, and public works). In 1718 they created their own parallel six "duty groups" at the Trinh lord's residence. But they adapted (and degraded) the imperial bureaucratic structure imported from China in the 1400s without being able to create anything like an ideological or functional alternative to it, let alone displace the existing dynasty.

The long spell of coexistence between monarchs and regional lords was finally broken in the late 1700s only because economic growth undermined the capacity of the dualistic political system to control and tax its increasingly mobile population. The result was a new cycle of integration, in which the descendants of the south's Nguyen lords created a territorially enlarged Vietnamese polity, with themselves as emperors, at Hue in 1802.

The economic transformation between 1500 and 1800 was especially marked in the south. Before the 1700s the Nguyen lords had ruled the south through an elite of military officers, who helped them end the political life of the Hinduized Cham kingdom (in present-day Khanh Hoa and Binh Thuan provinces) by 1697. One of their more developed administrative agencies was the shipping affairs office, designed to tax overseas trade, which suggested their dependency on commerce as well as agriculture. Trade with Japan in the 1500s, based on the port of Hoi An (Faifo), had greatly expanded Vietnam's incorporation into a far-flung regional trading network. One Nguyen lord adopted a Japanese merchant as his son; another married his daughter to a Japanese trader. When the shoguns curtailed merchants' activities outside Japan in the 1600s, overseas Chinese merchants, married to Vietnamese wives who connected

them to the languages and resources of the Cochinchina interior, replaced the Japanese. The Nguyen lords appear to have seen foreign traders as being essentially stateless, rather than as bearing highly charged "national" identities; they discriminated among different Chinese regions, with their taxes favoring traders from Fujian and Siam over those from Guangdong.

By the middle of the 1700s, the South China Sea trade, which linked the Nguyen domain to places as far away as Shanghai and the Philippines, had created a wealthier and more egalitarian consumer society in southern Vietnam than had ever existed in the north. Two different regional standards of living—and economic psychologies—were now in place in Vietnam. These were to be magnified later, but not initiated, by French colonial (and American neocolonial) capitalism. Vietnamese men may have been changed less than women by the realm's economic growth. Army conscription for the Nguyen lords' civil wars with the north and the attractions of bureaucratic careers diverted many men away from commerce, so it was horseback-riding women traders who so astonished north Vietnamese observers when they came south to study the Cochinchina experience.

The problem was how to reconcile the pressures of an expanding commercial society with the ideal features of the Vietnamese political consolidation that had occurred in the 1400s, which had retained their historical persuasiveness even as Vietnamese society grew. The institutions of the Le Thanh-tong era remained the great prototypes of Vietnamese politics down to 1885. Under Le Thanh-tong, Vietnam had made a transition to a more bureaucratic, more intensely Confucian political system. Not only had the specialized Six Ministries of government, reflecting Chinese and Korean practices, become a permanent part of Vietnamese political life in 1471, but county magistrates—officials whose titles *(tri huyen)* literally suggested that they "knew their counties" through empirical investigation rather than through hereditary personal ties—had made their appearance (1460). They were an integral part of a Chinese-style provincial administration, which by 1490 had reengineered the Vietnamese landscape into provinces, prefectures, counties, and 6,851 administrative villages *(xa)*. Extending the principle of bureaucratic surveillance, Le Thanh-tong had prescribed the evaluation of all his officials for promotion or demotion every three years, striking at cryptoaristocratic officeholders who wanted to make hereditary claims to their positions. He had also insisted on the importance of recruiting his officials through public civil service examinations, which had further compromised aristocratic privileges.

Civil service examinations, modeled on China's, had been introduced into Vietnam as early as 1075 C.E., but they do not appear to have been widespread, or entirely Confucian, before the 1400s. The Le dynasty broadened the principle of holding lower civil service examinations in the provinces every three years; success in them led to higher examinations in the capital city, presided over by

the ruler himself, who became in effect the country's chief examiner. Students who passed the higher examinations were given welcome home parades in their villages, had their names engraved on stone monuments that can still be read, and could usually count on good government appointments. Even passing preliminary tests could gain students exemption from the labor service tax, as in the Nguyen examination rules of 1740.

To pass the examinations, students had to write essays about Confucian philosophy and "Northern" histories (the most famous histories of China became public administration guidebooks), write poems with standardized rhyme schemes, and even prepare policy notes for their rulers. Vietnamese elites often used borrowed Chinese institutions to assert themselves against China; in 1724, the Trinh lord of Tonkin ordered examination candidates to sketch a reply to officials in China's Yunnan province defending Vietnamese claims to certain border villages. Some villages set aside "studies fields" whose harvests paid for teachers and for the education of bright but poor village youths who hoped to transform themselves from "fishes" to "dragons" (mandarins who shared the ruler's power). The cost of a mandarin's education nonetheless remained high for most peasants.

In Confucian eyes the point of bureaucratic government was to avoid disorder by guaranteeing a certain minimal level of welfare to those most vulnerable. In 1460 Le Thanh-tong had decreed that all rich people who donated surplus unhusked rice to the government for redistribution to the poor would receive official titles as a reward. Like his other legacies, this principle of giving low and relatively harmless official titles to people who contributed grain for the poor degenerated in the succeeding centuries, ultimately endangering the meritocratic standards of the examinations. In the 1700s the Trinh regime sold government offices for cash, as it struggled to squeeze more out of its limited economic surplus in order to renew its long-standing war with the Nguyens. Bureaucratic personnel evaluations themselves were switched from every three years to every nine years after Le Thanh-tong died. By the eighteenth century they were virtually a dead letter.

Two kinds of tensions therefore influenced Vietnamese politics in the 1700s. One was political dualism: the tension between the Le emperors' theoretical legitimacy and the practical power of the regional lords. The other was generated by the struggle between the feudal principle of government, based on clientelism and personal loyalties, and the bureaucratic principle of government based on educational and administrative achievement. There was a reason why the ghosts of Le Thanh-tong and his court could not be banished. The scholar-official Phan Huy Chu (1782–1840), in the prodigious administrative history of Vietnam that he wrote between 1809 and 1819, argued that what had been important about Le Thanh-tong's reign was not so much the institutions it had created as the "rules" those institutions had implied. Such rules underwrote

"equitable conditions" in social life. Even monarchs had to conform to them; discoverable moral standards for tax rates and property distribution existed independently of rulers' whims, which governments could not "avoid." Phan's observation helps to explain why the government of Vietnam in the 1800s was as similar as it was to the Le dynasty model of 1497 even though society as a whole had changed and expanded. This was not "Oriental" inertia, as some Western colonial analysts supposed. The continuity reflected an effort to give politics a predictable framework with inherent notions of a public good. The long survival of Roman law, in different types of European societies over many centuries, offers a possible parallel.

Confucian ideology was the source of the "rules" of politics, although historians will always disagree about how deeply Confucian eighteenth-century Vietnamese society was. But the Vietnamese Confucian elite's relative lack of interest in the philological and metaphysical debates that so consumed their Chinese counterparts does not mean that they did not take the ideal of the Confucian "gentleman" seriously, even if few of them could fully exemplify the code of the "gentleman" as laid down by the preeminent philosopher Le Quy Don (1726–1784). Le Quy Don described the "gentleman" as someone whose serenity was strong enough to transcend poverty or loss of office, whose virtue impressed "court and countryside" alike, whose calligraphy was good enough to recapture the spiritual essence of ancient sages, and whose talents included both commanding armies and writing poetry. Even weak facsimiles of this sort of "gentleman" were stubborn enough to confound the French and American imperial proconsuls in the twentieth century who wanted their cooperation.

The basis of Confucian ethics in Vietnam was the "three bonds": the obedience of ministers to their rulers, of children to their parents, and of wives to their husbands. Society was properly a hierarchy. Daughters, wives, and younger brothers counted for less than sons, husbands, and older brothers. Rituals like ancestor worship, whose repeated performance was supposed to make people so self-conditioned to be good that they would not be tempted into wrongdoing, were crucial to maintaining Confucian ethics. Vietnamese worshiped their ancestors with incense, rice wine, betel, and prayers and obeisances on the anniversaries of their deaths and on other family occasions. The ancestral cult was designed to keep the family united as an eternal corporation. It supplied each family with a gallery of paragons from the past whose memories, kept in view by their tombs, might improve the behavior of the living.

The Le court reinforced the "three bonds" with a set of forty-seven rules for reforming and indoctrinating the people, published in 1663 and reissued in 1760. Local officials were supposed to expound them to "ignorant" villagers. Intended to be antidotes to the worst weaknesses in the Vietnamese practice of Confucian ethics, the rules significantly targeted younger brothers and wives. Younger brothers were enjoined to respect older brothers; even if they were

wealthier than their older brothers, they were not to presume to claim equal status with them and thereby violate the family age hierarchy. As for wives, they were in an awkward position in a patriarchal society in which brides not only married into their husbands' families but owed their husbands' parents greater ritual obligations than they owed their own. The Le monarchs enjoined wives to be obedient, to become chaste widows when their husbands died, and to cherish the children of their husbands' secondary wives (concubines) as if they were their own.

That was a large demand. The collision it set up between official ethics and private emotions was not confined to wives and younger brothers. Recurrent civil war also undermined Confucian conditioning. One edict that a northern Trinh lord issued in 1720, demanding the improvement of Vietnamese customs, suggested the extent to which Confucian ideals had to be re-created continually in the face of antagonistic pressures; it denounced such "ordinary" Tonkinese violations of Confucian punctilios as "incestuous" marriages between first cousins as well as commanding all villagers to stand up in the presence of officials and not ridicule them.

Among the educated elite there were also critics of Confucianism. The northern poet Ho Xuan Huong, who lived at the very end of the 1700s, was one of the most lively. Twice married to elite men as a secondary spouse, and discontented with Confucian values, Ho Xuan Huong wrote about sex, freely and wittily and bawdily. Among other things, she compared the life of a woman to the situation of a jackfruit on a tree (into which farmers drove wedges to test its ripeness) or to the plight of a hedge being butted by goats (male examination system students). But if Ho Xuan Huong was a feminist who used erotica as a weapon to put men in their place, she turned more sadly serious when she attacked concubinage as an institution, complaining that secondary wives were nothing but exploited "wageless maids." Vietnamese critics could write their subversive poetry not just in classical Chinese, Vietnam's language of public administration, but in a separate vernacular writing system called *nom*. It represented the non-Chinese words in the Vietnamese vocabulary and was sufficiently unstandardized to evade control by Vietnam's rulers. Mandarins pretended to find Ho Xuan Huong's poems embarrassing, but the poems survived, suggesting that she spoke for a significant side of Vietnamese life.

