A HISTORICAL SURVEY
OF EDUCATIONAL
DEVELOPMENTS IN
VIETNAM

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1959

Vol. XXXII December 1959 Number 2
BULLETIN OF THE BUREAU OF SCHOOL SERVICE
College of Education, University of Kentucky, Lexington
A Historical Survey of Educational Developments in Vietnam

by

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PREFACE

The President of the United States expressed the ideal for international cooperation in the Commencement Address at Baylor University, Waco, Texas, May 25, 1956:

"... Many nations, although their cultures are ancient and rich in human values, do not possess the resources to spread the needed education throughout their populations. But they can wisely use that help that respects their traditions and ways."

This publication represents one product of the emphasis upon international cooperation in education. The writer, a capable young Vietnamese graduate student at the University of Kentucky, completed a study of the factors and influences that affected the past century of revolution, reaction and reconstruction in his country. As we view the new Vietnam today there is evidence of amazing and encouraging growth and new developments that represent strong contribution by programs of assistance and education. Here, again, is a fresh illustration of the thesis that a people hold the key to their future if they understand and can guide the changes in their own culture.

The influences and factors that have changed a nation of Confucian tradition and agrarian life, through a long period of colonial domination and frustration, climaxed by revolutions, invasion and occupation, civil war, division, and reconstruction represent the background for the study. The upheaval that has changed the traditional ways of life has also brought new needs and aspirations which are imperative considerations for the educational leadership of the new nation.

Readers who follow the theses of the writer will have some additional evidences for assessment of the contribution he has made. It seems evident at this juncture that the new Vietnam has made astonishing strides toward greater stability and reconstruction during the past three years. One prominent phase of this encouraging growth has been the great gains from the new emphasis on literacy education, an emphasis which the writer placed first in importance. It is hoped that this progress will hearten the leadership of Vietnam and of other nations with comparable educational needs and strengthen the resolve of those who are able to render assistance of the kind that respects the traditions and ways of the peoples.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Basic Geographic Facts about Vietnam

Vietnam is situated in Southeast Asia, bounded on the north by China, on the west by Laos and Cambodia, and on the east and south by the Pacific Ocean. About two-thirds of its 127,380 square miles are covered by mountains and plateaus. Along the Chinese frontier are the limestone mountains of North Vietnam, which have steep-walled canyons and spires terminating in a series of islands in the sea. The Annam Cordillera consists of ranges and plateaus reaching from one corner of the country to another; its widest developments are in the north and the south. Almost everywhere communications between the highlands and the coast are rugged.

In North Vietnam, the delta of the Red River and the Black River covers an area of about 5,400 square miles. The coast of Central Vietnam has a series of small deltas and plains, separated from one another where the Annam Cordillera reaches the sea. Their combined area is about 7,700 square miles and much of the shore line is inhospitable and shelterless. The delta of the Mekong begins at Pnom Penh in Cambodia; most of it, however, lies in South Vietnam. The whole area of the delta is about 26,000 square miles.

Almost all of Vietnam is within the tropics, so that lowland temperatures and humidity are high. Usually from May to December destructive typhoons strike all sections of the east coast, but especially the shore line of Central Vietnam. These deadly winds may bring as much as twenty-five inches of rain in twenty-four hours.

1 "Vietnam" was officially adopted as the name of the country by the emperor Gia Long when he unified it at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Gia Long was the founder of the Nguyen dynasty to which the ex-emperor Bao Dai belongs. "Vietnam" means "Land of the South." Under the French domination, the country was divided into three parts—Tonkin in the north, Annam in the center, and Cochinchina in the south. Since the end of World War Two, "Vietnam" has come into common usage. It will be consistently used in this study so as to avoid confusion.
Like its neighbors in Southeast Asia as well as China and India, Vietnam is part of that climatic zone which is characterized by the monsoon regime throughout the year. The southwestern, southern, and southeastern monsoons bring warmth and abundant rainfall, whereas cold, dry weather comes with the northern and northeastern monsoons. The alternations of these winds regulate agricultural work in Vietnam, and give rural life its rhythm.

Cultivated land is almost entirely in the deltas. The abundant rains carried by the monsoons provide physical conditions favorable for the cultivation of rice, which is the most important agricultural production of the country. This cereal forms about ninety per cent of the Vietnamese diet and some fifty per cent of Vietnam's total exports. The yield, however, is very low because of insufficient fertilization and antiquated methods. In addition to rice, there are other food crops—such as corn, sweet potatoes, beans, manioc, and taro. Commercial crops include cotton, sugar cane, rubber, tobacco, and tea. Fish and fish products are important both for local use and for export.

Mining is concentrated in North Vietnam. Coal output amounted to nearly 2,500,000 metric tons in 1939. Other minerals are tin, zinc, iron ore, chromium, manganese, bauxite, gold, and silver. Phosphate is found in the south. Hydroelectric power is also available.

The country is well endowed for industrial development since it has the basic raw materials of heavy industry and can also supply textile fibers, rubber, vegetable oils, timber, and other requirements for light industries. Modern industry, however, is limited to rice mills, distilleries, saw mills, textile mills, sugar refineries, and other small-scale processing industries.

