

INTRODUCTION

Prologue

When people first began to live on Earth, terrain was very different from what it is today. For tens of thousands of years, what we know as the country of Vietnam was the mountainous western edge of a broad plain. Now covered by the Gulf of Tonkin and the South China Sea, this plain extended in places for hundreds of kilometers east of the modern coastline and included a massif that we now call Hainan Island. Today we can imagine that beneath the mud at the bottom of the sea lie the relics of the people who inhabited this plain. But our knowledge of their existence comes only from the remains of quarries and workshops where they crafted stone tools at the tops of mountains along the modern Vietnamese coast. During that time, people also inhabited the mountains in what is now northern Vietnam, and we know of them from what they left in the caves where they lived.

About twelve to eight thousand years ago, the coastline shifted westward as sea levels rose with the melting of the ice-age glaciers. The water reached to around 5.8 meters above the modern level of the sea and penetrated into the mountain valleys. Thereafter, the sea gradually receded to its present level, exposing a chain of coastal plains that became the lowlands of what is now Vietnam. The most important of these plains for early Vietnamese history is the most northern of them. This is the plain of the Red River. It was formed by grey oceanic sediment emerging from the receding sea that has been increasingly streaked by accumulations of the red silt that has given the Red River its name.

The Red River flows in nearly a straight line from the Yunnan plateau to the sea. It follows what geologists call the Red River Fault Zone. This is a major geological discontinuity where for millions of years the land south of the fault has been shearing a few millimeters each year southeastward under tectonic pressure from the Indian subcontinent against the Eurasian land mass. The plain of the

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Red River, along with the smaller plains of the Ma and Ca Rivers immediately to the south, make up the scene in which Vietnamese history was lived until the fifteenth century.

Between four and five thousand years ago, people with stone tools began to live on these plains in agricultural communities with rice, domesticated animals, and pottery. It is fruitless to speculate about the origins of these people. They lived so long ago and left such meager evidence of their existence that they are impervious to our strategies for using archaeological, geological, geographical, or linguistic evidence to identify them as having arrived from a particular somewhere. They may have come from the continental land mass, they may have come from the lands submerged beneath the sea, or, most likely of all, they may have come from a mixture of peoples from both directions.

During the succeeding millennium, people with bronze weapons gained supremacy over these communities. At that time, advanced bronze cultures existed in several areas of the Asian continent. There is no surviving evidence that would allow us to specify from where the bronze-age people came to assert their rule over the Red River plain, or even to determine that they came from elsewhere and did not arise from the existing society as a result of bronze technology being introduced through peaceful exchange. Thereafter, contact with expanding political powers in the north, which we now associate with ancient China, increasingly exposed the people living here to northern influence and power and led to incorporation into the Chinese imperial realm.

The Dong Son Culture with its distinctive bronze drums decorated with boats, warriors, musicians, dancers, feathered garments, birds, animals, reptiles, and amphibians flourished during the four or five centuries preceding conquest by the Han Chinese in the mid first century CE, after which this culture disappeared. During the next nine centuries, the people here lived under a local form of imperial administration as the southernmost members of a succession of Chinese empires. During the past thousand years, local dynasties ruled as vassals of Chinese empires, save for the last century and a half during which a brief French hegemony gave shape to modern Vietnam.

Vantage

Vietnamese scholars have endeavored to project a sense of national identity back into the past as far as possible. In the modern period, it became common for Vietnamese to affirm a national history going back four thousand years to when archaeologists date artifacts that they have assembled and categorized under the name of Phung Nguyen Culture. Phung Nguyen is defined as a late stone and

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early bronze culture that represents a level of archaeological uniformity in the Red River Plain that did not previously exist. Many Vietnamese scholars are inclined to draw a line of continuity in cultural, and even ethno-linguistic, development from Phung Nguyen to modern Vietnam. This inclination, however, makes an exuberant use of evidence.

The search for origins in the distant past is a common intellectual endeavor among peoples in nearly all times and places. For example, historians at royal courts in northern Vietnam during the thirteenth and the fifteenth centuries were concerned to affirm their status in reference to rampant northern empires, the Yuan and the Ming. They did this not only by culling references from classical Chinese texts about what they imagined to have been their ancestors in antiquity but also by constructing a “southern” history for themselves that is largely parallel with and a response to “northern” imperial history. The urge for connections with the past is a means of self-affirmation, not a scholarly endeavor.