Beyond such criticism, Confucianism and classical Chinese institutions in Vietnam experienced the same encounters between totalism—the determination to enforce an imported creed and its institutional necessities in as pure a manner as possible—and relativism—the acceptance that loyalty to international creeds permitted their coexistence with long-standing local customs—as could be found elsewhere in Southeast Asia, for example, in the Islamic polities of Sumatra. Relativism triumphed with the greatest of all premodern Vietnamese law codes. Begun by Le Thanh-tong in 1483 and known conventionally by one

of his reign period names as the Hong Duc code, it was in effect until the end of the 1700s. Inspired by Chinese law codes, it nonetheless deviated from them by treating women more generously. The Vietnamese code allowed women to inherit their parents' property almost equally with their brothers and to own property after marriage, rather than insisting on the complete incorporation of the wife's property into the husband's estate. For a Confucian political order, these were substantial concessions. Unfortunately, the Nguyen court was to replace the Hong Duc code in 1815 with a new law code (commonly called the Gia-long code), more totalistic in its ambition to copy the latest Chinese codes, that imposed a purer form of legal patriarchalism on Vietnam.

The Rise and Fall of the Independent Nguyen Dynasty

MORE civil war in the 1700s ended Vietnam's system of multiple polities. It led to the formation of a united Vietnam in 1802—earlier than Germany or Italy was unified—which for the first time allowed one court to control both the Red River delta in the north and the Mekong River delta in the far south. The Vietnamese state of the twenty-first century is the beneficiary of this process. In the north the Le-Trinh regime committed a slow suicide by mobilizing large numbers of soldiers and then paying them by distributing village common lands to them. This policy of treating public lands as reserve sources of army finance deprived ordinary villagers of a source of poverty relief and touched off peasant rebellions. Famine and floods accompanied the north's renewed war against the south, which briefly succeeded in 1775. The agrarian misery was such that perhaps one out of every ten Tonkinese villages of the early 1700s disappeared; Tonkin's population, in so far as it is possible to calculate it, may have been slightly smaller in 1750 than it had been in 1550.

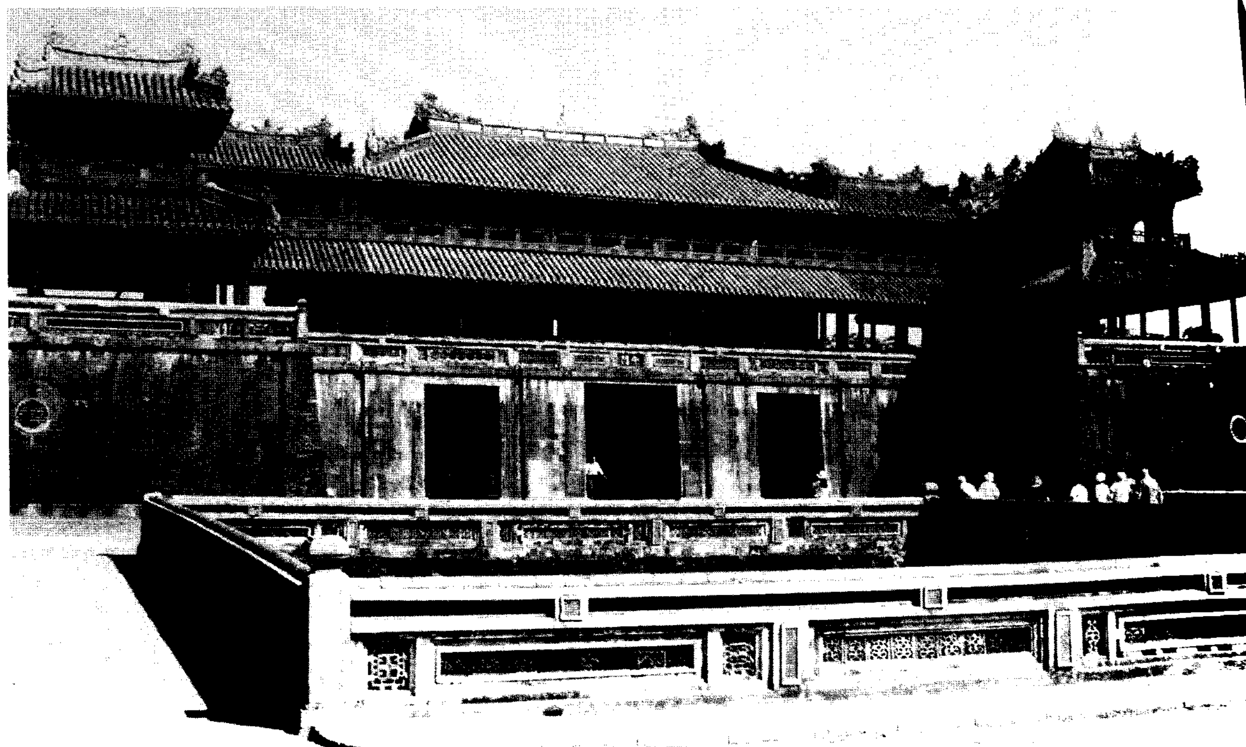
In the south the manpower shortage was so severe, despite famine-driven migrations from the north, that the Nguyen lords authorized the capture of ethnic minority children and their public sale as serfs for purposes of farm labor. A system of serfdom that had largely vanished from the north by the late 1400s thus made a belated reappearance in Cochinchina, even if ethnic Vietnamese were no longer enslaved. The Nguyen lords also lost control of their money supply, which had been based on Japanese copper until Tokugawa Japan withdrew from world trade. They turned to zinc coinage and tried to disguise its inferiority by giving it the appearance of famous Song dynasty coins from eleventh-century China. Finally, in a desperate bid to consolidate his government, Nguyen Phuc Khoat (r. 1738–1765) took the title of "king" of Cochinchina for the first time in 1744. He converted his household affairs offices into the more classically imposing Six Ministries and ordered the people of his realm to change to Chinese-style clothing (as prescribed in a sixteenth-century Chinese encyclopedia).

The Nguyen lords ultimately survived the civil wars of 1771–1802 not because of these measures but because of foreign help (from the Siamese and the French) and because they never completely lost access to the Mekong delta rice supply. Their defeat by the Trinh in the 1770s became meaningless when the Trinh lords and the Le emperors themselves were subsequently overwhelmed by a rebellion by the three "Tayson" brothers, known to us by the name of their hamlet in south-central Vietnam. Preaching the equality of rich and poor as they launched their uprising in 1771, the Tayson brothers were not—despite the myth attached to them by later nationalist historians—simple peasant rebels. They had some education, and they attracted some Confucian scholars as advisers. Nor were they purveyors of progress and freedom: they sacked such towns as Qui Nhon and Hoi An and massacred ethnic Chinese in Saigon in 1783. But Nguyen Hue, the most intelligent brother, was a brilliant army commander. He destroyed both the Le and Trinh dynastic houses, and proclaimed himself Quang-trung emperor, a "cotton clothes" commoner hero who would "help the world," in 1788. He then defeated the large army that the emperor of China, responding to all the turmoil, had sent into northern Vietnam against him. As a ruler, Quang-trung dreamed both of translating the Confucian classics into the vernacular *nom* script and of seizing the two southern Chinese provinces of Guangdong and Guangxi. But his death in 1792, when he was not yet forty years old, doomed the Taysons and allowed a great revival of Nguyen power in 1802, this time over all Vietnam.

The Nguyen dynasty (1802–1945) ruled less than six decades before it began to succumb to the piecemeal French colonial conquest of Vietnam (1859–1885). Yet its achievements were considerable. Abandoning Vietnam's old northern capital, the dynasty created at Hue, in central Vietnam, a new walled capital city complex that was a smaller, more floridly ornamented Southeast Asian copy of the Chinese capital at Beijing. It consisted of a series of palaces arranged on a north-south axis; a Beijing-like "Forbidden City" at the core for the emperor himself; and a "Meridian Gate" at which proclamations were read and prisoners of war presented. The Nguyen emperors also built Chinese-style imperial tomb complexes for themselves, outside Hue, with stone horses and elephants to guard them; through architecture, they aspired to become eternal moral paradigms for their kingdom after they died. Nor were Nguyen monuments only in stone. Lacking an archival tradition of their own comparable to that of the Le dynasty, the Nguyen court produced an enormous encyclopedic handbook to their own bureaucratic behavior, a "compendium" of Vietnamese "institutions and institutional cases" *(hoi dien su le)* that runs to fifteen volumes and almost eight thousand pages in its modern romanized reprint. For the first time in centuries, relatively greater political stability allowed Vietnam's population to grow significantly, from 5 million people at most in the early 1800s to 7 million people in the 1870s.

But hindsight tells us that the Nguyen rulers' administrative ambitions probably exceeded their resources. Their demographic base was limited; there were probably fewer people per square kilometer in the territorially enlarged Vietnam of 1820 than there had been in the smaller Le kingdom of the 1400s. Nor could the bitter spiritual legacy of three centuries of civil war be overcome quickly. The bureaucracy was riddled with tensions between southerners and northerners, reminding the emperor Minh-mang (r. 1820–1841) of the terrible administrative factionalism of Song dynasty China. The great scholar-official Nguyen Du (1765–1820) wrote a magnificent verse novel about a beautiful, melancholy heroine named Kieu who is forced to turn to prostitution to ransom her father from official thieves; Du may have seen himself as a "political Kieu," a northerner and Le dynasty loyalist compelled to serve the Nguyens in order to protect his family.

As recently as 1993, a prize-winning French novel about Vietnam, reflecting French missionary propaganda of the 1800s, characterized Minh-mang himself as a "Confucian of Chinese culture who closed the country to outside influences." This is nonsense. Minh-mang may well have been the most intelligent Vietnamese state-builder since 1497; he showed his interest in "outside influences" by sending envoys to Batavia and British India, and he hoped to use Vietnamese sugar exports to expand trade with the West. But Minh-mang



Gateway to the "Forbidden City": the Citadel, Hue.

Photo by N. G. Owen

feared the "heterodox" teachings of a globalizing Christianity, which he felt threatened Confucianism, and he executed French Catholic missionaries, whom he saw as colluding with Vietnamese rebels. The French government refused to negotiate with the diplomats he sent to Europe to discuss the missionaries' behavior.

Politically, Minh-mang was a centralizer. As he saw it, the decentralized administration of his predecessor (Gia-long, 1802–1820), in which Hue had shared power with overlords in Hanoi and Saigon, had perverted bureaucratic accountability to the point where "failures were seen as achievements and nothing was seen as something." Minh-mang restored the power of the central Six Ministries, ruled through civil and military bureaucracies divided into eighteen grades each, and tried to impose finite six-year terms of office on his officials. Civil service examinations were revived and made more resistant to intellectual subversion by examiners and students through the introduction of word limits to policy questions and answers. Minh-mang's conception of Vietnam's identity remained broadly similar to that of medieval rulers. He saw Vietnam as a "south" that opposed itself to the Chinese "north," but he also believed the Vietnamese had the right to call themselves "Han people"—proprietors of the heritage of the ancient Han empire of which they had once been part—when they pursued a Confucian civilizing mission (including the imposition of Sino-Vietnamese surnames) among Cambodians or other ethnic minorities. Yet even Minh-mang felt some need for what we would now call Southeast Asian solidarity. He urged the Siamese diplomats who came to his court in 1826 to support Myanmar in its war with the "Red Hairs" (the British).