Mention is to be made of the traditional village handicrafts which supplement agriculture and make use of the villager's time left over after his work in the rice-fields. They include embroidery, basket making, pottery, lacquering, weaving, etc., which are more developed in North Vietnam than in the two other parts of the country. With the exception of a few groups of potters, villages of full-time handicraftsmen are rare.

Vietnam has trade relations with a large number of countries in the Far East and in Western Europe. Its exports consist mainly of raw and semi-manufactured materials—such as rice, corn, rubber, coal, and raw hides. Its imports include fabrics, metal and metal
products, machines and machinery, and some food products—that is, chiefly manufactured articles.

A railway follows along the coast of Vietnam from north to south, with a branch line penetrating into China. The total length of the rail network is about three thousand kilometers. In addition, there are some thirty thousand kilometers of roads, a series of canals, and some navigable rivers. The two main seaports are Haiphong in North Vietnam and Saigon in South Vietnam. Air transport is provided by Air France, Air Vietnam, and some British-Chinese airlines. Two international airports are located respectively near Hanoi in North Vietnam and near Saigon in South Vietnam; seven secondary airfields are scattered throughout the country.

The population of Vietnam amounts to nearly twenty million Vietnamese, who occupy the rice-growing deltas of the Red River and of the Mekong as well as the coastal plains of Central Vietnam. A few hundred thousand Chinese, Europeans, Eurasians, and other foreigners, live in such large urban centers as Hanoi, Haiphong,
Saigon, and Cho Lon. Some tribes of Indonesian origin form scattered groups in the jungles and the highlands.²

Main Historical Events in Vietnam

According to legends and myths, it would seem that the Vietnamese were originally from Thibet or from some part of Southern China where internal strife forced them to migrate. Under their irresistible southward drive, the earlier inhabitants of Vietnam were assimilated or driven back to the mountains.

Vietnam was under Chinese rule from about 207 B.C. to 939 A.D.;³ after its liberation, the overwhelming influence of Chinese civilization remained. Indeed, the country still bears the strong imprint of China’s cultural domination in its literature, religions, customs, and until recently in its elaborate imperial structure and mandarin system.

It was not until the seventeenth century that Christian missionary zeal, embodied in the Jesuits, led the first Frenchmen to Vietnam. One of them, Father Alexander of Rhodes, was instrumental in forming the Society of Foreign Missions which had a preponderent role in the development of Catholicism among the Vietnamese. Besides the missionaries, there was a certain number of European traders whose commerce was made unprofitable by their mutual jealousy, the mandarins’ exactions, and the people’s lack of interest in European articles.

A series of dynastic struggles in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries permitted the intervention of the French in Vietnam. Pigneau de Behaine, bishop of Adran, supported the cause of the prince of South Vietnam, Nguyen Anh. After failing to secure the help of the French government, he recruited French volunteers, reorganized the army and fleet of Nguyen Anh, and fought at the head of his troops. Although he was killed in a battle in 1799, De Behaine succeeded in paving the way for the eventual triumph of the prince of South Vietnam, who unified Vietnam and founded the


³ In the fifteenth century, China regained control over Vietnam for a short period of fourteen years (1414-1428).

In spite of his unbounded benevolence toward his French officers, Gia Long had no intention of opening Vietnam to French commerce. His successors persecuted Christian missionaries and converts, which led to diplomatic protests and furnished the pretext for armed intervention. A French-Spanish expedition captured Saigon in February 1859. By the treaty of June 5, 1862, the emperor Tu Duc ceded the eastern part of South Vietnam to France, granted liberty to Christians throughout Vietnam, and opened the Mekong and a number of seaports to French traders. The western part of South Vietnam came under French rule in 1867.

Desiring to open a good road into the southern provinces of China, the French extended their domination to North Vietnam. Hanoi was attacked and captured on November 20, 1873. By the treaty of March 15, 1874, the emperor Tu Duc confirmed the cession of South Vietnam to France, opened the Red River to French commerce, and put North Vietnam and Central Vietnam under the French protectorate system.

The intervention of the Chinese led to a series of military operations which brought forth the treaties of 1884 and 1885. These finally and definitely set up the French control over all of Vietnam.

By the end of the nineteenth century, French Indochina was established, consisting of the colony of Cochin-China (South Vietnam) and of the four protectorates of Tonkin (North Vietnam), Annam (Central Vietnam), Cambodia, and Laos.

From the beginning of the twentieth century to the outbreak of World War Two, the French managed to keep peace and order in Vietnam. Nationalist uprisings, lacking coordination and discipline, failed time and again. Furthermore, those attempts to overthrow the French domination were ruthlessly suppressed.

