ONE

In Search of a Future

One's character is based largely on that of the people with whom one lives. . . . Knowledge opens the mind. . . . Travel also greatly expands the mind; we leave the circle of our nation's prejudices, and are hardly in a position to take on those of another.

– Montesquieu

THE LOST HOMELAND (*MAT NUOC*)

The myth of Ho Chi Minh is multifaceted. One aspect, added long after the man himself had become myth, concerns his family and native region. Funerary monuments have been dedicated to his ancestors, their houses have been restored, his father's family temple has been maintained, and all of these sites have been listed as national memorials.[1] His family saga represents the edifying history of the men and women who symbolized traditional Vietnam. They were faithful to their nation's cultural values and passed them on from generation to generation by transcribing their language and teaching the fundamental Confucian texts.

Both the regional and family backgrounds of Ho Chi Minh suggest a certain geographical and sociological determinism, as well as individual destiny. Nghe An province is known as the forge of great men, from the conventional to the rebellious, and as the theater of historical events that gave birth to a tradition of heroism and sacrifice for the common good.

Ho Chi Minh came from Hoang Tru, which together with six other hamlets comprises the village of Kim Lien. According to a popular saying (*ca dao*), it is

> A most pleasant place
> Its landscapes immortal. Its inhabitants happy.[2]

And yet, nature has not been kind to the inhabitants of Nghe An. They suffer from an alternating cycle of drought and flooding, as the dry winds

rush down from the Annamite mountains (*Truong Son*) or typhoons rise up from monsoons, leading to food shortages and sometimes outright famine. From birth, the men and women of the province are subjected to the dangerous caprices of nature, and so they learn to be frugal.

The area is caught between the sea and the mountains, and the flatness of the landscape is punctuated by hills that once were the stronghold of the resistance against Chinese and French invasions. The ghost of Nguyen Hue (under his royal name, Quang Trung), victorious over the armies of the Manchu Dynasty in the eighteenth century, hovered over these skies, but the villagers of Kim Lien were more attuned to contemporary exploits from their homeland. They remembered the scholar-official Phan Dinh Phung, who resisted the French until his tragic death in 1895. For the parents and grandparents of Ho Chi Minh, he was not just a memory but a real presence to those who looked to the foothills of Truong Son. Some of the villagers had even participated in Phung's "Save the King" movement (*Can Vuong*), which spread throughout northern Annam and Tonkin at the end of the nineteenth century.[3]

Ho Chi Minh was born in 1890 into troubled times.[4] His given name was Nguyen Sinh Cung, but he took the name Nguyen Tat Thanh at age ten, in keeping with Vietnamese custom. The French invaders, faced with stubborn resistance, had just barely managed to conquer the northern provinces of the Kingdom of Vietnam. They had completely taken over the southern part of the nation in 1872 and had established their protectorate over the kingdom of Cambodia in 1863. Then, moving progressively northward along the peninsula, they took control of the rest of Vietnam in the last two decades of the nineteenth century and proceeded to "protect" the Lao principalities that had recently been pried away from Siamese domination.

Nguyen Tat Thanh was fed at his mother's breast and lulled to sleep in a hammock by the songs she hummed while weaving silk. At first he lived in his grandparents' home, then moved nearby with his parents when they acquired a separate house, a modest straw structure with rudimentary furniture. Both sides of his peasant family combined had about 2,500 to 3,000 square meters of land (just over half an acre), which they cultivated for their own subsistence. When Ho returned to his native village in 1957 as President of Vietnam, he pointed out where the jackfruit tree used to be, and the guava, the orange tree, and the areca palm: Their shape, their perfume, and the taste of their fruits retained a hold on his memory.

Official history presents Kim Lien as a haven of community spirit, harmony, and solidarity among families who shared common bonds, many

through marriage.[5] Ho's father, Nguyen Sinh Sac (Nguyen Sinh Huy), an orphan, had been adopted and then chosen as son-in-law by a scholar of the village. He began his studies there and then prepared for the civil service examinations required for entry into the imperial bureaucracy. To earn money for his family, Sac taught the children of the village, but it was his wife who put food on the table by working in the fields and weaving silks. She also wove cotton fabrics that she sold in the market or used to clothe her family at the New Year.