But Vietnam's own independence eroded less than two decades after Minh-mang's death. The French navy seized the six provinces of Vietnam's far south and converted them into the colony of "Cochinchina" between 1859 and 1867. The Vietnamese court, under the far less competent leadership of the emperor Tu-duc (r. 1848–1883), was then forced to agree to the transformation of north and central Vietnam into French "protectorates," between 1873 and 1885, after appealing to China for help against the French. China, itself in decline, lost the Sino-French war (1884–1885) that resulted from Vietnam's appeal. The fiercely patriotic southern poet Nguyen Dinh Chieu (1822–1888) depicted the French invaders as barbarians "garbed in wool" who had wrecked Confucian ethics; another southern poet (Phan Van Tri, 1830–1910) saw the French takeover as an "opera" in which too many Vietnamese actors wore the white makeup of traitors.

French imperialism succeeded not just because it possessed the superior weaponry of an industrializing Europe, but because it exploited fatal social divisions in Vietnam. These were expressed both in peasant rebellions and in the conversions of hundreds of thousands of poor Vietnamese, especially in the north, to Catholic Christianity. The Nguyen court's prohibition and mistreatment of French missionaries had in fact provided the French government with

its major excuse for intervention in the first place. Some members of the Vietnamese elite had also become Catholics by this time. The most noteworthy of them, Nguyen Truong To (d. 1871), was a modernizing reformer who rather quixotically tried to combine Confucian loyalty to the Nguyen court with a Catholic defense of the (anti-Catholic) Tu-duc emperor as the representative of God on earth. To this he added an admiration for nineteenth-century Europe's rule of law and its independent judiciaries. The rich contradictions in To's thought failed to save the country's independence. Nonetheless they demonstrated the unheralded flexibility of Vietnamese political theory in the 1800s and anticipated Vietnamese anticolonial thinkers' worries, in the next century, about the legitimacy deficits of established Vietnamese institutions.

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Chapter 8

Cambodia, 1796–1884

Politics in a Tributary Kingdom

By the end of the eighteenth century, Cambodia had fallen from its days of glory almost a millennium before, when the great monuments of Angkor were built and Khmer kings presided over a realm that included all of Cambodia and much of what is now southern Vietnam, southern Laos, and eastern Thailand. Caught between the expanding powers of Siam and Vietnam, the kingdom had been reduced to the status of a tributary state, fought over by its neighbors.

Between Siam and Vietnam

In 1794 a young Cambodian prince named Eng traveled to Bangkok, where he was crowned by Siamese authorities and sent back to Cambodia to be king. For the next seventy years, Siam was either an active patron of the Cambodian court or was striving to regain that status, having been displaced by the recently consolidated Vietnamese empire to the east. Rivalries between the Siamese and Vietnamese royal houses, exacerbated by factional rivalries inside Cambodia itself, led to repeated invasions by Siamese forces and to a Vietnamese protectorate over the kingdom in the 1830s. In terms of its paternalism and assumed cultural superiority, this protectorate foreshadowed the later French protectorate and its "civilizing mission." For the first half of the nineteenth century, Cambodia was a battleground between its larger neighbors. In the process, it almost disappeared.

AFPFL became rampant, Nu resigned as prime minister in o pline on the party. When he returned to office in 1958, factio once more threatened political order, and in what amoun but name, the army under Ne Win took over the govern six months, which was eventually extended to a total of e taker Government" then held general elections.

U Nu's new Union Party won, and he was returned the concessions he had made during the campaign again unity. Nu antagonized religious minorities by passing a co ment establishing Buddhism as the state religion and then an by passing another guaranteeing freedom of religion. Whe intention to resign by 1964, his supporters began to fight Shan insurgency also broke out in the east of the count rumors of secessionist plans. To the army it appeared that back to the conflicts of 1958. Despite the harshness of its pre government had had some successes, and Ne Win and confident that they could rule more effectively than Nu. T a coup on 2 March 1962, imprisoned many civilian politi constitution, and set about reconstructing both state and so pices of an army-led Revolutionary Council. Burma's fi multiparty democracy, which had begun in 1921, was over

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Chapter 23

Vietnam, 1885–1975

Colonialism, Communism, and Wars

French colonialism divided Vietnam into three parts: Cochinchina (the far south), Annam (the central region), and Tonkin (the north). Cochinchina was a formal colony, ruled by a French governor at Saigon and by French laws. It was also the principal base of French capitalism in Vietnam. Annam and Tonkin were called "protectorates," separated from each other in 1898. They were governed by parallel administrations of French civil servants, who governed Europeans and the tiny number of Vietnamese who had become French citizens, and old-fashioned turbaned Vietnamese mandarins, who governed most Vietnamese.

But this political wonderland, bristling with administrative distinctions, was less complex than it looked. The north and center were really colonies too. A single French overlord, the governor-general of "French Indochina," dominated all three parts of conquered Vietnam, along with Cambodia and Laos, from his Hanoi palace. Under the most aggressive of them, Paul Doumer (1897–1902), a single general Indochina budget was established as well as the beginnings of a new universe of higher education that included an Indochinese school of medicine (1902), a school of arts and crafts (1902), and the French School of the Far East (École française d'Extrême-Orient, 1901), so important a pioneering venture in the study of Vietnamese culture that it was invited back to Hanoi after colonialism had ended.

French Colonial Strategies and the Modernization of Vietnamese Patriotisms

THE SIMPLE FACT was that French colonizers could not rule Vietnam without Vietnamese help. There were too few French to fill all the colony's administrative positions; at the time Doumer left office in 1902, there were a mere 3,778 European officials in Indochina. The colonizers therefore preserved the old Confucian mandarinate in the north and the center; the French even maintained the precolonial Confucian examinations, through which Vietnamese mandarins were recruited, until 1919, long after the equivalent Confucian examinations in China had been abolished as hopelessly opposed to modern thought (1905). The French also bet heavily on the preservation of the ancient Vietnamese monarchy in the Hue Forbidden City. As the author of a doctoral thesis about "Annamite Civilization and the French Protectorate," written for the Bordeaux University Faculty of Law in 1919, put it, the continued presence of a Vietnamese emperor was necessary to maintain among the natives "that sort of fear of superiors, that terror of one's master, which is in Annam the basis of public order." A series of youthful emperors served as French puppets until 1945, looking increasingly anachronistic and out of place in a rapidly changing Asia.

In effect, this was a strategy of Confucian colonialism. Outside Cochinchina the French tried to make the old Confucian reflexes of loyalty to the king, obedience to one's parents, and wifely submission to husbands work to support their superimposed authority, while they were simultaneously encouraging a brave new world of post-Confucian global capitalism to flourish in Saigon. This was a contradiction, but for a time it seemed that they might get away with it. Few Confucian intellectuals could imagine abolishing the principle of loyalty to a monarch; in 1900 the notion of a socialist dictatorship, such as was to be the basis of government all over Vietnam by 1975, seemed scarcely more intelligible than life on Mars. During the French conquest Confucian patriots who had hated the French had been able to invoke the Confucian principle that "the loyal minister does not serve two princes." In the 1880s such a principle had rallied them to the cause of a boy emperor, Ham-nghi, whose advisers had called for a general insurrection against the French invaders. Even after the French had captured Ham-nghi in 1888 and exiled him to Algeria, the "aid the king" *(can vuong)* resistance movement had continued in the countryside, drawing its supporters from village leaders and examination system students. But the introverted mixture of Confucian loyalism and xenophobia that the royalist resistance exhibited, as it made war on both Vietnamese Catholic villagers and French soldiers, could not embrace any modern conception of Vietnam as a nation-state in competition with other nation-states. Its spirit was one of change-resisting ethnocentrism more than change-accepting nationalism.

What wrecked Confucian colonialism, or the "association" of French colonial authority with Vietnam's Confucian monarchy and bureaucracy, was that the French could never get full control of the shifting concerns of the Confucian world. Confucianism was an international ideology, flourishing in China and Japan as well as in Vietnam. Just as influences from Cairo might stimulate colonialism-subverting renewals of Islamic thought in maritime Southeast Asia, influences from Beijing (the site of the 1898 Chinese reform movement, which tried to combine Confucian monarchism with constitutional government and a parliament) and Tokyo (where China's 1898 reformers fled after their efforts failed) excited Vietnamese intellectuals and inspired thoughts about how to revitalize Vietnam. Japan's victory over Czarist Russia in the 1904–1905 Russo-Japanese War, the first modern defeat of a Western power by an Asian one, only increased Japan's prestige. Vietnamese saw that a country with Confucian traditions could nonetheless achieve equality with the imperialist West if it modernized itself.

About 1905, therefore, anticolonial Vietnamese students began to travel to Japan to study in Japanese schools and acquire modern political and military training of the sort denied them in French Indochina. Such students might not speak Chinese or Japanese, but as products of a Confucian education based on classical Chinese texts, they could conduct silent "writing brush conversations" with mentors who shared the same classical written language. Such conversations cast a long shadow over Vietnam's future, because the Japanese elite at the time were busy inventing a systematic new vocabulary, based on classical inspirations, for talking about modern ideas. The Vietnamese pilgrims to Japan absorbed this vocabulary: the modern Vietnamese term for "society" *(xa hoi)*, for example, is derived from an early twentieth-century Japanese coinage adapted in turn from medieval Confucian philosophy. New concepts like this helped reformers to think of their compatriots as symbolically interacting with each other beyond kinship networks.

Phan Boi Chau (1867–1940) was probably the most important Vietnamese nationalist before 1930. Born into a Confucian scholar family, Phan embodied the transition from the old to the new. He had organized a royalist militia in 1885 and passed the old civil service examinations in 1900, but he then rejected French rule and came under the spell of the 1898 Chinese reformers; he moved to Japan to study with one of them, Liang Qichao (Liang Ch'i-ch'ao). Apart from new vocabulary, what Phan got from Liang and the other Chinese and Japanese thinkers he met was an interest in Social Darwinism, with its belief that the master principle of the universe was not harmony (as many Confucian thinkers hoped) but rather endless competitive struggle, in which the chief competitors were nation-states. Applying Social Darwinism to Southeast Asia, Phan wrote in "Letter Inscribed in Blood from Abroad" (1907) that Vietnam

was now as uncompetitive as the Cham kingdom that Vietnam had once conquered; it would disappear like Champa if it did not learn how to struggle against French control more effectively. In a 1908 polemical history of Vietnam, Phan further asserted that human history was a process of linear evolution, from being "animals" to being "civilized"; Vietnam was merely in the intermediate stage of beginning to civilize itself.

Japan's contribution to this moment of upheaval in the Vietnamese elite worldview weakened after 1907. The Japanese government, a colonial power in Taiwan (after 1895) and Korea (by 1910), began to see itself more as an imperialist colleague of the West than as the patron of colonized Asians like the Vietnamese. Vietnamese students were expelled from Japan or forced to hide by acquiring false Chinese identities. But by this time the writings of Phan Boi Chau had been smuggled back to Vietnam, where secret organizations of Phan's "Restoration" *(duy tan)* Society had been formed in the guise of hotels or business organizations.