With France’s defeat in Europe, the Japanese militarists moved in swiftly and effectively against Vietnam, which was one of their major objectives in terms of vital raw materials and military bases. Their increasing demands, supported by demonstrations of force, obliged the French to make concession after concession. In July

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4 The kingdom of Cambodia accepted French protection in 1863.
5 The French protectorate over the kingdom of Laos was established in 1893.
1941, all of Vietnam was occupied by Japanese troops. For reasons of expediency, the French administration was allowed to continue running the country. It was not until March 1945 that the Japanese actually moved in on the government.\textsuperscript{6} 

In the meantime, the \textit{Viet Minh} (League for the Independence of Vietnam) and other independence groups continued their guerilla war against the Japanese. When militarist Japan collapsed, a provisional government under the presidency of \textit{Ho Chi Minh} established itself in Hanoi and issued a Declaration of Independence of Vietnam in September 1945.\textsuperscript{7} The emperor \textit{Bao Dai} abdicated and later became supreme counselor to the new government. Huge demonstrations welcomed the newly achieved independence. More than ninety per cent of the people voted in the general elections of January 1946. A constitution was adopted that laid the legal foundations for the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

For the purpose of accepting the surrender of the Japanese troops, the Allies divided Vietnam into two parts with the sixteenth parallel as the line of demarcation. In the south, the British refused to negotiate with the Vietnamese leaders who were in control of the administration. Furthermore, the British troops helped the French gain control of Saigon and other cities. In the north, the Chinese let the Vietnamese run the government, and kept the French out of the area.

In the spring of 1946, Allied troops were withdrawn.\textsuperscript{8} Negotiations between France and Vietnam led to the signing of an accord on March 6, 1946, which allowed the French to return to North Vietnam. By this agreement, the French government recognized Vietnam as a “free” state within the French Union, with its own government, army, and finances. The accord also stated that a referendum would be used to determine whether South Vietnam wanted to join the Vietnamese state.

\textsuperscript{6} The emperor \textit{Bao Dai} formed a national government of Vietnam in March 1945. Actually, however, the control of the country was in the hands of the Japanese.

\textsuperscript{7} This provisional government was formed by a \textit{Viet Minh} congress, which was held in August 1945 near the Chinese border. Its president, \textit{Ho Chi Minh}, got his political training in France and in the Soviet Union. He is now regarded as a communist leader.

\textsuperscript{8} In February, 1946, the French gave the Chinese generous concessions and promised special treatment to the Chinese residing in Vietnam. In return, \textit{Chiang Kai-shek} consented to withdraw his troops from the country.
Conferences were called to settle the main points of difference between the French demands and the Vietnamese aspirations. In the meantime, the French set up a provisional government in South Vietnam, creating a very tense atmosphere in the whole country. While negotiations were under way at Fontainebleau in France, a French-sponsored conference was held at Dalat in South Vietnam. No representative of the government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was invited. The Vietnamese delegates walked out of the Fontainebleau Conference in protest. On September 14, 1946, however, Ho Chi Minh secured a modus vivendi providing for the cessation of hostilities.

Tension increased as a series of clashes took place in different parts of North Vietnam. On November 23, 1946, Haiphong was bombed by the French troops and thousands of civilians were killed or wounded. The following month, war broke out in North and Central Vietnam.

By the middle of 1948, the French recognized the unity of Vietnam. The accord of June 5, 1948, led to the formation of a provisional government for the whole country, with the ex-emperor Bao Dai as Chief of State. Another agreement on March 8, 1949, gave Vietnam a limited independence within the framework of the French Union.

In January, 1950, the Soviet Union and Red China recognized Ho Chi Minh’s regime. The United States and Great Britain countered by giving full recognition to Bao Dai’s government in the following month.

As time went on, the areas controlled by the French Union forces gradually dwindled. By the spring of 1954, the world became much concerned about the deterioration of the French military position in North Vietnam. In February 1954, agreement was reached in Berlin between the United States, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and France to hold a conference in Geneva with a view to discussing Korean problems as well as trying to settle the war in Vietnam. While fighting was raging on various fronts, the Viet Minh besieged the French fortress of Dien Bien Phu,9 which they succeeded in capturing on May 8, 1954. They also seized

important non-communist areas, including the Catholic bishoprics of Phat Diem and Bui Chu. The Geneva Conference, opened on April 26, lasted almost three months. After numerous proposals and counterproposals, an agreement was finally reached, resulting in the cessation of hostilities in Vietnam and the partition of the country at the seventeenth parallel. On July 21, 1954, the final documents were signed in Geneva, without the participation of neither the United States nor the State of Vietnam.\footnote{Details concerning the Geneva Conference can be obtained from the Sunday issues of the \textit{New York Times}, May to July, 1954.}

In the immediate post-Geneva period, the State of Vietnam in the south was confronted with many urgent problems. More than 850,000 Northern Vietnamese were evacuated to the southern sector. Reception centers had to be organized, food and clothes distributed, and resettlement villages constructed. In its efforts to provide for the welfare of the refugees, the Vietnamese government was offered invaluable assistance from many friendly governments and private agencies. As a result, the refugee problem has been largely solved.

