

## INTRODUCTION TO VIETNAM: LAND, HISTORY AND CULTURE

*"Man is a shadow,  
gone as soon as born  
The trees,  
so green in spring,  
are bare in autumn  
Greatness and decline,  
why should we care?  
The destiny  
of men and empires  
is like a dew-drop  
on a grass leaf"*

Van Hanh 11th century



### The Land

"Why are we in Vietnam?" had to be the most popular question of the era now called "the 60s." Few Americans even knew where Vietnam was, let alone why their sons were being sent there to fight. It wasn't apparent how that small country on the other side of the world could be so important to a great nation like the United States. Yet for thirty years, several American presidents had insisted that, if Vietnam were "lost to communism," the effects would be felt as far away as Japan and the Suez Canal; the entire American security position in the Pacific would be severely threatened.

What then is Vietnam, and why might it be important to the United States? It is, first of all, an oddly-shaped country (see map, page 3), stretching like a letter "S" along the coast of mainland Southeast Asia from the Chinese border to the Gulf of Thailand. Vietnam measures over 1,000 miles from north to south and often less than 100 miles from east to west. Its western border is a string of mountains known to the Vietnamese as the Truong Son (Central Mountains). Beyond the Truong Son lie Vietnam's immediate neighbors, Laos and Cambodia. Its eastern border is the South China Sea. The entire country lies roughly within the tropical zone. It is a region of dense jungles, swamps, and lush rice paddies. The temperature rarely falls below fifty degrees and usually averages in the eighties and low nineties.

The Vietnamese often compare the shape of their country to two baskets of rice suspended on a bamboo pole. The baskets represent the two major rice growing river deltas that support the majority of the population of the country—the Red River Valley in the north and the Mekong River Delta in the south. The bamboo pole is the narrow waistline of central Vietnam that connects the two river deltas. The delta areas of the Red River and the Mekong form the heartlands of modern Vietnam. About two-thirds of the country's sixty million people live here. These areas produce the bulk of the rice, the staple food in the typical Vietnamese diet.

Most of the people of Vietnam are ethnic Vietnamese. They are descended from people who inhabited the region of the Red River Delta in North Vietnam several centuries prior to the Christian era. In their physical characteristics, the Vietnamese are roughly similar to many neighboring peoples in Southeast Asia and China. However, Vietnam has been recognized as a distinct culture for over two thousand years. In fact, its language is a separate member of the world family of languages.

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## History and Culture

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Throughout its history, perhaps the central fact of Vietnamese existence is the presence of its great neighbor China beyond the northern frontier. The importance of that presence was established early in Vietnamese history. During the first millennium B.C., Vietnam emerged as a small principality based on rice culture and local commerce in the lower Red River Delta. In the second century B.C., Vietnam was conquered and integrated into the expanding Chinese empire.

For one thousand years, Vietnam was part of China. Chinese officials administered the territory and attempted to assimilate the Vietnamese population into Chinese civilization, then one of the most advanced in the entire world. Chinese political and social institutions were introduced. Vietnamese education was based on the Confucian concept of the civil service examination system. Chinese styles also became dominant in literature and the arts. Educated Vietnamese conversed and wrote in Chinese, and the Chinese system of ideographic characters was adopted as the

written form of the Vietnamese language. At the same time, much of the poetry, architecture and painting retained themes distinctive to Southeast Asia.

To the Chinese, the absorption of the Red River Delta represented the expansion of a superior civilization over people of primitive culture, a concept of "manifest destiny" not unlike the westward expansion of the United States in the nineteenth century. And there is no doubt that one thousand years of Chinese rule left

*"Heaven entrusted us with a  
great responsibility.  
We had to surmount all obstacles."  
Nguyen Trai 15th century*

a lasting imprint on Vietnamese culture. But Chinese occupation did not extinguish the Vietnamese view of themselves as a separate and distinct people. On several occasions, popular uprisings broke out in an effort to evict the foreign intruder. Finally, in the mid-tenth century A.D., Vietnamese rebels took advantage of chaotic conditions in China, drove out the Chinese and restored Vietnamese independence.

The new state, which called itself Dai Viet (Greater Viet), soon became a major force in Southeast Asia. Although politically independent, Vietnam's new rulers found Chinese institutions and values useful in building a disciplined and powerful state. For several hundred years, Vietnamese political and social institutions continued to be based on Chinese models. Confucian philosophy and ethics emphasized the importance of the family and the community over the private interests of the individual. This concept reinforced the position of the monarch (who now called himself Emperor on the Chinese pattern) and the centralized power of the state.