This early phase of Vietnamese nationalism climaxed in Hanoi in 1907, with the opening there, sponsored by patriotic elite families, of the Dong Kinh (Tonkin) Free School, on the model of Tokyo's Keio School (later Keio University), founded in 1868 by the Japanese liberal reformer Fukuzawa Yukichi. The Hanoi imitation lasted less than a year before French authorities suppressed it. But in its brief life the Free School proposed a cultural revolution: the adoption of Western clothing, the abolition of the Confucian civil service examinations, the use of romanized Vietnamese words *(quoc ngu)* rather than cumbersome Chinese writing as an aid to greater mass literacy, and the study of the latest Western theories of nationalism and of the social contract. The school's geography teacher shocked his students by showing them the first modern map of Vietnam, with "the rivers and mountains of the ancestors" drawn on it, that they had ever seen.

But the Dong Kinh Free School had little impact on Vietnamese villagers. The major achievement of the first generation of Vietnamese nationalists was to discredit the old Confucian institutions, such as the monarchy and the examinations, that the French had been manipulating to maintain their rule. Another giant of early Vietnamese nationalism, Phan Chu Trinh (1871–1926), now advocated a republican presidency and a Western-style written constitution for Vietnam, in which (as he put it in a famous Saigon speech in 1925) the same laws would govern everybody "from presidents to peasants," rule of law would be the "brick road" that would lead to freedom, and the people would no longer be the passive "herd of goats" they had been under the emperors. Phan Chu Trinh's 1926 Saigon funeral provoked some of the earliest mass demonstrations of Vietnamese student nationalism.

The French began, grudgingly, to replace Vietnam's Confucian education, at least in the towns, with a more modern school system, in which French

cultural influences were brought to bear upon Vietnamese youth. But t
a dangerous option. Much French culture, to its credit, was unhelpful to t
poses of French colonialism. Voltaire's hostility to tyranny, Rousseau's
of popular sovereignty, and Victor Hugo's espousal of liberty and Paris w
insurrections could all work instead to encourage the appearance in Vietnam of that curious creature the Francophile anticolonialist. Vo Nguyen Giap, the Hanoi schoolteacher who became, in the 1940s, the military brain of the communist revolution, was just one example.

Modern nationalism has been said by Benedict Anderson to be the joint product of the erosion of more religiously imagined communities and the rise of printed vernacular newspapers; the ceremony of newspaper reading allegedly replaces that of prayers, and print capitalism standardizes both popular speech and people's images of the solidarity they share with other members of their political unit. Applied to Vietnam, this theory underestimates colonialism's obstacles and also the difficulty of subtracting religious instincts from self-sacrificial faith in the "ancestral" nation. Vietnam's first *quoc ngu* newspaper appeared in the south in 1865; by the 1930s Hanoi and Hue, as well as Saigon, had newspapers with circulations of up to 15,000 copies. But French authorities controlled newspapers through subsidies, and censored and suppressed anti-colonial messages. Of the roughly 10,000 *quoc ngu* books and pamphlets published in Vietnam between 1923 and 1944, very few treated politics or history, even if Vietnamese writers did become skilled at evading censors by slipping their revolutionary pleadings into women's cookbooks or school mathematics texts. The worst obstacle of all was rural illiteracy, which anticolonial politicians could not begin to cure before the 1940s.

Then there was the fact that some modernizations of Vietnamese patriotism, rather than substituting for religion, could take religious forms themselves. For many Vietnamese, the challenge of Western colonial rule called for a religious response, not one based on Rousseau or Marx; millenarian sects' conceptions of anticolonial resistance, based on hope for messiahs, could actually block the spread of revolutionary political parties' ambitions to expel the French by more painstakingly secular means. The two most important religious sects in the Vietnamese south in the 1920s and 1930s, where the French succeeded in confining them, were the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao Buddhism movements. Like Sarekat Islam in Java a few years earlier, both sects publicly claimed to want to rehabilitate traditional religious practices, a goal to which colonial rulers could hardly object.

The Cao Dai sect emerged in the 1920s as a coalition of spirit worship groups that engaged in fortune-telling seances. Cao Dai created its own miscellaneous pantheon of deities, which included the Chinese medieval poet Li Bo and Victor Hugo, as part of an effort to present itself as a new universal religion; its success in quickly attracting thousands of adherents allowed it to

acquire a territorial base in Tay Ninh province. There it proceeded to reproduce, in defiantly nativist terms, some of the structure and imagery of the Catholic Christianity associated with Vietnam's French invaders; a symbol (a heavenly eye) was adopted to compete with the Christian cross, and a hierarchy of cardinals and bishops emerged to compete with the Catholic clergy. Services at the Cao Dai cathedral in Tay Ninh were visually stunning. Cao Dai clergy wore tunics of three different colors to suggest the restored prestige and the unity within the sect of Vietnam's three precolonial creeds of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. Along with followers of Hoa Hao Buddhism, founded in 1939 by a charismatic faith healer, Huynh Phu So (1919–1947), Cao Dai sect members had an anticolonial bias. But they were too culturally conservative to ally themselves with communists, whose worldview—emphasizing secular struggle rather than cosmic harmony—was so different from their own.

Political Parties and the Communists' Triumph

WITH HIS wispy beard and rubber sandals, Ho Chi Minh (1890–1969)—to use the most famous of his estimated seventy-six pseudonyms—is one of modern Southeast Asia's most remarkable political figures. Even if he did receive great help from his enemies, his political achievement was amazing. In 1925, as an impoverished exile living in the humid back streets of Guangzhou (Canton), Ho created a Vietnamese Communist Party of all of nine people; four decades later, he was the leader of a communist government in Hanoi that had evicted the French from Vietnam and was preparing to defeat the United States.

Ho, like numerous other Vietnamese communists, was descended from the Confucian schoolteaching intelligentsia of northern Vietnamese villages. He learned about Marxism and Leninism in France. An obscure Paris photo shop worker, Ho made his debut in world politics in 1919 by petitioning the Allied powers at the Versailles peace conference to grant Vietnam autonomy. They ignored him. This left him open to the 1920 appeal of Lenin, the leader of the newly created Soviet Union, for an alliance between the European "communist proletariat" and the Asian "revolutionary peasant movement" directed against the established Western powers. Ho converted to communism and became an international communist missionary, working as an agent of the "Comintern" (Third Communist International), the global organization sponsored by Moscow that was supposed to subvert capitalism and spread revolution.

One great advantage of this Comintern-sponsored international community of revolutionary exiles, to which Ho now belonged, was that it allowed the separation of politics from kinship ties more rapidly than would have been possible in Vietnam itself. This facilitated the growth of new loyalties to causes that went beyond family and regional interests. Creating a Vietnamese "revolutionary youth" association in Guangzhou in 1925, Ho even urged all its members

to adopt the same surname (Ly) as a symbol of the new, extrafamilial solidarity they needed to make a revolution. The failure of the Chinese communists' Guangzhou commune in 1927 drove Ho out of that city. Regrouping his forces in the British colony of Hong Kong, Ho formed the Indochina Communist Party (ICP) there in 1930. Ho himself carefully remained outside French Indochina, and the clutches of the French colonial police, from 1911 to 1941.

Photo by N. G. Owen

New religions: the Cao Dai Great Temple, Tay Ninh.

A communist revolution in Vietnam was still hardly inevitable. Other political parties challenged the communists. One was the Vietnamese Nationalist Party (VNQDD), named after the Chinese Nationalist Party (Guomindang) and founded in Hanoi in December 1927, shortly after its namesake had seized power in China. The VNQDD's leaders saw themselves as the Vietnamese disciples of the Chinese revolutionary Sun Yat-sen. They wanted to preach in Vietnam what Sun had called his "three people's principles": nationalism, democracy, and a modest socialism that limited rural landlordism. They also hoped for aid from the new Chinese Nationalist government in the struggle they planned against the French.

Unfortunately for them, the Chinese Nationalists were too preoccupied with Japanese pressures and Chinese warlords to give their young Vietnamese allies support. Nor was the Guomindang necessarily a suitable model for Vietnamese nationalists in a colony that lacked any real native equivalent of the treaty port merchant class who helped to finance the Chinese party. Hoping that theatrical acts of bravery would arouse the political consciousness of the Vietnamese, in February 1930 the VNQDD heroically fomented an armed uprising against French rule in the northern town of Yen Bai. The uprising was hopeless. In the repression that followed, the French guillotined many VNQDD leaders, including the party's head, Nguyen Thai Hoc (1901–1930).

If this repression bought French colonialism more time in Vietnam, it also helped to ensure that Vietnamese anticolonial politics would have a different

future from that of anticolonialism in the Netherlands Indies. In the Indies the communists had launched a premature uprising (1926–1927) the failure of which led to their temporary eclipse; noncommunist nationalists like Sukarno took advantage of this to replace them. In Vietnam it was the other way around: Ho Chi Minh was the beneficiary of the noncommunist revolutionaries' rashness.

Nor was the VNQDD defeat at Yen Bai Ho's only asset. The international communist movement's support was indispensable to the Vietnamese communists in providing their cadres with training in sanctuaries outside Vietnam (Moscow, south China, even northeast Siam), beyond the reach of the French police. The Comintern also provided its Vietnamese disciples with a useful two-stages revolutionary strategy in which full communism, for which there was little support in Vietnam, was postponed to the second stage and a more popular patriotic mobilization for independence became the focus of the first stage. The organizational techniques the Comintern taught, featuring secrecy and a cellular party structure, worked even inside Indochina's prisons, which were full of opportunities for collusive fraternization between prisoners and guards, or between Comintern-trained Marxist teachers and more "directionless" common criminals. Then and later, prison friendships bound communist leaders to each other.

Finally, there was the communists' success in exploiting the Vietnamese rural crisis. With China and Korea, Vietnam shared a long tradition of political theory that assumed that landownership was a moral principle, not just an economic fact; the good ruler, as custodian of the land, supposedly ensured that everyone enjoyed its yields. Such expectations also became embedded in the popular culture, if less so in the south. Vietnam's oldest regions were a maze of collectively owned welfare lands, including temple lands, lands for sustaining orphans and the familyless, lands for the support of teachers and poor students, and even lands "for feasting elders." Vietnam's most ambitious rulers, such as Ho Quy Ly in 1397 and Minh-mang in 1839, had sponsored major land reforms to limit private landholding. Under French colonialism, population growth, helped by the effect of vaccinations and inoculations on the mortality rate, worsened class exploitation of the kind emperors had feared. Landlords could easily replace their tenant farmers, from whom they demanded very high yearly rents, with the growing numbers of landless peasants who still needed fields to work; they had little incentive to behave well.

As early as 1927, in a tract about the "revolutionary road" printed in China, Ho Chi Minh had condemned the colonial economy in the south for exporting rice at a time when population growth and landlessness threatened many Vietnamese with famine. During the global depression, the ICP made its first violent bid for power (1930–1931): the creation of rural "soviets" (self-governing councils) in the north-central provinces of Nghe An and Ha Tinh. The uprising was crushed, but thousands of villagers, despite their puzzlement at the soviets'

campaign to commemorate European communist martyrs like Rosa Luxemburg, eagerly joined party-organized peasant associations and engaged in "rice struggles" to confiscate landlords' estates.

Ho nonetheless told the Comintern in 1935 that few ICP members understood what a "bourgeois democratic revolution" was; their literacy was so inadequate that written indoctrination had to be kept simple. The ICP were not a serious threat to French colonialism in Vietnam before World War II. The war and the Japanese army's occupation of Vietnam (1941–1945) changed everything. In addition to undermining the reputation of French military power in Vietnamese eyes, the invasion gave the communists a matchless opportunity to blend their complex doctrines with the more easily understood patriotic cause of resisting both the French and the Japanese.