The Vietnamese government also had to cope with several military and political crises. In the fall of 1954, the Chief of Staff of the Vietnamese Army, General Nguyen van Hinh, was withdrawn from active service and ordered to leave for France on a military mission. With strong support from his unit commanders, the Chief of Staff defied Prime Minister Ngo Dinh Diem, who had not gained control over the Vietnamese Army. It was not until November 1954 that the crisis ended, when Chief of State Bao Dai removed General Nguyen van Hinh from his post. Then, Prime Minister Ngo Dinh Diem maneuvered to divide and eliminate the politico-religious sects from the political scene. After a bloody struggle in April and May 1955, the Binh Xuyen and Hoa Hao units were defeated and dispersed. Many dissident generals and their troops were induced to rally around the government, while others were captured or killed.

Clashes between Chief of State Bao Dai and Prime Minister Ngo Dinh Diem resulted in a popular referendum in October 1955, which changed the constitutional structure of the Vietnamese government. Bao Dai was deposed, and a Republic was established with Ngo Dinh Diem as first President. On March 4, 1956, elections for a Constituent Assembly were conducted. A Western-inspired
Constitution was prepared and proclaimed the supreme law of the land. Ngo Dinh Diem continues as President for a five-year term, while the Constituent Assembly is now the regular Legislature.

An elaborate system of propaganda and control has been set up in the rural areas, particularly in the districts formerly dominated by communist cadres. Other techniques of political and psychological warfare—such as, anti-communist rallies and self-criticism meetings—have been used against the underground. It seems that this all-out effort has enabled the Vietnamese government to stamp out most communist activities in the Republic of Vietnam.

Other important developments include the evacuation of French forces from the Republic, the release of French advisers and personnel, and the withdrawal of the Vietnamese representation from the High Council of the French Union. A national bank has been established, and an army formed and equipped with modern weapons. Direct contacts have been made with the outside world regarding trade, cultural activities, and diplomatic representation.

At the present time, the government of the Republic of Vietnam is increasingly turning its attention toward elaborating and implementing programs of economic and social reconstruction. With
the help of friendly nations—particularly, of the United States—it has been reasonably successful in coping with these problems.\textsuperscript{11}

\textbf{Purpose and Scope of this Study}

For almost a century, Vietnam has undergone many changes and crises, some of which have been instrumental in reshaping its society and institutions. To a Confucian-inspired, backward-looking nation, the French brought Western civilization with its science, technology, and educational system. The effect, of course, was disruptive, since new patterns of living and thinking challenged and often eliminated age-old traditions and practices. During and after World War Two, Vietnam has been a battleground on which colonialism, communism, and nationalism have bitterly fought with one another for power. The resulting ravages and crises have left an indelible imprint upon the Vietnamese people. A tremendous socio-economic upheaval has practically reached every corner of Vietnam, playing havoc with the traditional way of life while creating new aspirations and demands. As a process within a culture, education in Vietnam has accordingly gone through many stages, and is still being modified so as to meet the needs of a growing nation.

This study is an attempt to survey the educational developments in Vietnam in relation to the social and political conditions of the country. Although there have been studies dealing with education in Vietnam, they have stressed the formal aspect of schooling rather than education in its broad sense. In the following chapters, efforts will be made to present (1) the educational systems that have existed in the country, and (2) other educative agencies—such as, the family, youth organizations, artisans' guilds, and the like—that have played an important role in shaping the Vietnamese way of life. In addition, main social and political developments will be surveyed and condensed so as to provide this study with a cultural background.

There will be three parts dealing with education (1) in traditional Vietnam, (2) in French-controlled Vietnam, and (3) in

\textsuperscript{11} Material for this section has been obtained from the references in the Bibliography, particularly the following: Thomas E. Ennis, \textit{French Policy and Developments in Indochina}, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Illinois, 1936. Ellen J. Hammer, \textit{The Struggle for Indochina}, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1954.
present-day Vietnam. The last part will, of necessity, be limited to the presentation of the educational system in the Republic of Vietnam, since data concerning education in communist-led North Vietnam are not easily accessible at the present time. It is still early to appraise the outcomes of educational reforms in South Vietnam, which would make a challenging research project for students interested in the future educational developments in that part of the world.
CHAPTER II

POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONDITIONS IN
THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The Imperial Structure

The emperor of Vietnam was believed to hold his office through Heaven's mandate, which made his authority absolute and sacred. In him were combined the administrative, legislative, and judicial powers. His will was both the source and the sanction of law. His ministers and mandarins, deriving authority from him, owed him unreserved loyalty. To his people he was the Son of Heaven (Thien Tu), whose divine commission was to promote their welfare through maintaining peace, order, and prosperity in his empire. They in turn respected his will, which was regarded as emanating from the supreme celestial authority. Indeed, to disobey him was to commit a sacrilege.