What we can know about the past with some degree of confidence is a meager residue of what remains from an ongoing process of accumulation and attrition, of gain and loss, of putting together and tossing away, a process in which all generations participate. Human efforts to remain oriented amidst change can take forms between the extremes of denying change and of seeking change. Historians are not immune to the implications of such efforts, and they do not agree on the appropriate pose to assume toward change in wielding the rhetoric of their craft. I believe that the task of historical scholarship is to look at what survives from the past as coming from people with their own existence, not as evidence of people who attain significance primarily as precursors of people today. The Vietnamese past does not display an internal logic of development leading to the present. Rather, it reveals a series of experiments designed by successive generations as solutions to perennial problems of social and political organization. These experiments have failed, have reached an impasse, or have been overcome by the possibilities or the violence of larger contexts. None has been a final solution.

Vietnamese history is a convenient name for what can be known about a certain aspect of the past. What makes it Vietnamese is that the events of which it is comprised took place in what we now call the country of Vietnam and that certain versions of it have been taught as a common memory to generations of people who speak the Vietnamese language, thereby inducing a sense of ownership. I find interest in the Vietnamese past not because it is Vietnamese but because it is about how human society has been organized and governed during many centuries on the edge of an empire.

Vietnamese history as we know it today could not exist without Chinese history. The manner in which Vietnamese history overlaps with and is

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distinguished from Chinese history presents a singular example of experience in organizing and governing human society within the orbit of Sinic civilization that can be compared with Korean history and Japanese history. Such a comparison is not the purpose of this book. The purpose of this book is to present a narrative of current scholarship on Vietnamese history that is accessible to students and general readers. But, this book is also written with an awareness of comparative possibilities within the academic jurisdiction of East Asia.

Vietnamese history can also be viewed in a Southeast Asian comparative context. The kingdom of Dai Viet that existed in Vietnam from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries was contemporary with other major kingdoms in mainland Southeast Asia at Angkor (Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand) and at Pagan (Burma). Also, the southward expansion of the Burmese and Siamese peoples from the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries is seemingly parallel with a similar movement of Vietnamese peoples at the same time. However, the disparity in surviving evidence, the great differences in culture and politics, and the exceptional imperatives of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship are obstacles to meaningful comparisons.

Language

A large proportion of the modern Vietnamese vocabulary derives from Chinese, but linguists categorize the Vietnamese language as a member of the Mon-Khmer family of languages. Although available comparative data for studying Vietnamese with other Mon-Khmer languages are limited, there is an abundance of materials documenting the historical relationship between Chinese and Vietnamese. Linguists continue to develop new methods for analyzing such data, and developments in Sino-Vietnamese historical linguistics enable new ways of theorizing how the Vietnamese language came to be. Building upon the work of scholarship in French and Chinese in the early twentieth century and of Japanese scholarship more recently, linguists are beginning to appreciate the great complexity of the relationship between speakers of the Chinese and the Vietnamese languages; both the speakers and the languages are products of great changes during the past two millennia from which documentation of this relationship exists.

Sino-Vietnamese historical linguistics has tended to focus attention upon words from the classrooms in which what we call Literary Chinese was taught for more than two millennia. This was the language of education, scholarship, literature, and government in both China and Vietnam until the turn of the twentieth century. While Literary Chinese in its written form has changed

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relatively little through the centuries, the phonologies of Literary Chinese have changed significantly in accordance with changes in spoken languages. Advances in phonological analysis enable greater understandings of the realms of spoken languages that have interacted with Literary Chinese. Literary Chinese, as the written form of the prestige language, was an aspect of a larger world of language contact between speakers of languages that we now identify as contributors to modern Chinese and Vietnamese. Modes of speaking Literary Chinese can be thought of as literary registers that became aspects of prestige versions of vernacular forms of language.