Sac's perseverance eventually paid off, and he successfully passed the examinations given in the imperial capital, graduating with the title of *pho bang*, "doctorate, second class" (literally "subordinate list," it was second only to the *tien si* who had passed the palace examinations). He set up a placard in his home bearing the maxim "Good studies will lift you out of poverty" – which he must have looked upon with some satisfaction, if also a bit of frustration. Sac was then thirty-nine years old, and Thanh Thai, the scandalously immoral emperor, had just been deposed.[6]

Nguyen Sinh Sac is a perfect illustration of the possibilities that existed at the time for a humble Vietnamese of rural background to gain access to the official Confucian bureaucracy, sometimes at even the highest level, via the civil service examinations. Traditionally, new graduates would then pursue a career in the bureaucracy, but they could also return to their villages to teach or become writers. The latter option offered a way of maintaining a certain distance from the established power; in the early twentieth century that meant refusing to serve a monarchy under French domination. Sac chose to return to his village. Although inspired by the spirit of resistance, in 1906 he nonetheless accepted the imperial court's invitation to take a government job as subaltern to the Minister of Rites.[7] Was this an act of submission, or did he think that by entering the government he would be able to work for the good of the people without bending to the will of new masters? It is interesting to note that Sac was a close friend of the scholar and nationalist revolutionary Phan Boi Chau, who was also from Nghe An province.[8] In 1905, Chau had wanted Sac to send his youngest son, Thanh, to Japan to train as a freedom fighter, but Sac refused or at least did not follow up on the invitation.

In May 1909, Sac was sent to Binh Dinh province as proctor of the examinations and, while there, was nominated vice magistrate of Binh Khe district, which had just been created. This newly cleared mountainous zone became the subject of land disputes, which sometimes turned to confrontation, leading Sac to remark: "Our country is shipwrecked, but 'they' fight each other for the layout of the low embankments in

our rice fields."[9] As vice magistrate, Sac became known as a defender of the lowly and poor against the high and "wicked" – whether indigenous landlords or Catholic missionaries in collusion with French officials – and he soon found himself in low standing with his superiors. Although one report stated that "he is a good employee," others accused him of repeated absences from his office or of freeing prisoners who had protested against the tax system. This revolt of the political center – popularly called the "Revolt of the Short-Hairs" because the demonstrators had cut off the traditional chignon – was part of a larger, nationwide movement (*Duy tan*/modernization, *Minh tan*/enlightenment) that wanted to reform traditional institutions and modernize the country, following the example of Meiji Japan. Sac expressed his support for the demonstrators, and his son, then a student at the Quoc Hoc (National Academy) in Hué, did the same (some even say that Thanh served as interpreter between the demonstrators and the French Résident Supérieur).[10]

Nguyen Sinh Sac's luck ran out in 1910, when his temper got him into serious trouble. He already had a reputation for being quick-tempered, but one day he unleashed his anger against a "tyrannical" landlord, who then appealed directly to the French resident administrator of Quy Nhon in an effort to bypass Sac. Sac then ordered the landlord to be beaten with a wicker switch, and the man died two months later. In May 1910, Sac received a harsh sentence: one hundred lashes with a switch, a demotion of four ranks, and dismissal. Fortunately for him, the punishment was reduced four months later due to his lack of administrative experience and especially because the delay between the beating and the man's death had made Sac's direct responsibility difficult to establish.

After his release from prison, Nguyen Sinh Sac neither requested readmission into the administration nor returned to Kim Lien. Evidently, he could not bear the judgment of the townspeople who, according to custom, had given him a triumphal welcome after he passed his exams. He instead went to South Vietnam where he took a variety of odd jobs, from plantation supervisor to "doctor" to public scribe. Some also said that he fell prey to periodic bouts of mysticism. When someone asked him where he lived, he responded with bitterness, "when the country is lost, how can you have a home?"[11] He died at age 63 on 27 November 1929, in Cao Lanh in the Mekong delta, where he had found shelter and comfort with a family of scholars. The local organization of the Communist Party erected a mausoleum at his burial site in 1977.