Being also the religious head of the state, the emperor performed many ceremonies, especially the Sacrifice to Heaven (Te Nam Giao), and conferred titles upon Buddhist and Taoist dignitaries. His quasi-divine character required him to make his person mysterious by remaining hidden in his inviolable palace most of the time. Furthermore, his personal name was never to be pronounced or mentioned in official documents and mandarinal examinations. Upon his accession to the throne, he took a "reign name" or "reign title," by which dates were computed. 12

It was believed, however, that the emperor might lose Heaven's mandate, if he persistently proved himself unworthy. In this connection, Virginia Thompson says:

\[\ldots\] As part of the principle of balancing privilege by duty, which permeates the whole system, the Emperor must serve as an example of virtue to his subjects: he is the first scholar of his kingdom, the Complete Observer of Confucius's precepts. \ldots If the sovereign is persistently evil or unjust, he is regarded as having forfeited his right to rule. Then, and only then, have the people a right to revolt, and they are even authorized to do so by divine law. \ldots 13

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12 For instance, when the founder of the Nguyen dynasty acceded to the throne in 1802, he took the "reign title" of Gia Long. That year became Gia Long's First Year; the following year was Gia Long's Second Year; and so on. The same process was repeated with each emperor.

Thus, the emperor's absolutism was somewhat tempered by the fear of Heaven, whose displeasure was believed to reveal itself in such public misfortunes as floods, droughts, and famines. Under these circumstances, a person who succeeded in seizing power might be considered by the people as having received the divine commission, unless he himself was "evil" or oppressive. Actually, however, succession to the throne more than often took place through palace revolutions, in which the masses had no part. It is also doubtful whether any emperor had ever ruled solely by the influence of his "virtue."

Below the emperor was a vast array of officials, eunuchs, and servants, who took care of the imperial household. Although they were not supposed to play any role in the government, they might have immense influence by helping an intriguing empress to rule over both the sovereign and the state. Their machinations might also lead to a change in dynasty or at least to the disgrace of a high-ranking mandarin.

The Vietnamese nobility included members of the imperial family and meritorious mandarins. Titles were also conferred by the emperor upon exceptionally deserving citizens in terms of services rendered to the state or of high moral character. Rank was only a social distinction, involving no office-holding.

The central government was constituted by two councils of state and six ministries. In addition, the emperor Gia Long created four chancellors (the Pillars of the Empire), who supervised the imperial household and acted for the sovereign both during his lifetime and after his death. The council of state Co-Mat was a secret body which dealt with all vital affairs of state; the Ministerial Council discussed problems concerning agrarian law, rites, justice, and imperial edicts. Ministers were at the head of the departments of Interior, Justice, Rites, Finance, War, and Public Works. Finally, there was a corps of imperial inspectors whose main duty was to keep watch over the whole administrative machinery.

It is significant to note that Vietnam had a ministry of rites (Le Bo), which has always played an important role in all Confucian countries. The word "rites" is only an imperfect translation of Le—of which Li is the anglicized version. Indeed, Le refers to different things in different contexts. It may mean "propriety," "reverence," "rites," as well as "the ideal standard of social and religious conduct" or "the religious and moral way of life. From
the standpoint of the Confucian school of thought Le is of vital importance in regulating human relationships and in creating a harmonious unity between men, Earth, and Heaven.\(^{14}\) As the Vietnamese state was ordered on such a principle, a ministry of rites was needed to maintain and enforce the practice of appropriate social and religious ceremonies.

Another significant feature of the imperial government of Vietnam was the absence of a ministry of foreign affairs. Diplomatic relations with other countries were practically unknown to the Vietnamese rulers, who had for centuries recognized only the suzerainety of China over their empire. It can be said that the idea of dealing with other governments on the basis of equality was inconceivable, if not revolutionary.

**The Mandarin System**

For administrative purposes, the emperor delegated his powers to a hierarchy of mandarins (*quan*), who were divided into nine classes of two degrees each. As will be discussed in later chapters, these imperial aids were recruited from the people on a merit basis. Partaking of the emperor's absolute and quasi-divine authority, they exercised all powers without specialization. Indeed, they governed, administered, judged, and defended the local areas as well. They also participated in the imperial rites and performed certain religious ceremonies. Like the emperor, they were supposed to devote themselves to the welfare of the people and to rule less by force than by the influence of their "virtue." In other words, they were "fathers and mothers" of the population within their jurisdictions, as the sovereign was "father and mother" of the whole nation.

The mandarinate was in charge of the thirty-one provinces of Vietnam, which were subdivided into prefectures (*phu*), sub-prefectures (*huyen*), and highland districts (*chau*). Toward the end of the nineteenth century, there were ninety-eight *phus* and 342 *huyens* and *chaus*.

A few words must be said about the military mandarins, who were also divided into nine classes of two degrees each. Their recruitment was based mostly on physical prowess and some knowledge of military tactics and of Chinese characters. A literary examination, however, was required for mandarins of third class

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The Vietnamese people, trained in the Confucian school of thought, disdained the display of force and practically worshipped learning and the written word. For them, military mandarins were inherently inferior to civil mandarins.