Ho returned to Vietnam in 1941, making his headquarters in Cao Bang, a northern border province. In May 1941 the ICP central committee, under Ho's guidance, founded the Vietnamese Independence Solidarity League, better known as the Viet Minh. The Viet Minh was a "front" organization, designed to accommodate anticolonial Vietnamese who had no real interest in the smaller ICP's belief in class warfare. The front also hoped to attract assistance for fighting Japan from the British, the Americans, the Chinese Nationalists, and even European communists serving in the French Foreign Legion in Indochina. In this they succeeded, up to a point: the U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS), forerunner of the CIA, wanted Ho's cooperation in rescuing American pilots shot down over northern Vietnam. To get it, the Americans aided the Viet Minh, trained its technicians, and tried to help Ho frame a U.S.-style declaration of independence for Vietnam. Ho seemed "an awfully sweet guy," one of his American advisers ruefully recalled later.

On 9 March 1945 the Japanese armed forces in Indochina, who had tolerated the existence of an increasingly feeble French administration since 1941, suddenly overthrew French colonialism. The last emperor at Hue, Bao-dai, signed a proclamation, under Japanese guidance, that reclaimed Vietnam's independence but accepted Vietnamese participation in Japan's Greater East Asian empire. But the Viet Minh, which had created its own tiny "Liberation Army" in the hill country in December 1944, led by Vo Nguyen Giap, was the real beneficiary of the Japanese destruction of French power.

The terrifying famine that ravaged northern Vietnam from the end of 1944 also transformed Vietnamese politics. Perhaps as many as one million Vietnamese starved to death; Tonkinese rivers were full of corpses. Giap's new army now entered northern villages, seized the granaries that were storing rice for landlords or for the Japanese army, and distributed their rice to hungry villagers. The Viet Minh combined the slogans "national independence" and "destroy the granaries and resolve the famine," under the inspiration of the 1917 Russian Bolshevik slogan "peace, bread, and land." The famine thus enabled them to

overcome conservative village notables who had previously opposed them. Village chiefs were compelled to destroy their own official seals; Viet Minh "people's committees" replaced them. By the time Japan surrendered to the Allied powers in August 1945, the Viet Minh were able to mobilize thousands of peasants, armed with sticks, knives, and a few rifles, to invade the major Vietnamese cities and towns.

Bao-dai, the religious sects, and the other political parties lacked enough military resources of their own to resist the Viet Minh takeover. ICP propagandists hailed it as the "August Revolution." Bao-dai abdicated his throne when the Viet Minh demanded it, seemingly accepting their legitimacy as Vietnam's rulers. Ho announced the birth of a communist-run Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in Hanoi in September 1945, with himself as president, citing the U.S. Declaration of Independence and the French Revolution's Declaration of the Rights of Man as he did so. But a Chinese invasion of the north in the fall of 1945, theoretically to exercise Nationalist China's mandate as an allied power to receive Japan's surrender, endangered the DRV. Ho pretended to dissolve the ICP; the communist party went underground for six years, publicly reemerging under a different name in 1951.

The French and American Wars, 1946–1975

AIDED BY the British, the French army had reentered southern Vietnam in late 1945 but lacked the power to reconquer the south's countryside, to which the communists withdrew. To remove Chinese invaders from the north, Ho daringly invited French soldiers to return there as well. In March 1946 France recognized the DRV as a free state and negotiated the withdrawal of the Chinese army, surrendering French colonial concessions in China itself to obtain this; in return Ho's government accepted membership in a proposed French Union (a diluted version of the old French empire). But the French now dreamed of using the south as the basis of a French-controlled Indochinese Federation that would preserve their presence except in the north. Ho tried to flatter the French into peaceful decolonization. As president of the DRV, he visited France in 1946 to explain that Cochinchina was as much a part of Vietnam as Brittany was a part of France. But the militarists in charge of the French colonial regime resisted setting a timetable for their departure. They thus won the opportunity to perish in a revolutionary war that they would never really understand. The war between the Viet Minh and the French broke out at the end of 1946 and lasted until 1954.

As explained by Giap, the Vietnamese communists' military thought included such principles as the value of continuous attack (because attacking deepened people's political consciousness, and stationary defense did not); learning how to use small resources, cleverly deployed, to defeat larger resources

not so wisely managed; the importance of surprise; the flexible use of different force types, ranging from a main army equipped with modern weapons to less well-armed guerrillas; and, most important of all, the total involvement of the population, old and young, male and female, in fighting the enemy. The most proudly professional French (and later American) generals, unaccustomed to a world in which military actions were planned for political ends or in which soldiers and civilians were not differentiated, found Giap's approach baffling. To recruit popular support, the Viet Minh redistributed the lands of French owners and "Vietnamese traitors" to landless peasants and launched a mass literacy campaign. Giap's army grew from several thousand soldiers in 1945 to more than 200,000 by 1950, in addition to many more local guerrillas and armed civilians; communist party membership itself grew from 20,000 in 1946 to 700,000 by 1954.

This popular mobilization was a real revolution, more so than its shallower 1945 namesake. Combined with the victory of Mao Zedong's communists in China in 1949, which gave the Viet Minh a powerful ally, it spelled the doom of French colonialism. Giap's military humiliation of the French in 1954 at the battle of Dienbienphu, on Vietnam's northwest frontier—the worst defeat any Western colonial power suffered at the hands of an Asian people it had once ruled—nonetheless astonished world opinion. A Geneva peace conference, opening the day after the fall of Dienbienphu, required a final French withdrawal from Indochina. But the 1954 Geneva Agreement also required the Vietnamese communist regime at Hanoi to coexist for two years with an anticommunist government, based in Saigon, which the French had fabricated in the last years of the war. This Saigon regime (and its overseas supporters) controlled the half of the country south of the seventeenth parallel. Nationwide reunification elections, which the communists anticipated winning, were supposed to be held in 1956. But the new "Republic of Vietnam," now under American patronage, refused to sign the Geneva Agreement. The elections were never held.

The reasons for the disastrous American intervention in Vietnam, which led to another two decades of slaughter, belong more to U.S. history than to Vietnam's. Briefly put, American governments during the global Cold War were animated by a rigid anticommunism that took the form, in 1954, of a deep fear of Mao's China, whose huge armies had recently confronted the United States and its allies in the Korean War (1950–1953). Washington regarded the Vietnamese communists as submissive underlings of the Chinese ones; South Vietnam was a "domino"—in the words of President Eisenhower (served 1953–1961)—whose fall to communism would lead to the collapse of Southeast Asia's other domino-like noncommunist governments. The paradox that China had been Vietnam's chief enemy over the centuries, even while it supplied the Vietnamese with cultural and political inspirations, was not appreciated by Washington

policy-makers, who had little knowledge of Vietnamese history and even less interest in the Vietnamese as people.

Ironically, China restrained the Hanoi communists between 1954 and 1959. They did not resume what they regarded as their anticolonial war in the south until the decade's end. In 1960 the southern branch of the Viet Minh was resurrected, in the form of a patriotic coalition called the National Liberation Front (NLF), known to its enemies as the Viet Cong (an abbreviation of the terms for Vietnamese Communists), fighting a skillful guerrilla war and pursuing in the countryside tax and property distribution policies that favored the poor. By 1962 the NLF controlled or influenced—by U.S. estimates at the time—two-thirds of the south's villages. President Lyndon Johnson responded by increasing the number of American military advisers in Vietnam, then contriving, in 1964, to get Congress to pass the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, which authorized him to use "all necessary measures" in Indochina. The United States began to bomb the north systematically in 1965. Combat units were also sent to South Vietnam, the beginnings of an overt military intervention that became, by 1969, an American conscript army of 540,000 men there.

More U.S. bombing in the south, combined with ground warfare, drove much of the south's rural population into the cities as refugees, succeeding by sheer firepower in damaging the political connection between the NLF and the peasantry. In response, Giap's northern army began to come south, eventually overwhelming the previously largely southern NLF membership. In 1968 the communists launched a surprise attack—known as the Tet (lunar new year) Offensive—on the south's cities. The initial success of the offensive, gruesomely televised in millions of American living rooms, showed that there was little "light at the end of the tunnel" for this supposedly "limited" American war in Asia. But the offensive also disappointed Hanoi by failing to trigger pro-communist uprisings or mass desertions by the south's army comparable to Nationalist army desertions during the Chinese civil war. Both sides therefore agreed to peace talks in Paris, which were to last for five years (1968–1973). These eventually led to a truce and to the withdrawal of American forces from Vietnam. Left to do its own fighting, in 1975 South Vietnam disintegrated during a new communist offensive and was then reunited with the north as one communist republic.

Tragically, this had also been a civil war, as the large exodus of refugees from the south after the communist victory in 1975 showed. What happened off the battlefields during the war was as important as what happened on them. Non-communist South Vietnam's disappearance in 1975 did not just mark the end of Western colonialism; it also marked the end of a project to create a multi-party democracy in Vietnam. In 1956 the U.S. National Security Council had declared that American policy in the south must be to assist "Free Vietnam" to establish a constitutional democracy strong enough to be an attractive contrast

to the communist north. In 1966, at a meeting with South Vietnam's leaders in Honolulu, President Johnson imperiously demanded that they be able to answer the questions "How have you built democracy in the rural areas? How much have you built, when and where? Give us dates, times, numbers." Johnson warned them to distinguish between promises and results or, in his language, between "high-sounding words" and "coonskins on the wall." To some degree Washington saw itself as operating in a historically virgin environment. One eminent American political scientist who was involved in this "political development" effort complained in 1968 that the main trouble with South Vietnam was that it had no organized political system at all.

The south did have a political system, but it was one in which religious sectarianism overshadowed political behavior. The Saigon rulers whom the Americans bankrolled and managed between 1954 and 1975, such as presidents Ngo Dinh Diem (1954–1963) and Nguyen Van Thieu (1967–1975), were either devoutly and ostentatiously Catholic themselves, like Diem, or depended heavily, like General Thieu (himself a Catholic convert) on the support of northern Catholics who had fled south. This was far too narrow a political base for anything like a democratic government, because most Vietnamese were still, at least residually, Buddhists.

One famous group of South Vietnamese Buddhists, linked to the An Quang temple in Saigon, responded by calling the war a battle between the "advance patrols" of "red imperialism" (Hanoi) and "white imperialism" (the Americans); Buddhists should shun both imperialisms, neither of which had mass support. Buddhist publishers issued books, like Thich Thanh Tu's 1966 treatise *Buddhism in the Life Pulse of the National People,* asserting that Vietnamese civilization itself had been created, back in the eleventh century, by great Buddhist monks like Van Hanh. The implication was that Catholic Christianity, supported by French and now American colonialists, was inorganic and antinational. Not only had French colonialism been responsible for encouraging this religious sectarianism; it had also been responsible, by its police terrorism, for generating habits of secretiveness even among noncommunist Vietnamese political parties. It was thus difficult for them to mobilize publicly large numbers of activists, even if they could rise above religious feuding. The result was fragmentation. In the early 1970s, shortly before they were repressed, South Vietnam had twenty-four political parties.