For over a millennium, up until the tenth century, speakers of Han-Tang Chinese accumulated in what is now northern Vietnam. Imperial government was based in the area of modern Hanoi where the most critical mass of Chinese speakers concentrated. During the thirty to forty generations of this time, the Chinese speakers developed their own regional version of Chinese, for which one modern linguist, John Duong Phan, has found evidence and that for convenience can be called Annamese Middle Chinese. It is possible that this was simply a dialect of a broader Southern or Southwestern Middle Chinese of that time.

The non-Chinese-speaking lowland population spoke a language that linguists call Proto-Viet-Muong, the most eastern member of the Mon-Khmer languages that at that time prevailed in the plains drained by the Mekong and the Menam. Proto-Viet-Muong can be imagined as having spread north at some earlier time from the passes linking the Mekong and Ca River valleys. During the ten centuries of imperial rule, many Chinese words were borrowed into spoken Proto-Viet-Muong and we can reasonably conjecture that there was a significantly high level of bilingualism among primary speakers of both languages.

Beginning in the tenth and eleventh centuries, when the governing connection with Chinese dynasties was broken, there were no longer regular infusions of Chinese speakers from the north and local kings appeared. The population of Annamese Middle Chinese speakers was increasingly concentrated in the Red River plain where political authority was based. As the diglossic situation collapsed, speakers of Annamese Middle Chinese gradually shifted into Proto-Viet-Muong, bringing with them a critical mass of vocabulary and grammatical particles, thus giving rise to the Vietnamese language as we categorize it today, the speakers of which at that time were called Kinh, meaning the people of the “capital” in the region of Hanoi. On the other hand, the speakers of various forms of Proto-Viet-Muong who did not participate in this “shift,” namely those in the plains of the Ma and Ca Rivers, were eventually driven from the lowlands by the Kinh speakers, who referred to them as Trai, or “outpost” people; in the twentieth century, French ethnographers and colonial administrators identified the descendents of these people as Muong. The Kinh–Trai distinction is first

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mentioned in historical records from the mid thirteenth century, although it surely existed prior to that time; this is also the time when the writing of Vietnamese poetry is first documented and when the last generation of Vietnamese princes who spoke Chinese are known to have lived.

In the fifteenth century, two decades of Ming Chinese rule introduced new pronunciations for words already existing in Vietnamese from the Han-Tang/Annamese Middle Chinese experience. Some later Vietnamese scholars viewed the Ming pronunciations as less correct than the older forms. This is an example of a common phenomenon during the long history of Sino-Vietnamese interaction: Chinese words once absorbed by Vietnamese would be “re-borrowed” from a later version of the Chinese language with new pronunciations and sometimes modified semantic fields. The rejection of Ming pronunciations was part of a general reaction among educated Vietnamese to the memory of Ming rule. Nevertheless, from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries, during which Vietnamese began to flourish as a literary language, writers adopted or invented many classroom-inspired Chinese words to bejewel and elevate the vernacular in a process of “relexification.”

A further complication is that, beginning in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Vietnamese speakers in what is now central and southern Vietnam began to develop regional versions of the language as a result both of normal language change and of contact with non-Vietnamese speakers. In central Vietnam, many Cham speakers began to speak Vietnamese, and, in the late seventeenth century, a large wave of Ming Chinese refugees into the south also had a linguistic impact.

This new understanding of the Vietnamese language as arising from a long history of Sinic bilingualism gives formative significance to the centuries of Chinese rule that is more plausible than the well-established cliché of “a thousand years of Chinese domination” that imagines an already existing Vietnamese identity surviving many generations of participation in Sinic civilization while being fundamentally uninfluenced by it. It also requires a major shift in our view of Vietnamese history and culture away from the scheme of an ancient and enduring Vietnamese identity claimed by modern nationalists. Vietnamese culture and language came into existence as the result of a merging of what linguistic evidence reveals as speakers of Annamese Middle Chinese and Proto-Viet-Muong.

Apologia

In this book I combine a chronological political narrative, expositions of interpretive themes, and discussions of geography, education, ideology, language, literature, religion, society, government, economy, and warfare. Information

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surviving from pre-modern times is often very sparse, which is likely to disappoint the thirst of some readers for more knowledge than is available. I have sought to avoid excessive speculation or large generalizations that lack plausible evidence. At the same time I have endeavored to rise above a tedious account of random events by charting a narrative to stimulate the imagination, making thought about the past possible. I have excluded a mass of detail and have aspired toward coherence sufficient to satisfy both those who prefer to think diachronically across time and those who prefer to think synchronically with topics. An introductory survey, this book provides a point of entry into Vietnamese history and does not excavate the historiography from which my ideas have emerged. It aspires to provide a sketch of the Vietnamese past using political, administrative, economic, and cultural information.