The mandarin system provided Vietnam with a well-organized administrative machinery, based on the principle of balancing duty by privilege as well as on Confucian precepts. In his paternalistic role, the mandarin was held responsible for all that happened to the people within his jurisdiction. Moreover, a wide variety of legal and moral restrictions was imposed upon him. He was forbidden to leave his district, unless on official business; he might neither acquire property nor marry therein. As family and village ties were strong in Vietnam, elaborate regulations prevented the danger of nepotism. Thus, two mandarins related to each other by blood or marriage might not serve in the same district, nor might two natives of a village work in the same office. Upon the death of his father or mother, an official was required to retire from public life for twenty-seven months—a period equivalent to three years according to the mourning customs in Vietnam. Demotion, dismissal, exile, and death were the different penalties for violation of law or abuse of power.

The above-mentioned duties were compensated by certain privileges. As an imperial representative, the mandarin partook of the Son of Heaven’s quasi-divine character. His person was inviolable and surrounded with decorum. People could not approach him without prostrations or gifts appropriate to his rank. His parents and children shared his social distinction and might receive honorific titles from the emperor. Even his native village was proud of his rise to power, which was celebrated by copious banquets and elaborate ceremonies.

Along with its qualities, the mandarin system had some shortcomings. First of all, the people had no voice in the government, in spite of the fact that the mandarinate was recruited from the masses. The mandarins of Vietnam represented but one social class—that of the scholars—which tended to uphold the emperor’s absolute authority because of its Confucian convictions and of its personal interests as well. The larger portion of the people, consisting of rice-growing farmers, artisans, and merchants, did not participate in the management of state affairs and, consequently, adopted a submissive and apathetic attitude toward the government.
so long as peace and order reigned over the country. The result was that Vietnam lacked a dynamic culture and the exchange of ideas on the international level was brought almost to a standstill. In the words of Virginia Thompson, the Vietnamese were "forcibly moulded into a united and stereotyped people."15 Another shortcoming of the system was the danger of financial corruption. The underpaid mandarin had to support many dependents. In addition to his usually large family, there might be relatives, former teachers, and friends, who were in need. Duty-bound as he was, he could not but help them. Since gifts from litigants or favor-seeking persons were acceptable, if not obligatory, it was not surprising that a poor mandarin succumbed to temptation time and again. Graft was, however, restrained by Confucian education as well as by the fear of punishment.

The Commune

At the base of the Vietnamese social pyramid stood the semi-autonomous commune. It was an agglomeration of several families bound together by strong religious and social obligations. Each commune was a state in and by itself, with its own genii, rites, customs, traditions, as well as its own government and economic life. Hidden behind a hedge of bamboos, it was somewhat cut off from the outside world, whose encroachment was resented and often resisted. Indeed, according to a Vietnamese popular saying, the emperor's law had to yield to the commune's custom (Phep vua thua le lang).

The creation of new communes is described by Virginia Thompson in the following terms:

When the head of the commune-clan felt that the soil was becoming exhausted for his ever-increasing population, he chose the most ambitious and able man of the younger generation to direct the task of colonizing a new territory. The young leader called to his aid any who showed conspicuous courage and initiative. Among those who took part in the exodus were naturally the resourceless and the malcontents, of whom the old commune felt itself well rid. The new villages, founded usually along the river banks, were like so many frontier citadels. They were the advance guard of an expanding civilization in which the ownership of property was thought to be the best guarantee against lawlessness—no matter what the origin or character of the new colonizers.16

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16 Ibid., pp. 32-33.
This kind of expansion was supported and regulated by the imperial government, which wanted to widen the frontiers of the empire and also to give anti-social elements a chance to reform. Furthermore, it was not unusual that state prisoners were deported and forced to colonize new lands.

The commune was allowed to govern itself, provided that it complied with the laws of the empire, paid taxes, and recruited soldiers for the state. Its Council of Notables, elected by its people in a general meeting, made and executed the laws, settled disputes between fellow villagers or with neighboring villages, voted the communal budget, approved of all land transactions, collected the taxes and contributions levied by the state, supervised the building and repairing of temples and dikes—in brief, most communal affairs were taken care of without the intervention of the provincial administration. These Notables were usually chosen on the basis of scholarship, old age, administrative ability, and landownership as well. It is true that cases of abuse of power occasionally occurred, in which rich schemers attempted to govern in the interests of their own class. But, as a whole, communal governments were efficient and devoted to the welfare of the people. Commenting on the communal organization in Vietnam, Philippe Devillers says:

Throughout its history, Vietnam has maintained this social cell [the commune]. Perhaps, for some of our contemporaries, it is not a perfect example of democracy. It has at least given the Vietnamese people a deep-rooted habit of freedom from the central power whose encroachment into the individual’s private life has thus been reduced to a minimum. Of course, all was not perfect on the communal level, but the relations between the inhabitants were much less impersonal than they are nowadays in our European villages for instance. . . .17

Indeed, the commune was like an enlarged patriarchal family, in which group responsibility prevailed. All that affected communal life—public works, police, the care of the poor and infirm, etc.—was done cooperatively. To this day communal granaries and communally owned lands still exist in Vietnam. Group responsibility also applied to criminal and fiscal matters. Thus, the commune as a whole could be held accountable for the deeds of each of its members, just as the family of a criminal could be punished.

indiscriminately. The Council of Notables, being in charge of the collection of taxes, must make up for any deficiency regardless of its causes.