Diem hardly even paid lip service to the American hope for "constitutional democracy" in Saigon. He abolished village councils, tried to relocate grumbling peasants into large fortified villages ("strategic hamlets"), and arbitrarily arrested thousands of political prisoners, many of whom were not even communists. Diem's brother, a Catholic archbishop, publicly prophesied the end of Vietnamese Buddhism as a living religion; Diem's inept police raids on Buddhist temples in 1963, which led to monks burning themselves to death in the streets

in protest, tried to further the prophecy and ended the Americans' romance with him.

Rebellious army officers, with tacit approval from American officials, then overthrew Diem and murdered him in November 1963. For a time between 1964 and 1972, the south held real elections for National Assembly seats, in which members of the urban middle class (doctors, engineers, lawyers, professors, pharmacists) participated and experimented with coalition-building skills. The coalitions took the form of slates of allied candidates with their own pictorial symbols: lotuses, rice flowers, roosters, incense burners. Unfortunately the "khaki party" *(dang Ka Ki)*, as the army came to be known, grew faster than they did, usurping civil functions and—with its careers for young men and its easy access to surplus American military hardware—making all other prospective sources of political power look irrelevant.

Finally, in 1973, President Thieu circumscribed the other political parties and switched to the model of his northern communist enemies. He created his own "Democratic Party" in which civil servants were forced to enroll; it had a Leninist-style party central committee and cadre training schools (at Vung Tau and elsewhere) for specialists in building "new life hamlets" named after medieval Vietnamese heroes. The problem with Thieu's imitative authoritarianism was that it lacked the mass support its northern adversaries in Hanoi commanded. Its hollowness meant that it had to be sustained by corruption, including the outright sale of government positions as province or district chiefs. This house of cards collapsed in 1975, yet it is understandable that since then Vietnamese refugee communities around the world have preserved a mournful remembrance of the old struggle for political freedom in the south in the late 1960s and early 1970s, or at least a sense that a historic opportunity had been missed. Equally important was their justifiable nostalgia for a South Vietnam that was also the home of a remarkably free literary culture, many of whose members fled abroad in 1975. Three women won its top literary prizes in 1970 alone, indicating something of the energies of self-emancipation that were stirring there before northern tanks rolled into Saigon.

The communist north had begun the war with the Americans as a "nervous society," the nervousness being generated by revolutionary strategies borrowed from Mao's China. The keystone of Mao's thought was the belief that purified human willpower could create a communist revolution even where the orthodox Marxist requirements for one—capitalism and an industrial working class—did not exist. But this willpower could only be purified, Mao and pro-Mao Vietnamese leaders like Truong Chinh claimed, through bullying thought reform campaigns directed against dissident intellectuals and party cadres, and a more general populist disparagement of experts and bureaucrats. In the 1950s the DRV's land reform campaign, based on Maoist stereotypes of village social classes, led to violence and to Ho Chi Minh's public denunciation of "barbaric"

cadre behavior. In the early 1960s northern peasants lost their lands, being forced into agricultural cooperatives in which most land was publicly owned. Income depended on the work points party cadres awarded to each farmer, and inefficient "small producer" mentalities were supposedly eliminated.

In the end the north won the war only by abandoning Maoism and relaxing control of the land. Between 1964 and 1973 collectivized farmland actually shrank; in 1975 most cooperatives remained smaller than traditional villages, unlike the huge communes in Mao's China. The north also fought the war by means of aid from the USSR and China, which included redirected Canadian and Australian wheat imports; by the theft and domestication of the "miracle rice" crops the Americans had introduced in the south; and by a traditionalistic mass patriotism (unlike Maoist attacks on tradition in China), which American bombing only intensified. In 1967 Hanoi even approved the continued dual use of the modern solar and the premodern lunar calendar, because the latter defined traditional festivals and ritual remembrances of ancient Vietnamese heroes who had fought foreign (Chinese) invaders. Magazines celebrated the existence of an eternal Vietnamese "soul" that knew how to reconcile the use of the "sword" of struggle with the "guitar" of poetic feeling. But even here thoughtful Vietnamese Marxists had misgivings. The veteran writer and government minister Tran Huy Lieu warned on his deathbed (1969) that Hanoi's wartime promotion of Vietnamese national heroism must not degenerate into racialism or a "conservative" worship of village communitarianism. Even as the American bombs fell, the tradition of the insider critic remained intact.

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Chapter 34

Vietnam after 1975

From Collectivism to Market Leninism

AT FIRST GLANCE the regime that the Vietnamese communists created at Hanoi, in the image of the far bigger Soviet Union of Lenin and Stalin, represented more of a break with its national past than that of any other major post-colonial Southeast Asian state. Thailand kept its monarchy and Malaysia its sultans, and even Cambodia retrieved its kingship in the 1990s. Modern Indonesia's continuities with its old Dutch colonial bureaucratic traditions have been frequently noted, and the Philippines has preserved political and judicial institutions bequeathed it by the Americans. Even the Myanmar military dictatorship of the 1990s used a body of binding laws a significant (if minor) percentage of which were inherited from the British colonial administration. No such continuities were evident in the regime created incrementally at Hanoi from 1945 on.

The Crisis of the Party State at the Century's End

AS IN other communist party states, the Vietnamese party resembled a paramilitary formation, with a general staff and mass organizations (youth leagues, labor unions, women's federations, professional associations) through which it attempted to dominate its society. The party's own central committee (with 150 members in 2001) supposedly mobilized members, through periodic meetings and congresses, to discuss party policies. But discussion had to be coupled with

obedience to party leaders' decisions, following a pseudodemocratic formula known as "democratic centralism" that Lenin had first used in 1906. In reality the party and the country were ruled by a tiny "standing committee" of the party central committee's own smaller political bureau (or, in Leninist shorthand, "politburo"). This oligarchy of party leaders, headed by the party's general secretary, then tried to command the separate but subordinate hierarchy of the government, headed by a premier or council of ministers. The effectiveness of this command was qualified by the fact that the government apparatus, reflecting its original total planning responsibility for the country's economy, became increasingly bloated. North Vietnam, in 1960, had thirty-one government ministries or similar bodies; by 1986 the communist government of all Vietnam had doubled this number to sixty. The government was supposedly accountable to an elected National Assembly; party liberals hoped that in time this assembly might become an outpost of real democracy in Vietnam. The formerly Maoist party elder Truong Chinh published a large book on the "problems of the Vietnamese socialist state" in 1985 in which he complained that the party had never been able to "systematize" its own political structures.

Because of its lack of "systematization," the real political life of the Vietnamese party state after 1975 was often at considerable variance with its forms. Patron-client ties between senior and junior leaders—sometimes formalized in Western social science jargon as "symbiotic clientelism" or "Leninist patrimonialism"—pervaded the policy-making environment. These ties mediated the tensions within the oligarchy about just how much the party state should interfere in Vietnamese economic life. Under the long and stagnant reign of party general secretary Le Duan (from 1956 to 1986), the politburo was a theater of nepotism. Le Duan's reign also saw the marginalization of some of the creative people the aging party elite still possessed, most notably Vo Nguyen Giap, the party's military hero, evicted from the politburo in 1982. (The victor of Dienbienphu was sidelined as head of the state family planning commission, prompting jokes in Hanoi streets about "field marshals who fit IUDs.")

With the introduction of the reforms in the 1980s known as "renovation" *(doi moi)*, the party state tried to save itself by shifting to a less centrally planned, more market-based economy, seeking increased involvement with the procedures and institutions of global capitalism. In this era a series of party general secretaries came and went: Nguyen Van Linh in 1986, Do Muoi in 1991, General Le Kha Phieu in 1997, and Nong Duc Manh (the reputed unacknowledged son of Ho Chi Minh) in 2001. But none of these leaders would tolerate the emergence of competitive rival political parties. Opposition groups within the communist party itself, such as the Club of Former Resistance Fighters in 1987 (veterans of the National Liberation Front, or NLF, based in Ho Chi Minh City, who wanted Vietnamese government leaders to be chosen by secret ballot), were suppressed.

That opposition groups could germinate at all inside such a small and socially unrepresentative communist party showed how serious Vietnam's economic and political crisis was. In 1997, more than two decades after the war with the Americans ended, the party's total membership (2.1 million) amounted to slightly less than 3 percent of Vietnam's population. This contrasted with the 5 percent of the Chinese people who were members of the Chinese Communist Party and the even higher percentages of the population enrolled in some Eastern European communist parties before their regimes foundered in 1989. The average age of Vietnamese party members had actually increased between 1976 (38.6 years) and 1995 (43.6 years) despite the overall youth of Vietnam's population. Over one-quarter of the party's members were retired officials or cadres; fewer than one-tenth of its members were workers, mocking its Leninist claims to be the vanguard of the working class. The party also remained stronger in the north than in the south.

The party's lack of representativeness, vividly exposed in the gap between its patriarchal managerialism (in 1995 only 16.9 percent of its members were female) and Vietnam's considerable female work force, aroused complaints within the party establishment itself. In 1969, during the American war, 32 percent of the members of north Vietnam's village and ward people's committees had been women; by 1982 this statistic (for the whole of Vietnam) had shrunk to less than 6 percent. The party's difficulties in attracting members among Vietnam's ethnic minorities were even worse. Among some important minorities in the northern hill country, like the Hmong (whose numbers more than doubled between 1960 and 1989), party membership was less than 1 percent of the population in 1990. The party's lack of appeal among the minorities was underlined by the conversion—by clandestine missionaries and short-wave radio broadcasts from the Philippines—of tens of thousands of minority villagers in northern provinces like Lao Cai to Protestant Christianity. This trend could only remind historically conscious communist leaders of the way Catholic missionaries in the early 1800s had lured large numbers of poor people away from allegiance to Vietnam's equally elitist Confucian bureaucracy.

Corruption inside the party reinforced the decline of its political magnetism. Duong Thu Huong, herself the daughter of a party cadre, published a 1988 novel *Paradise of the Blind,* which recounted the degeneration of an incorruptible party executive into the agent of a black market network among Vietnamese expatriates in the Soviet Union. Her novel sold tens of thousands of copies before it was suppressed and she was expelled from the party. Higher up in the party, in the politburo itself, the liberal Tran Xuan Bach suggested to a Hanoi congress of Soviet bloc social scientists in 1988 that the social sciences had the tasks in Vietnam of creating full consciousness of the power of democratic freedom in each individual and of destroying the "bureaucratism" that had robbed socialism of its "prestige." Shortly after Bach expressed this mandarin-like hope

that the intellectual elite's social sciences could substitute for democratic elections as a force for making party rule more accountable, he too was expelled from both the politburo and the central committee.