I have given much attention to simply sorting out a basic sequence of events because this has never yet been done with the detail and method enabled by surviving evidence and recent scholarship. Although many detailed studies exist in Vietnamese, and to some extent in Chinese, Japanese, Russian, and French, English-language writings have for the most part referred to the pre-modern past with vast clichés and to modern times with relatively narrowly focused narratives that follow lines of argument about interpretive themes fundamentally unrelated to the Vietnamese. I have endeavored to provide as much opportunity as possible for readers to enter the past and to see events from the perspective of those who lived them or who recorded them. If we imagine the past with the dynamism of possibility with which it was lived, we can glimpse it looking back at us with the eyes of aspiration that each human life and each generation have aimed at the future.

The Vietnamese past is full of personalities and events both obscure and famous, and often the obscure have had greater effect upon the direction of culture, society, and politics than have the famous. I have tried to move beyond the propaganda of memory and memorializing to display a thicker layer of information that has accumulated about people and events. My purpose in doing so is to evoke a sense of the past as alive in its own time.

Because much of what survives from the past concerns the vicissitudes of political authority, some readers may view this as a “kings and battles” approach, which I believe would be a superficial impression, for I have endeavored to give serious attention to geographical contexts, language, literature, education, ideology, religion, ethnic and social formations, institutional developments, agrarian policies, trade, and commerce. Nevertheless, I have striven to sort out the political and military events because in the English language there has not yet been a sustained engagement with the history of Vietnamese efforts to structure authority and negotiate change.

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Some readers will be disappointed by the lack of footnotes. The decision to avoid marking the text with notes was made out of consideration for the intended audience and from an expectation that readers looking for documentation can consult the bibliographic essays. I have done my best to stay close to the sources. There were times when I was tempted by an interesting thought toward an interpretation that in the end had to be discarded because the evidence was insufficient to bear its weight. I have indicated places where the evidence is too problematic to sustain any definite assertion. I am sure to have made errors and can do no more than to trust that other scholars will find them.

In this book, I have taken a pragmatic approach to the great morass of toponyms that have accumulated from past to present. The maps are provided as references for reading the book and do not indicate names and jurisdictions in their historical specificity. Places in the book have been known by various names during the two thousand years covered by historical records, and these names often covered different or overlapping territories at different times. Consequently, I have used a mix of historical and modern names, noting when I am using a modern name anachronistically for the sake of clarity. As much as possible, my aim has been to facilitate a narrative without digressions into the complexities and conundrums of historical geography, which require a separate study.

For example, the name Hanoi does not date before the nineteenth century. During the past millennium and a half, this place has been an administrative and dynastic center known by several names, the most prominent being Dai La, Thang Long, Dong Kinh, and Ke Cho. I have used these names in their historical contexts while at times also using Hanoi when doing so solved rhetorical problems, enhanced clarity, and seemed unobjectionable. In general, I have used modern names when historical names would introduce contextual inaccuracies and excessive explanatory asides.

The maps do not indicate jurisdictional boundaries for provinces and districts because that would introduce two unnecessary problems. First of all, the maps do not show every toponym but only those that come into the narrative; since we cannot begin to draw some boundaries without ending up by drawing all of them, we would need additional names that would clutter the maps with information of no use for the narrative. Also, since boundaries change and can be known but approximately, the project of sorting them out for each historical era, along with all the complexities and conundrums arising when doing that, is a task for a different, more specialized, kind of book.