Each commune had a ly-truong,18 who was nominated by the Notables and confirmed by the provincial authorities. This functionary executed the decisions of the communal council and served as an intermediary between his fellow villagers and the central government. It was through him that imperial edicts and mandarinal decrees were handed down to the people, just as communal requests and petitions were submitted by him to the provincial administration.

Several communes constituted a canton. This rather artificial administrative unit had a head but no headquarters. It was, however, the highest form of self-elected government in Vietnam. Chosen by the people, the chief of canton or chanh-tong acted as a coordinator between the provincial administration and the different communes within his jurisdiction.

The People and Their Way of Life

Basically, the Vietnamese society was divided into four classes: (1) the scholars or Si, (2) the farmers or Nong, (3) the artisans or Cong, and (4) the merchants or Thuong. Needless to say, there were scattered groups of Buddhist monks, Taoist priests, sorcerers, and the like, who did not have any definite social status, although they might exercise a great influence over the people. Similarly, noblemen and members of the imperial family did not constitute a distinct class in the Vietnamese society.

At the top of the social pyramid were the scholars, from whom the mandarinate was recruited. These Confucian disciples embodied learning and virtue—two qualities highly esteemed by the Vietnamese people. It is true that many scholars devoted themselves to study and to the welfare of the masses. As mandarins, they made every effort to promote harmony in human and social relationships. As teachers, they performed the task of imparting knowledge and wisdom to the younger generation. All of them were characterized by their veneration for Confucius and his teachings, their disdain for manual labor, and their conservative attitude.

18 The word ly-truong has been often improperly translated as “village mayor.” In reality, the ly-truong was not the head of the Council of Notables, but its executive agent.
toward changes. To all problems they looked to the past for answers; they could not conceive of any society which would not be rooted in the Confucian tradition.

Since Vietnam was mainly an agricultural country, it is not surprising that the farmers occupied a respectable place in society, immediately below the scholars. Furthermore, rice has always been the staple food of the Vietnamese people; as such, it has acquired a quasi-divine character. Until recently, sacrifices were made to the spirits of the earth, of the monsoons, and of agri-
culture; religious ceremonies and festivals took place before the planting and transplanting of rice as well as during harvest time.\(^{19}\)

The Vietnamese artisans were organized into guilds. In urban centers, they grouped together in certain streets which were than named after their trades. Thus, in Hanoi for instance, there still exist the Fan Street, the Paper Street, the Copper Street, and the like. In rural areas, the artisan generally was also a farmer, who worked in the rice-fields at least during transplanting and harvest time. The main handicrafts in Vietnam included embroidery, basketry, pottery, carpentry, the manufacture of food products, building materials, and agricultural implements—in brief, every item connected with food, clothing, and shelter. In addition, there were articles produced for religious purposes: incense sticks, religious figures, candlesticks, ancestor tablets, and the like.\(^{20}\)

At the bottom of the social pyramid were the merchants, most of whom were retail dealers owning tiny shops in urban areas. As a rule, they were looked down upon and regarded as profiteers with low moral standards. People realized, however, that commercial activities might bring about prosperity and luxury, as indicated in the popular saying “\textit{Phi thuong, bat phu}” (no wealth without commerce). But, considering that human and social relationships in Vietnam were regulated by Confucius’s ethical principles and generally characterized by face-to-face, personal contacts, any profit-making transaction could be regarded as unfriendly, if not repulsive. In rural areas, goods were often bartered according to kind and weight. A certain number of coins, however, was used for trade, although Vietnam did not have a monetary system in terms of monetary units and their multiples and submultiples. There existed gold and silver ingots, which served mainly for hoarding purposes. Copper and zinc \textit{sapeks} circulated freely because their very low value suited the needs of the population. According to Charles Robequain, there was some circulation of Mexican piastres and of Dutch, British, and Spanish silver pieces in Vietnam and other Far-Eastern countries.\(^{21}\)


\(^{20}\) For details concerning the handicrafts in Vietnam see Robequain, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 243-248.

\(^{21}\) \textit{Ibid.}, p. 138.
Whether he was a scholar or a merchant, the individual was strongly attached to his family in particular and to his native village in general. This feeling was more marked in the farmer or the rural artisan, whose outlook usually did not go beyond the boundaries of his commune. In this respect, Virginia Thompson says:

Just as the young commune can never break away from the mother commune and the central government, so the individual can never loosen himself from the hold of his family and native village. Not only is he called back by the imperious ritualistic demands of the ancestral cult, but he is also drawn by the security which the commune offers to its own. Communal lands nourish even the village paupers. . . .

Indeed, the individual was immerged, so to speak, in the village and family affairs. According to the principle of group responsibility, the imperial government dealt more with social institutions and agencies than with each particular person, and individualism was thus reduced to a minimum.

As will be discussed in a later chapter, the family was not only a procreative and social unit but a predominantly educative agency as well. The members of this group jointly owned lands, kept a common budget, and cooperatively pursued a common living. It was also in this group that children were born, raised, and educated, and that religions, traditions, customs, and usages were transmitted from generation to generation.