But the power of the emperor was not absolute. While in many Southeast Asian societies the ruler was a god-king with unlimited powers, the Confucian system stressed that the behavior of the ruler was bound by a set of broad political principles (called in Chinese the Tao, or Way) that required compassion and concern for the needs of his people. Should he fail to live up to those



standards and oppress the people, then he would lose the "Mandate of Heaven" and could be deposed.

The Confucian system also was unique in its concern for the selection of talented and virtuous individuals to serve in the bureaucracy. Officials were not chosen exclusively from the landed aristocracy, as in much of the rest of the world, but through a series of civil service examinations that tested the candidate's knowledge of Confucian political, social and moral principles. The system was by no means totally egalitarian or democratic in the modern sense. Girls, for example, were not permitted to sit for the examinations because it was assumed that their place was in the home. But it did lay the foundation for an educated bureaucracy to administer the state and, thus restrict the power of the emperor and his court. And, most importantly, the system provided an opportunity for bright children from peasant households to escape the drudgery of rural life and rise to an influential position in Vietnamese society.

Spurred by its internal success, the Vietnamese state now began to expand southward. To a considerable degree, this southward expansion (known in Vietnamese history as "the March to the South") was a response to the growing need to locate additional cultivatable land for peasants living in the crowded Red River Delta.

The most available land was along the coast to the south, a region at that time controlled by an Indianized trading state known as Champa. Over the next several hundred years, rivalry with Champa led to an almost constant state of war between the two countries. The Vietnamese gradually pushed southward into areas controlled by Champa. Land-hungry peasants established settlements under the rule of the Vietnamese empire. By the eighteenth century, the state of Champa had entirely disappeared.

A similar process led to the Vietnamese seizure of the rich Mekong Delta from the declining state of Angkor in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Founded in the seventh century, Angkor, later to become Cambodia, was for several hundred years the largest and most powerful state in mainland Southeast Asia. By the fifteenth century, however, Angkor was in decline. Taking advantage of the situation, both Vietnam and Thailand, Angkor's neighbor to the west, confiscated territories from the disintegrating state. By 1700, all of the Mekong River Delta was in Vietnamese hands. Two hundred years later, the remnants of the once-mighty Angkor empire had been transformed into a joint protectorate of Vietnam and Thailand.

#### FARMER'S SONG AT CAN THO

What is a man but a farmer,  
bowels and a heart that sings,  
who plants his rice in season  
bowing then to the river,  
I am a farmer and I know what I know.  
This month's harvest is tall green rice.  
Next month's harvest is hordes of hungry beetles.  
How can peace come to a green country?

#### FERRYMAN'S SONG AT BINH MINH

Vendors of green oranges  
vendors of immaculate ducks  
Children, lame musicians  
begging with milky eyes  
Ancients with their boys  
they are moving altogether  
Riding the back of the dragon  
crossing the *Rach Can Tho*

—Herbert Krohn

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## The Peoples of Vietnam

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Throughout this period, the life of the average Vietnamese peasant changed very little. Like most lowland peoples in Southeast Asia, the majority of the Vietnamese were rice farmers. Until the last years of the Vietnam War, more than eighty percent of the Vietnamese people lived on the land. The vast majority lived in thousands of villages and hamlets (surrounded by the lush green paddy fields that provided their livelihood) scattered throughout Vietnam.

For Vietnamese peasants, the village traditionally formed the horizon of their lives. It was there that they were born, lived and died, often in the home and on the land occupied by their forefathers. The village was their universe. All decisions relating to their lives were made, if not within the family, then by the council of elders composed of the more respected or wealthy landowners in the village.

The central government, represented by a magistrate and his staff in the district capital, seemed far away, an attitude exemplified by the famous saying, "The authority of the emperor stops at the village gate." For most villagers, the government meant two things: taxes and conscription, for military service or community labor to work on the dikes or the irrigation system. All villages were expected to provide taxes and recruits to the state, but decisions on individual tax rates were normally made by the local council of elders on the basis of landholding and sent to the district magistrate for transmittal to the central government.

In such conditions, most Vietnamese did not develop a strong sense of participation in the political process. As was true in most traditional societies, major political decisions dealing with broad policy issues and national defense were made by the Emperor, assisted by his court and the imperial bureaucracy. In general, the Vietnamese respected strong government that would provide security, efficiency, and a measure of social justice for the population at large. They relied on the village council for their local needs, such as the resolution of civil disputes, the distribution of taxes and conscript labor, and the allocation of communal land.

Nor did the Vietnamese develop a strong sense of individualism and freedom of choice in the western sense. Because rice farming demanded a concentrated

effort by all members of the family, individuals were expected to subordinate their needs to those of the group. Like China, Vietnam practiced the concept of the joint family system, with as many as three generations living under one roof. The family was patriarchal in nature, with the senior male playing—at least in theory—the dominant decision-making role in the family unit. According to Confucian ideology, women were expected to obey their husbands (although in practice they often played an influential role in family decisions). Children were admonished to obey their parents. Marriages usually were arranged, and sons were expected to remain on the ancestral land after

*"We have known both days of greatness and times of decline, but never have we lacked for heroes ."*

Nguyen Trai 15th century

marriage to maintain the family plot and provide for the needs of their elders.