The Vietnamese party state nonetheless survived the meltdown of Marxist-Leninist regimes in Europe, because, unlike them (but like its Chinese counterpart), it was not facing strong ethnic nationalism or a large, highly educated, critical white-collar class. But its survival still raised big questions. Was it true (as some scholars argued) that the peculiar political structures generated by Marxism-Leninism unintentionally reinforced traditional elements in the political culture such as clientelism in response to pressures created by such regimes? And if it was true that the voluntary "detotalization" of a Leninist state like Vietnam had no successful historical precedents, were Vietnam's post-1986 reforms to be caught in a standstill? The purpose of the reforms was to restrict arbitrary state power over the economy. Yet the necessary agent of the reforms was the state itself. The postwar world's two successful examples of sudden transitions from planned to less planned economies, West Germany and Japan, had required foreign military occupations to make them work.

The Postwar Collapse of the Collectivist Dream

In 1975 Vietnam's communist oligarchs, giving themselves high marks for their victory over the Americans, resolved to create a full communist order in Vietnam as quickly as possible. That meant a totally planned ideal polity in which nature, history, geography, and human psychology would all be remade in the spirit of a military campaign. The publication of a new Vietnamese translation of Goethe's *Faust* in Hanoi in 1977 might have been an omen. The oligarchs were not impressed by the increasingly successful capitalism of Japan and of their Southeast Asian neighbors. They studied Southeast Asia's ethnic Chinese business people aloofly, reading polemical Russian interpretations of them as the "tools" of China.

By 1976 the oligarchs had renamed their state the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. They centralized power over the south from Hanoi rather than considering any kind of federalism, and they even changed the name of Saigon to Ho Chi Minh City. In September 1975 money-changing tables, protected by soldiers, had been set up in the south's cities and villages to impose socialist currency; the more than 3 million people of Saigon were given a mere three days to dispose of their old piasters. Armed with fresh Vietnamese translations of Lenin's 1918 tract about "the immediate tasks of the Soviet government," which called for the use of mass organizations and consumers' cooperatives to wrest control of the distribution of goods away from counterrevolutionaries in the aftermath of a revolution, Vietnamese party cadres directed peasant associations and women's associations to take over Saigon's retail trade. They also sponsored

noisy street demonstrations against the south's biggest ethnic Chinese traders, vilifying them individually as "the cigarette king" or "the farm tools king."

But the economic results of this frenzy were frustrating. By 1978 the south's more than forty state trading companies in farm products could get their hands on no more than about 20 percent of the south's foodstuffs. This exposed both their own weaknesses and the hostility of southern farmers to communist economic visions. Smuggling and speculation spread, in both north and south, in response to the collectivized economy's inefficiencies. In 1965 the black market had accounted for only about 13 percent of the general circulation of retail goods in the north; by 1980 it accounted for almost 38 percent and far more than that in food services.

Meanwhile the communist state, connecting salvation to spatial engineering, also tried to reconfigure the boundaries of Vietnamese provinces. The country's seventy-two provinces in 1975 were reduced and merged into a mere thirty-eight hybrid provinces by 1978. Such large amalgamated provinces, produced by manipulations at odds with Vietnamese administrative traditions, were designed to convert Vietnam into a single integrated economic machine, in line with Lenin's view that regions could be defined "scientifically" rather than historically in order to further such projects as national electrification. But spatial engineering from above generated enormous costs, ranging from postal address changes to quarrels about the locations of government offices. As the utopian values of the revolution waned, old provinces that had been abolished in 1978, such as Nghe An and Vinh Long, slowly reappeared. By the end of the twentieth century, history had almost triumphed over revolutionary science: Vietnam had sixty-one provinces and centrally attached cities, nearly as many as in 1975.

Farm collectivization was another form of administrative space management. Planned agricultural cooperatives, by eliminating private ownership of the land and thus the oppression of landlords, were supposed to end the alleged isolation of peasants, their reputed lack of specialization, and their presumed inability to rise above the level of self-sufficiency. After 1975 Hanoi attempted to extend its agricultural cooperatives to south Vietnam. This ambition collided with the fact that the war with the Americans and the CIA's campaign of terror (Operation Phoenix) had killed the thousands of locally born party organizers who best understood southern villages and were indispensable to the success of even a moderate rural revolution there. Even worse, the old-fashioned southern landlord class, whose depredations might have made the introduction of cooperatives more popular, had been driven from the countryside by 1975. They had not been able to survive the fighting, a southern land reform law of 1970 (in which American funds supplied their compensation), and the rise of an entrepreneurial group of capitalist farmers ("middle peasants" in communist terms), helped by U.S. aid and investment, who relished marketing their produce on free markets and had little desire for communist-style collectivization.

The regime's relentless pursuit of a single form of economic rationality encountered equally instructive challenges in the mountainous and midlands regions of Vietnam, where 250 of the country's 400 counties were located. This was where Vietnam's ethnic minorities lived. More than half of north Vietnam's increasingly impoverished farm cooperatives in the early 1980s could be found in its eight mountain provinces, the homeland of the Hmong, Yao-Mien, Nung, and Tai minorities, among others. Here Hanoi government planners, introducing cooperatives, abused the minorities' notions of what a natural community was. The minorities were compelled to conform to the sizes of lowland Vietnamese villages, even though their own traditional mountain hamlets had been smaller. This type of spatial engineering made it difficult to find minority leaders who could understand the cooperatives' administrative procedures.

Vietnam's shocking, if brief, border war with China in 1979 was simply the international relations version of the widening gulf between ideology and reality that afflicted domestic policy-making. Marxists claim that socialism, having triumphed over monopoly capitalism and imperialism, guarantees peace; this was the first wholly undisguised war in history between major communist states. The war had a variety of immediate causes. China and Vietnam had competed with each other for the right to be the chief foreign patron of the revolutions in Laos and Cambodia. But after 1975 the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia had showed intense enmity to Vietnam and assaulted the borders of southern Vietnam. Vietnam thereupon invaded Cambodia and installed a more manageable government in Phnom Penh (January 1979), reminding the world as it did so of imperial Vietnam's recurrent colonial manipulations of Khmer politics and greatly embarrassing Pol Pot's Chinese patrons. China responded with an invasion of Vietnam's northern border provinces (February 1979). This was halted after failing to end the Vietnamese military occupation of Cambodia, which continued to 1990. Truong Chinh, once the preeminent apostle of Maoist thought among the Vietnamese communist leaders, revealed the fantastic fears that lay behind this war in December 1979, when he accused China of wishing to "occupy Southeast Asia" in order to "conquer the world." He went on to argue that Beijing's two-pronged attack on Vietnam in the north and by its Khmer Rouge "servants" in the southwest repeated the tactics of the Chinese "feudal" court in the eleventh century, when it had allied itself with the Chams against Ly dynasty Vietnam.

China border war

Apart from Cambodia, Sino-Vietnamese relations foundered upon the two governments' increasingly contradictory involvements in the Cold War duel between the American and Soviet superpowers. China feared the Soviet Union and sought greater intimacy with the United States even before the Vietnamese communists' war with the Americans had ended. Vietnam allied itself with the Soviet Union, alarming China. There were also border disputes and a tragic

controversy over the nature and behavior of the overseas Chinese people of Vietnam, who had enjoyed dual citizenship privileges there until 1978.

Overseas Chinese merchants had by then become the scapegoats for Hanoi's inability to impose its revolutionary blueprints readily on the conquered south after 1975. As Sino-Vietnamese tensions mounted, ethnic Chinese refugees, including veterans of the Vietnamese army and communist party, fled from Vietnam. They went either to southwest China or by sea to Hong Kong and noncommunist Southeast Asia as part of a disheveled stream of "boat people" that eventually resulted in more than a million refugees. Hoang Van Hoan, a longtime associate of Ho Chi Minh and a member of the Hanoi politburo itself until 1976, also fled to China in 1979, becoming one of the most senior defectors in history from an established communist government. Other unhappy Vietnamese, such as the hundred thousand or so political prisoners who had served southern governments before 1975, could not escape. They were detained in Stalinist-style camps and in many instances died in them.

This extraordinary accumulation of self-inflicted disasters and assaults from outside threatened the Vietnamese communist state with system breakdown. The price of hostility to China was a claustrophobic dependency on the Soviet bloc at the worst possible time, when the bloc itself was about to collapse (as it did between 1989 and 1991). The dependency did have a benign side; the Soviet Union, one of the world's leading scientific powers, had as of 1987 trained almost half of the Vietnamese communist cadres with university-level educations, while Soviet aerial photography, space satellite surveys, and geophysical probes gave Vietnam its first truly modern maps of its own national territory. Economic dependency, in contrast, was catastrophic. Billions of rubles in Soviet aid created the illusion of a domestic economic surplus that Vietnam did not really have, generated consumer demands that the country could not afford, and overwhelmed and distorted the management capacities of the Vietnamese state, detaching it from local realities.

In 1978 Vietnam joined the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON), the Soviet-run trading bloc created at the height of the Cold War in 1949. By the time Vietnam joined it, COMECON's international trade had dropped to less than 10 percent of world trade as a whole. COMECON assigned arbitrary production tasks to its different members. It compelled Vietnam to orient its foreign trade to distant, uneconomical markets in Siberia and Eastern Europe. In one characteristic incident, in 1987, Vietnam signed a COMECON agreement to export millions of pieces of clothing, at state-rigged prices, to the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in return for raw materials and button-sewing machines. As the Soviet bloc fell apart and its deliveries failed, Vietnam was left with hundreds of thousands of unsold buttonless garments.

By this time, the weaknesses of Vietnam's collectivized agriculture had become a nightmare. Official calculations themselves suggested that the average

yearly productivity of one Vietnamese farmer in 1985 was less than half that of a Thai farmer. Meanwhile the beleaguered Vietnamese government, which had forced the northern hill country minorities' cooperatives to pursue grain production at the expense of their more varied and familiar traditional agriculture of soybeans, oranges, peanuts, and opium, had to come to their rescue with imported rice. Collectivization's attempt to make farmers into the rural facsimiles of paid factory workers did not suit the seasonal and dispersed nature of farm production. The Soviet-style collective mode of farming, introduced into a tropical Asian society with a dense population and a shortage of land, could not achieve the economies of scale and specialized divisions of labor that Leninist propagandists had once celebrated in the Soviet Union. And the egalitarianism of the cooperatives' "work points" pay system, combined with the Vietnamese state's intensifying demands for rice with which to feed its swelling numbers of salaried functionaries, destroyed farm workers' incentives. By one inside estimate, Vietnamese farmers at the end of the Le Duan era (1986) were being allowed to keep no more than twenty kilograms of unhusked rice out of every hundred kilograms they harvested.

So much for the failed hopes of another twentieth-century experiment in political utopianism. The Vietnamese experiment attracted less attention than the communist millenarianisms of Cambodia or China. But it was not significantly more modest in its aims. Even before it eroded, the experiment's ideology was remarkably eclectic. It combined a Marxist faith in the global achievement of a universal civilization in which pure rational enlightenment could overcome all cultural and historical differences with a Leninist political siege mentality and a Maoist determination to make collectivized labor substitute for the industrial infrastructure that poor countries lacked. The experiment probably also gained legitimacy in Vietnam from its limited affinity with earlier Vietnamese rulers' dreams of legislated agrarian equality, such as the "well-field" and "equal field" ideals of the Tonkinese lord Trinh Doanh (r. 1740–1767). During the experiment, Vietnam related itself to the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe not by geographical proximity or culture (as it had with China in the precolonial period) but by a shared creed of imagined developmental time.