A large family usually included three generations living under the same roof. It emphasized the continuity of descent—commonly known as the "continuity of incense and fire." To ensure posterity was the main consideration in the selection of a daughter-in-law, whose quasi-sacred obligation was to give birth to male descendants. A wife's barrenness might lead to her repudiation; it unfailingly entitled her husband to take one or more concubines. This kind of polygamy was based on religious beliefs, approved by society, and fortified by the Confucian doctrine of filial piety. Most Europeans, who entered into contact with the Vietnamese people, frowned upon such a practice, without realizing its underlying causes. For instance, in a letter dated June 10, 1700, Father Le Royer, Superior of the Jesuit Missions in North Vietnam, wrote:

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22 Thompson, op. cit., p. 34.

23 For details concerning the family-religion relations in Vietnam see Grivaz, op. cit., Chapter 2, Section 1, pp. 25-54.
The only Obstacle to their [the northern Vietnamese] turning Christians is their allowing a Plurality of Wives; their being permitted to put from them such as they don't like; and the barbarous Custom of Castrating Men. The Plurality of Wives, and these Castrations, regard chiefly Persons of Distinction, to whom a great Number of Children is no Burthen, and who are desirous of raising them to the first Employments of the Kingdom. But 'tis not So with respect to the Right which Husbands have of putting their wives from them, and taking another, when they are barren or ill-temper'd. This is a Custom established even among the common People, and is one of the greatest Obstacles to their Conversion. . . .

First, it is to be noted that the custom of castrating men was adopted not by those who desired to rise to the “first Employments of the Kingdom,” but by the eunuchs who worked in the imperial palace. This was somewhat necessary from the emperor’s standpoint, since he had an empress consort, many secondary wives, and a harem of concubines and dancers. Secondly, the right of the husband to “put from” his wife was neither absolute nor arbitrary; it resulted more from religious considerations and group action than from individual preferences. It must be admitted, however, that the status of women was inferior to that of men in the paternally family of Vietnam.

The “continuity of incense and fire” also meant the maintenance of ancestor worship, which seemed to spring from man’s mystical desire to create links between the living and the dead. The general belief was that the ancestral spirits lived in a world somewhat similar to ours, but that economically they partly depended upon the assistance of their descendants, who periodically burned paper articles of all kinds—paper money, paper furniture, paper clothes, and the like. Whether rich or poor, each home had its ancestral altar, placed in the central room and equipped at least with wooden tablets inscribed with the names of the ancestors, incense burners, and trays for ritual offerings. An important part of ancestor worship was the family pilgrimage in spring to the graves of ancestors, which were then swept and rebuilt. On the other hand, the living were believed to be dependent upon the dead, who were capable of promoting the prosperity of the family as well as of displaying punitive anger. In other words, ancestor worship was closely tied up with the Vietnamese sense of family solidarity and continuity.

Ancestor worship was and still is, though no longer universally, one of the many and varied beliefs in Vietnam. Commenting on the Vietnamese religions, Virginia Thompson says:

The religions of Annam [Vietnam] have been compared to a tropical forest where no one tree can live isolated. There is no clear-cut boundary between them, and one person may hold simultaneously and without friction a half-dozen beliefs. The Annamites [Vietnamese] work on the principle that if one religion is good, three are better. If the result is chaos, there is at least a comforting absence of fanaticism. Both this tolerance and the all pervading formalism of Annamite [Vietnamese] religions, which are Chinese in origin, cover a multitude of indigenous beliefs that have never been eradicated. . . .

The Vietnamese people believed that spirits of many different kinds exist everywhere in Nature. Heaven and Earth are, so to speak, crowded with spirits, which occupy the sun, the moon, the planets, and the stars, which move the winds and the clouds, which make rain and thunder, which dwell in hills, streams, trees, rice-fields, stones, as well as in each house, room, and kitchen. In brief, everything has its own spirit. Added to that was the cult of Heaven, Earth, deities of agriculture, and village genii, which had acquired an official status in Vietnam.

Toward the end of the second century A.D., the Mahayana form of Buddhism spread from China to Vietnam, where it was much modified by its blending with the varied indigenous beliefs. At the height of its development from the seventh to the fourteenth century, it was institutionalized and supported by many devout emperors; it gradually declined under the attacks of the Confucian school of thought. Today a rather shallow form of Buddhism, accompanied by elaborate rites and even magic, is practiced mainly by the Vietnamese women, whereas the profound tenets of Buddha are the monopoly of a few learned men and monks. The same remarks can be made about Taoism, which has degenerated into sorcery and superstition.

In the final analysis, it was Confucianism that pervaded every aspect of life in Vietnam, as evidenced in the existence of a ministry of rites, the social hierarchy of scholars, farmers, artisans, and merchants, as well as in the programs of study for the mandarinal examinations and the family education of children, who began at the age of seven or eight to learn about Confucius's fundamental belief in the innate goodness of man (Nhan chi so, tinh ban thien).

25 Thompson, op. cit., p. 54.
26 Noss, op. cit., pp. 188-208.
27 Ibid., pp. 311-338.