I have endeavored to provide enough dates to maintain a sense of diachronic orientation but without cluttering the narrative with unnecessary information. The tables contain reign dates for rulers, but these are not unproblematic, particularly when times of transition occur near the end or the beginning of

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years as counted according to different calendars and historiographical rules. Vietnamese texts follow the lunar calendar in which the twelfth lunar month overlaps with the first solar month of the calendar currently in general usage. Furthermore, Vietnamese historians assigned whole years to rulers so that the remainder of a year in which a ruler died was counted in the reign of the deceased ruler and the successor's reign was considered to officially start only at the beginning of the next year. In some cases, sources provide different dates for the death of a ruler and the accession of the successor, or rulers were deposed so their death dates and the end of their reigns do not coincide, or the reigns of rival or coterminous rulers overlap, or there may be a gap between one ruler and another during times of dynastic turmoil or change. As a consequence of these considerations, readers will find a variety of dates in different books. Rather than drawing attention to these problems and analyzing them, I have followed a policy that privileges the solar calendar without the strictness and precision that a detailed study of dating problems deserves, seeking instead to provide dates that maximize the integrity and the readability of the narrative while remaining essentially faithful to a careful study of surviving sources.

Summary

The thirteen chapters of this book are organized on the basis of length and convenience and do not represent any scheme of periodization with which to conceptualize Vietnamese history. In terms of large themes, I am inclined to organize this material into four periods: first, the centuries during which what is now northern Vietnam was a province of Chinese empires (Chapter 1); second, the four centuries of the Ly and Tran dynasties during which Buddhist aristocracies in the Red River plain ruled (Chapters 2 and 3); third, the four centuries attributed to the Le dynasty during which kings came from Thanh Hoa Province, Confucianism was the ideology of rulers, the Vietnamese expanded into the south, and there were long eras of separate realms at war (Chapters 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8); finally, the two most recent centuries during which the modern country of Vietnam came into being (Chapters 9, 10, 11, 12, and 13).

During the millennium when what is now northern Vietnam was a frontier province of Chinese imperial dynasties, the people living there were acculturated to what we call East Asian civilization. In art, music, architecture, dress, cuisine, education, language, literature, religion, philosophy, social organization, and political behavior, nearly all the distinguishing features of Vietnamese culture were acquired at this time as a consequence of contact with the Han-Tang civilization of China.

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A thousand years is a relatively long time in human history and it is hard to overemphasize the changes that occurred during this age of belonging to northern empires. The people who lived in the Red River plain before this time and those who lived there after this time would surely be unrecognizable and unintelligible to each other. Important changes can be attributed to any people during such a period of time, but the effect of being governed by a succession of imperial dynasties surely accelerated the pace of change in particular directions that reflected the course of imperial history. During these centuries, local culture, society, and political organization passed through many vicissitudes, some of them utterly transforming. Crafts, erudition, and political thought were mostly focused upon mastering the elements of imperial civilization. At the same time, from generation to generation and from dynasty to dynasty, a population of “northerners” accumulated and became a critical mass of people that were the governing class and its most reliable followers. Furthermore, there were a great variety of interactions, overlaps, and adaptations between local and imperial societies. It is not surprising that, intellectually, Vietnamese history later came to be written as a discussion, even an argument, with imperial Chinese history, for Vietnamese history can be understood only in reference to Chinese dynastic history. Accordingly, the earliest large event in Vietnamese history has to do with the arrival of northern imperial power near the end of the third century BCE and the eventual absorption of the region into the realm of northern dynasties. This situation was not altered until the tenth century after basic changes in imperial society and politics made it impossible for Chinese dynasties to continue to rule this region, thereby bringing the provincial relationship with northern powers to an end.

During the period from the late tenth to the early thirteenth centuries, political leadership shifted from the individual charisma of kings to leadership by men related to the mothers of kings. The Ly royal family came from the upper plains northeast of Hanoi.

Two brief wars with the Northern Song dynasty confirmed a relationship of formal vassalage with autonomy. The culture at royal courts combined popular spirit cults with the moral teachings of Buddhist monks, the occult skills of Daoist priests, and the erudition of Confucian scholars. The dynastic scheme of authority that was established at this time unraveled in synchrony with the decline of imperial power in the north. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Tran dynasty, based on the coast downriver from Hanoi, endeavored to eliminate the power of maternal families by ensuring that queen mothers were always from the royal family itself. In place of individual charisma, a group charisma was nurtured among the many talented princes of the royal family, who gained fame by leading soldiers against Mongol invaders in the thirteenth