Ho Chi Minh's father belonged to a world of scholars and officials who were consumed with dismay and bitterness at the realization that French domination of the Vietnamese monarchy would endure and become even stronger in the early twentieth century. French administrators selected and deposed the Vietnamese monarchs, who were reduced to nothing more than civil servants. They also directed the imperial administration, with the French Résident Supérieur presiding over the Privy Council, and French Résidents stood in for the local mandarin and the magistrates on the provincial level, as Sac knew from personal experience. They also reorganized the educational system, a fundamental pillar of the nation since it nurtured the next generation of mandarin officials.[12] The French restructured the system in such a way that a knowledge of Chinese characters and the Confucian classics was rendered both obsolete and useless. The last examinations were held in 1915, four years before they were definitively abolished. As a result, the old educational system gave way to a Franco-Annamite one that relied on the romanized transcription of the Vietnamese language, called *quoc ngu*.[13]

By the time misfortune struck Sac, he had already lost his wife – who died in 1901 at the age of thirty-three – and his son Nguyen Sinh Xin. Out of gratitude to his mother-in-law, who had sold a portion of her rice field to help him through his doctoral exams, Sac turned down an offer by a mandarin family to wed their young daughter. The family now began to disperse. Sac's daughter, Nguyen Thi Thanh, went back to live in Kim Lien and was soon joined by her older brother. Only Cung, who had taken the name Nguyen Tat Thanh in 1905, went down to Binh Dinh, where he entered boarding school in Quy Nhon. This separation was not uncommon; temporary or permanent migration is common among the Vietnamese, but they still keep an emotional attachment to their homes and families. On the other hand, Nguyen Thi Thanh had testified to the police about her father's irascibility and brutality that she attributed to his penchant for "the bottle" – which might explain the incident at Binh Khe. In the end, when Nguyen Tat Thanh went to visit his father in Binh Khe before leaving for Saigon, Sac greeted him with the words: "Why did you come to see me? When you've lost your country, searching for your father doesn't matter." These words from a father to his son (some say he was the favorite) resonate like those of a desperate man in the throes of *mat nuoc* syndrome. Extreme behavior can often be the expression of pain in heart and soul.

As for the son's perspective, Thanh later wrote two autobiographical accounts, only one of which mentioned his family's past, and that only

briefly.[14] Was this his way of suppressing a painful or shameful period in his life?

WHEN NGUYEN TAT THANH HEADED TO SAIGON HE HAD JUST TURNED eighteen. He stopped at Phan Thiet, an area of Annam famous for its fishing and pickling (such as for *nuoc mam* sauce). For several months he worked as a teacher's assistant in a school founded by the reformist scholar Phan Chu Trinh (1872–26), who had graduated as a *pho bang* in the same class as Nguyen Sinh Sac. It was no chance encounter, since Trinh backed the reformation of the monarchy and the mandarinate under the leadership of republican France. Trinh was also a supporter of the "Journey to the West" (*Tay Du*), which drew young Vietnamese away from the "Journey to the East" (*Dong Du*). The latter was supported and organized by Phan Boi Chau, who called out to the younger generation to come and join him in Japan. The young Thanh thought logically. He did not join up with the *Dong Du*, but turned toward the *Tay Du* to learn about the outside world so as not to end up confined within the Asian universe.

Thanh already had a basic understanding of the key concepts of Chinese culture. His father and others had taught him Chinese characters and Confucian morality, but Sac had also wanted his son to receive the rudiments of French culture and so sent him to Franco-Annamite schools in Vinh, Hué, and Quy Nhon, for elementary, middle, and high school education. At one point, Thanh attended the Quoc Hoc (1907–9), the National Academy that trained the sons of mandarins, the court, and other officials. It was at this time that he supposedly became involved in the Revolt of the Short-Hairs against the French regime.

Although he was sometimes mocked by his fellow students, Thanh earned the respect of several teachers for his tireless curiosity, quick wit, maturity, and talent for writing. One of his French teachers, Mr. Queinnec, returned a paper with this glowing praise: "Thanh wrote his paper on the writing of verse; he is an intelligent and very distinguished student."[15] As a teenager he enjoyed the history lessons of a Mr. Griffon, who gave fascinating lectures glorifying the French Revolution.