The demands of rice farming shaped the life of the average Vietnamese. Few had enough rice land to do more than eke out a bare existence for themselves and their families. Many had too little land or none at all. They were either forced to lease land from the wealthy, sometimes at exorbitant rents, or to sell themselves as hired labor. Most villages also reserved some common land to be distributed to the needy on a temporary basis. All too often, however, this land also was confiscated by the powerful for their own uses.

Even for those farmers with adequate land, life was hard. Although rice is one of the most prolific grain crops known to man, its cultivation demands a considerable amount of human labor for planting, weeding, maintaining the irrigation system, and bringing in the harvest. Farmers raised large families in the hopes of having male children to guarantee survival. This led to a growing population in the rich rice-growing areas. So long as the farmer was blessed with a bountiful harvest, large families were justified. All too often, however, natural disasters like floods, typhoons, or droughts damaged the crops and led to hunger and starvation. Even in good times, the farmer had to deal with high taxes, rents, and often heavy indebtedness. Once in debt, high rates of interest presented a heavy burden and

often cost the farmer his land. For most Vietnamese, it was a hard life.

The ethnic Vietnamese make up approximately ninety percent of the total population of the country. The remaining ten percent are composed of a variety of peoples. These include: (1) various ethnic and cultural groups living in the mountainous areas of Vietnam (about three million); (2) the Cham (50,000) and the Khmer (400,000), who are descended from peoples

*"It is better to be a ghost in Vietnam  
than an emperor in China ."*

Tran Bing Trong 17th century

assimilated by the Vietnamese during their historic expansion to the south; and (3) three million descendants of Chinese settlers who migrated into Vietnam from south China during the past 300 years.

With so much of its population ethnic Vietnamese, Vietnam is one of the most homogeneous societies in Southeast Asia, a region noted for its ethnic and cultural diversity. This homogeneity has helped to promote Vietnam's exceptionally strong sense of national identity. As we shall see, the Vietnamese are a tough and resourceful people, fiercely dedicated to their independence and the pursuit of their national interests.

Yet there is another side to the Vietnamese character, one that helps to explain why the Vietnam War was much more than just an ideological struggle between communist and capitalist forces, but also a civil war among the Vietnamese people themselves. For although the ethnic Vietnamese are by far the dominant group in the country, they themselves have long been divided in important ways.

The major divisions among the Vietnamese are geographical and religious. The former is partly a product of Vietnamese expansion to the south. After the tenth century A.D., the Vietnamese began to expand southward from their crowded historical heartland into the vast and open reaches of the Mekong River Delta. In these new conditions, a "frontier village" atmosphere of freedom and individual choice developed. This way of life, comparable in some respects to the nineteenth century American West, was an extreme departure from traditional Vietnamese culture. During the colonial period in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the people of the south came under the influence of

French institutions and culture, further accentuating the regional differences. They were thus more receptive to the introduction of a system based on western capitalist practices and political democracy. These distinctive differences between North and South, as we shall see, contributed significantly to the course of the Vietnam War.

The second major division among the ethnic Vietnamese is religious. The majority of the population is at least nominally Buddhist, with an admixture of Confucian, Taoist, and animist beliefs. However, there are about three million Catholics, whose ancestors were converted by French missionaries between the seventeenth and the early twentieth centuries. The Catholics have been more educated in western ideas and thus more inclined than their Buddhist compatriots to favor a political system patterned after those of western Europe and the United States. They were among the

*"The truth is that over the  
last decade I have been victorious  
in both south and north.  
My success, I must admit was due  
to the unreserved support  
of my people ."*

Nguyen Hue 18th century

primary supporters of the Saigon regime in South Vietnam during the Vietnam War.

Finally, there are two major religious sects in Vietnam—the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao—each composed of more than one million adherents. Both sects emerged in the Mekong Delta in response to the imposition of colonialism and the disintegration of the traditional Vietnamese state. The Hoa Hao religion is a form of reformed Buddhism, an attempt to put true Buddhist teaching into practice in "corrupt" everyday society. Cao Dai (meaning High Tower) is a religion that combines the tenets of several western and Asian creeds. Although both are considered religions, they also are highly political in orientation. Leaders of both religions have tried to create politically independent areas in the Mekong Delta, resisting the centralizing efforts of the Saigon regime and, more recently, the communist regime in Hanoi.



Illustration by Ho Dac Ngoc, from *The Tale of Kieu*