Vietnamese communism also had similarities with the global neoliberal economics that was to replace it; 1986 would not be a complete break. The practical subordination of all human activities to the primacy of economic growth and the pretense that state policies were the nonpolitical fulfillment of universal laws of development were just two such continuities. But in the villages, the interaction of the values and practices of different periods took its own forms. The revolutionary state, between the 1950s and 1980s, had created new types of political power in order to manage the assets confiscated from private landlords: the political power represented by party committees, people's councils, and even the administrative boards of the cooperatives themselves. In many

villages this power fell into the hands of cadres and officials whom one Hanoi insider derided as the "new strongmen" *(cuong hao moi)* or "new bullies." The new bullies were a neotraditional social formation, not a complete return to tyrannical village elders of the old days. Like them, the new strongmen relied on family and lineage connections that the revolution could not extinguish, but unlike the old village elites, they could defend and augment their power by the use of political resources and police sanctions from outside the village, accusing villagers who resisted them of being antiparty as well as antigovernment. Here the expanded use of the "primordial" family ties that held this "new caste structure" of cadres together was reinforced by the collectivized villages' greater dependency on the state. It was only in the late 1990s that retired party cadres living in political "hot spot" villages (as they were now anxiously called in Hanoi) began to lead their abused neighbors in violent protests against corrupt currently serving cadres, reenacting as they did so the part played by retired scholar-gentry in precolonial villages in the ancient struggle for the human rights of rural underdogs in Vietnam. Underdog-defending NGOs like the Assembly of the Poor in Thailand had yet to develop.

Vietnamese Leninism's Partial Shift to Market Economics

THE PARTY STATE was forced to redefine itself by changing from a planned economy to a more market-directed, export-promoting economy anxious for outside capital investment, similar to those elsewhere in Southeast Asia. The sixth party congress' formal ratification of the *doi moi* reform program occurred in 1986, but some reforms had begun before then. The party central committee's Directive No. 100 (1981) had already contracted farming responsibilities to village households, away from the cooperatives, and had allowed farmers greater freedom to market their crops. The politburo's Resolution No. 10 (1988) finally renounced collectivism. The resolution recognized village households as "autonomous economic units," though not as independent family farmers, and transferred land use rights and with them decision-making power directly to such households. Cooperatives no longer had a managerial function, surviving merely as a purveyor of services.

The party state stopped short of conceding outright private property ownership, however. Land still belonged to the state, even if a new Land Law of 1993 desperately tried to create "peace of mind" in the villages with land use tenures of as long as fifty years (compared to thirty years in China's equivalent reforms). Vietnam's millions of newly entitled state tenants were allowed to mimic private ownership, receiving the rights to rent their land tenures, mortgage them, exchange them, transfer them, and even inherit them. The National Assembly debate over the Land Law demonstrated how diverse even officially sanctioned opinion about the land could be in Vietnam. Southern delegates complained

that even the fifty-year tenures were not long enough, demanded that inheritance rights be extended to relatives beyond immediate households, and lamented that the maximum size of the land use tenures (three hectares) was too small to facilitate agricultural business enterprises. But the reforms were a big short-term success. Vietnam, which had had to import rice in the 1980s, became one of the three biggest exporters of rice in the world (with Thailand and the United States) by the end of the 1990s and also became a major exporter of coffee for the first time.

Farming reforms were only part of the drive to help Vietnam achieve a more rapid convergence with the economic productivity of regional and global capitalism. There was also a state-directed legal revolution. In the decade after 1986, a blizzard of new laws tried to remake the Vietnamese socialist republic in the image of its investment-seeking neighbors. Laws to protect foreign investment, private business enterprise laws, corporation laws, export and import tax laws, bankruptcy laws, state enterprise laws, laws encouraging domestic investors, and even a state budget law, as well as land laws, were introduced, based on theoretical appreciation of equivalent laws elsewhere. To help train managers, specialists, and advisers for a new effort at state formation, Vietnam even legitimized the formerly disdained "capitalist" subject of political science in 1991, becoming one of the last of the old Soviet bloc countries to do so.

Photo by N. G. Owen

Enjoying life under *doi moi:* Tay Ninh, 1994.

The immediate result of all the new laws was that typical symptom of legal globalization: a gap between the legal state and the real society, perhaps more extreme than any previous such gap in Vietnam's history. Vietnamese party cadres, skilled at orchestrating mass movements in wartime, had little experience in managing society by law and legal norms. Moreover, most of the new laws were "framing" laws, concerned with regulating very broad problems. Characteristically, they had to be applied in combination with a host of shadowy administrative guidelines, issued in delayed and uncoordinated ways by a multitude of state agencies. The reflexes of legal obedience of the population for which they were designed were weak: in the late 1990s about one-third of the officially assessed taxes on households and businesses were never collected. Then there was Vietnam's cultural diversity. The new civil law code of 1995, with its passion for standardization, could not cope with such diversity, one insider warned: how would its categories, borrowed from Roman law, address such phenomena as the "Malayo-Polynesian" matrilineal definitions of legal authority over household property found in Vietnam's central highlands?

The new laws, like the old Soviet-style cooperatives, were intended to accelerate history and create mass habits that did not yet exist; they were not rules for coordinating an industrial society whose values were already formed. The globalization of capitalist institutions could become a state-directed cultural borrowing process that, if successful, might be used to redeem the image of the old managerial state. Vietnam's first stock exchange, which opened in Ho Chi Minh City in 2000 (one of about fifty new such national stock markets that appeared in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe in the decade or so after 1985) was a potential example. Its purpose, banking and finance ministry cadres explained, was to cure Vietnamese of their traditional disorderly, low-volume approach to markets. It was also to function as a laboratory for the stimulation of modern "risk-taking" economic behavior in Vietnam and as a tool for increasing the state's economic power.

After Vietnamese relations with China were normalized again in 1991, the Chinese leaders who visited Hanoi celebrated the similarities of the reform processes in the two Asian Leninist states. The general pattern in both was that economic reform preceded political reform, and there was little Russian-style "shock therapy" from above. In addition, the Vietnamese state followed the Chinese state's formula of attempting to transform itself from a revolutionary charismatic community to an agency for celebrating ethnic pride. The 1991 party congress proposed to harness the power of the world's estimated three hundred thousand overseas Vietnamese "intellectuals" in order to help develop Vietnamese science and industry, even if some of these intellectuals, ranging from mathematicians to some remarkably talented film makers, also threatened to import subversive ideas from the outside. In the 1990s Vietnam's new (1988) Nationality Law came under savage attack, even by Foreign Ministry cadres, for

failing to recognize the dual citizenship of Vietnamese people living abroad (which could limit Hanoi's power over them when they visited Vietnam), thereby violating the "inner feelings" of solidarity of the Vietnamese people.

But the ways in which the Vietnamese reforms differed from the Chinese ones were at least as important. First, Vietnam was a poorer country than China: Vietnamese economists themselves calculated that Vietnam's industrialization was one or even two decades behind China's. Second, Vietnam lacked China's huge domestic market, meaning that while individual incomes remained low, it was more difficult for Vietnamese reformers to attract foreign investment or develop economies of scale. Third, before the reforms Vietnam had been more isolated from the global capitalist economy, not sharing Maoist China's anomaly of having the bulk of its external trade with capitalist countries that did not recognize it diplomatically. The crisis of Vietnam's sudden loss of Soviet and Eastern European aid combined with the costs of its military occupation of Cambodia meant that the Vietnamese reforms began in an atmosphere of economic disintegration, not just of stagnation as in China. Fourth, despite remittances from overseas Vietnamese, Vietnam lacked a Hong Kong: an offshore stronghold of capitalism, populated by an ethnically alike people, which allowed it quick access to business know-how and investment capital. This pointed to a more general historical difference between the two Leninist regimes. Business values are harder to imagine positively in countries that have never had their own successful merchant classes. Unlike China, precolonial Vietnam had lacked formidable indigenous merchants, relying like much of the rest of Southeast Asia on Chinese and Indian merchant diasporas. The Vietnamese collectivist state, with its state-owned enterprises, had to start from scratch, substituting for such merchants rather than expropriating and replacing them, as China was able to do.

Differences from China

Such differences between the Vietnamese and Chinese reform environments help to explain Vietnam's remarkable reinvention of itself in the 1990s as an officially "Southeast Asian" country, seeing itself this way for the first time in its history. The countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) began to absorb up to 40 percent of Vietnam's exports, replacing the lost markets of the vanished Soviet bloc. Vietnam joined ASEAN in 1995; eminent Vietnamese writers like Dinh Gia Khanh had already begun to publish books with titles like *Vietnamese Popular Culture in Its Southeast Asian Setting* (1993). ASEAN and its prospective ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) quickly acquired multiple functions in the Vietnamese imagination. On the one hand, they were seen as supplying the necessary external stimuli for a domestic "renovation" project whose internal stimuli were feared to be not strong enough: ASEAN free trade would force Vietnamese businesses to improve their competitiveness by reforming their technology and organization. On the other hand, membership in a large ASEAN common market area would compensate for Vietnam's small

ASEAN

domestic market and allow Vietnam to compete for foreign investment funds on more equal terms with south China. Here Vietnam's discovery of its "Southeast Asian" identity could serve as a new weapon in the very old struggle against Chinese domination.

For such reasons, Vietnamese propagandists, in 1995, celebrated the virtues of what they called "the great ASEAN family" as robustly as they had once celebrated those of the Soviet trading bloc. Entering ASEAN was a gamble. Vietnam's legal system was still underdeveloped, compared to its neighbors, and the country lacked a body of English-speaking business managers of the sort found in Bangkok or Manila. The Vietnamese revolution's whirlwind changes in its chosen geographic allegiances showed how modern doctrines of progress could reduce notions of space and region to contingent categories. But Vietnamese leaders had finally and apparently unconditionally embraced the promising postcolonial vision of "Southeast Asia," which had gone unrecognized for so many years right under their noses.

uplifting narrative

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Chapter 35

Cambodia since 1975

CAMBODIA, which as late as the 1960s was still characterized by some observers as a "sleepy" country of "peaceful" people, had by the mid-1970s shown itself capable of as much radicalism and violence as any other society in the world. In Phnom Penh in early 1975 the ineptitude of the Lon Nol regime and the disintegrating military situation were exacerbated by the influx of perhaps two million refugees from rural areas who had poured into Phnom Penh and Battambang since 1972. By March 1975 most public services in both cities had broken down. Food was running low. Khmer Republican forces, despite massive infusions of U.S. aid, were unable to loosen the grip of Khmer Rouge units encircling the towns. On 17 April, soon after Lon Nol and the staff of the U.S. embassy had flown out to safety, the communists seized control of Phnom Penh. Battambang fell a day later.

Democratic Kampuchea

THE APPEARANCE of the victorious troops was disturbing to urban dwellers, who welcomed an end to the fighting. The newcomers were silent, unfriendly, and dressed in peasant black. They were also heavily armed and in many cases very young. Within twenty-four hours in Phnom Penh and a week in Battambang, the Khmer Rouge ordered all the inhabitants of these cities—close to three million people in all—to walk away from their homes and take up