Thanh especially admired two of his teachers, the scholar Hoang Thong, who later ran into trouble with the authorities, and the artist Le Van Mien. Thong helped him with his Chinese characters and introduced him to the "New Writing" of the Chinese and Vietnamese modernist scholars, as well as Chinese translations of the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Montesquieu. Mien spoke to him of Paris where, as a scholarship

student at the École Coloniale (Colonial School), he had arranged to continue his studies at the École Supérieure des Beaux-Arts. He described a nation of people who were different from the French in Indochina, a society that had its humble and poor, where at nightfall old men rummaged through garbage cans and young women prostituted themselves to survive. Mien explained that both commoner and elite looked down on disreputable Vietnamese, but admired and respected those who were dignified, educated, or talented, and added that racial discrimination among the French was rare. He described the museums in Paris, which were rich in classical antiquities and works of art, as well as the libraries where books about revolution and the birth of nations were neither limited nor prohibited.[16] In France, the words "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity" had real meaning.

It is fair to say, then, that before embarking on a ship to France in 1911, Nguyen Tat Thanh was mentally prepared. He had a plan for the future but was not locked into it, and was determined to discover the world and make his own destiny. In 1946, he told the American journalist David Schoenbrun, "Do we know what it means to be a man? Do we really know ourselves? Our parents give us a name and tell us about where we come from. That doesn't matter. What really matters is where we are going."[17] Undoubtedly, Nguyen Tat Thanh was sensitive to the currents of change in Asian culture, and he had a strong will. As a young man he fell in love with his landlord's daughter in Saigon and faced a dilemma: Should he choose his individual destiny over the fate of the collective, or vice versa? Should he satisfy the desires of the heart, raise a family, and put down roots in his homeland? Or should he leave in order to train himself and then return to help his country? He made his choice.

LOOKING FOR ANSWERS: 1911–1917

> Born in somber times, from my earliest childhood, I lost my homeland.
> Before the sky and the earth I was ashamed of living among slaves.
> My heart is sickened to feel my still fragile wings, but boldly I took flight.
>
> – Phan Boi Chau

Whether he was beginning a voyage of initiation or just running away, Nguyen Tat Thanh was neither the first nor the last to board a ship to see the world. Before the West had begun its conquest of the world,

seventeenth- and eighteenth-century travelers from China, Japan, Vietnam, and Siam had gone to Europe on diplomatic and other missions.[18] By the nineteenth century, imperialist expansion was in full swing, and then the world was forever changed by the opening of the Suez Canal, the invention of the steamship, and the laying of underground telegraphic cables that encircled the globe as if completing Magellan's voyage.

Countries around the world were opening up to outside influences, leading to economic, political, and cultural change and an unprecedented migration of peoples. In Asia a wave of contractual laborers (mainly Indian and Chinese) flowed to Europe to replace the African slave trade, but others had to yield to imperial power, beaten but not broken. Many Japanese, Chinese, Vietnamese, Javanese, and Indians headed to Europe and the United States to discover the secret of Western superiority.[19]

The Journey to the West (*Tay Du*) gave birth to other groups that encouraged learning, like those that had flourished in China since the end of the nineteenth century, and many young people left to study and/or work abroad. Some left alone, but most went in groups; if they were poor they would seek employment on ships or stow away with the help of fellow countrymen working on board.

At the time of Thanh's departure in 1911, Saigon was the terminus of two French shipping lines with regular service between Europe and the Far East: Messageries Maritimes and Chargeurs Réunis. This modern port was growing fast. The city of 1910 was not yet the "Pearl of the Far East," which grew out of the urban and architectural development of the 1920s, but it was still a European-style city clustered around an impressive center of monumental buildings (the palace of the Governor-General and the Governor of Cochinchina, the cathedral, City Hall, the Hall of Justice, the Customs House, the military barracks). And it looked nothing like the small towns familiar to Thanh, like Vinh, Quy Nhon, and Phan Thiet. In 1907, the city of Saigon, combined with the Chinese section of Cholon, had some 250,000 inhabitants, including 7,000 French nationals. Even Hué, with its "palaces that look like tombs and tombs that look like palaces" – in the words of the journalist Andrée Viollis, author of *Indochine S.O.S.* (1935) – had shown nothing new to the young man from Nghe An.

In Saigon, Nguyen Tat Thanh took his first steps in a westernized setting. He discovered the electric light and ice cream, but also noted that a civilization known for its scientific and technological advancement also forced others to bend under its power. He would go down to the port looking for a ship bound for France, and one day had the nerve to walk

aboard the *Amiral Latouche-Tréville* of the Chargeurs Réunis company and ask if they had a job for him. The captain was skeptical at the sight of this young man with the intelligent face and frail body, but took him on as chef's assistant. On the morning of 5 June 1911, the ship cast off, carrying with it the man who now called himself Van Ba.

The crossing was rough due to monsoons in the Indian Ocean, but Ba managed it well, working hard during the day carrying buckets of coal, peeling vegetables, washing dishes, and scrubbing the kitchen. He learned to eat bread, beef, and potatoes and how to use a spoon and fork instead of chopsticks. Later, he remembered conversations on board with the engineer Bui Quang Chieu, who had known his father, Nguyen Sinh Sac, and was traveling in first class with his own son. But more than this, Ba recalled the friendships he made with two French colonial soldiers who had been demobilized and were returning to France. They loaned him books and helped him with his French, a language he was far from mastering, while he slipped them cups of coffee. He confided to the Vietnamese chef: "Some Frenchmen are okay, eh, brother Mai?"[20]

Ba disembarked in Marseilles with ten francs in his pocket and discovered some wondrous things. There were pleasant surprises, like riding on the tramway ("the house that moves electrically") and being addressed as "monsieur" in a café. But occasionally he was scandalized, taking offense when prostitutes came on board to ply their trade. These mixed images led him to form a more positive opinion of the French on the Continent, who did not behave like those in the colonies. And yet, since they had their own loose women and hoodlums, he wondered: "Why don't the French civilize their own people instead of trying to civilize us?" This mention of civilization shows that Thanh was already imbued with a notion of cardinal importance in Sino-Vietnamese wisdom. At the same time, he seemed to grant a superiority to European civilization.

After Marseilles he went to Le Havre, where he worked briefly as an assistant gardener for a rich bourgeois family with a Vietnamese valet among their household staff. Ba improved his French with the help of a "young and pretty" servant girl and befriended the chef, who was temperamental but "a good person." The chef sometimes made him the same dishes that he cooked for their boss, and Ba greatly appreciated their friendship. But he did not settle in for long. As soon as his boss told him about a cargo ship ready to sail, he hurried to find work as cabin steward and waiter in the officers' wardroom.

Before leaving Marseilles, however, he sent a letter to the President of the Republic of France seeking admission to the École Coloniale. Primarily

a school for training future administrators of the colonies, it also accepted a contingent of students from the colonies on scholarships. The latter, in exchange, had to serve the colonial administration. When news of this letter came to light years later, many people saw it as proof that in 1911 the young Thanh had not yet sketched out the path he was later to follow. To some, he was taking advantage of the resources offered by the French Republic in order to penetrate the "enemy" fortress, while to others, he was hoping to become a colonial official in order to rehabilitate his father. None of these opinions, however, take into account the influence of Thanh's former teacher, Le Van Mien, whose experience surely had an impact on Thanh's decisions.[21]

Ba spent another two years at sea before making a long stop in England. During this time, from late 1911 to 1913, he visited Dunkirk, made a brief stop back in Saigon, then continued on to Bordeaux, Lisbon, Tunis, Dakar, the ports of East Africa, Reunion Island, and as far as the Congo, observing the life of the people in every port. From there he went to North America, but did not record precise details on the length of his stay nor on his activities while in the United States. He completed his journey in England after having seen the Antilles, Mexico, and South America.

Nguyen Tat Thanh's observations during those two years of wandering reinforced what he knew about colonial regimes, as he witnessed the oppression suffered by Arabs, Africans, and the blacks of the United States. It was in the United States, in fact, that he noticed the most flagrant contradiction between great idealistic principles and the actual condition of people of color, who were subjected to segregation, denied civil rights, and lived under the constant threat of lynching. He saw how England, the largest colonial empire in the world, harshly suppressed Ireland's quest for independence. Here was a people who would take up arms in 1916 (right in the middle of World War I) yet were fair-skinned. He wrote that he cried upon learning of the death of the Mayor of Cork, McSwiney, who had been condemned by the British to two years in prison and who languished in agony for seventy-four days during a hunger strike. Thanh saw clearly the stark difference between theory and practice, and especially how even the most liberal democracies tolerated both racism and colonialism. These experiences led him later to relativize the "dictatorship of the proletariat" and, by consequence, the Stalinist regime.

Thanh demonstrated a deep sympathy for the "obscure, the underlings," for the oppressed, the humiliated, and, of course, resistance fighters. His travels showed him misery and oppression throughout the world,