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1966

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# VIETNAM

- A historical outline
- Problems, true and false

*From Vietnamese  
Studies n° 12*

**Vietnam :**  
**a historical outline**  
**( 1966 )**

ONE day, looking to the southeast of the town of Lathanh, **Cao Bien** (1) saw, emerging from the waters of the River Lô and surrounded by an aura of light, a ghostly figure towering above the furious waves. He did not dare to use his powers as a magician to drive away this apparition. That night, the same ghostly figure appeared to him in a dream, saying: "I am the genie of this land; your efforts to drive me away will be in vain." The following day, **Cao Bien** had altars erected and for three days on end he tried to exorcise the apparition. But a storm broke out and a flash of lightning destroyed the altars. **Cao Bien** heaved a deep sigh: "This land belongs to a powerful genie," he thought to himself. "I won't be able to stay here."

For people who are familiar with Vietnamese history, this legend (2) has a very clear meaning, for **Cao Bien** was not a mythical personage, but one of flesh and blood, a talented strategist and administrator sent to Vietnam in the year 866 by the Chinese Tang imperial dynasty with a view to incorporating the lands of

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(1) For easier reading, we use the term Vietnam to designate the country throughout its history, although it had known different names in different periods. Chinese names are transcribed the Vietnamese way, except for those which are universally known — Han, Tang, etc.

(2) From Linh Nam Chich Quai, one of the first written works of Vietnamese literature.

Vietnam into the "Celestial Empire". The same attempt had been made before **Cao Bien's** time for ten centuries on end by successive Chinese emperors, but although Chinese troops had occupied the country and Chinese administrators promulgated decree after decree, the "genie" of the land had remained indomitable and kept the conqueror and occupier under the constant threat of his flashes of lightning.



One might believe that a feudal empire of the size of ancient China, endowed with a superior civilisation, would have easily and quickly succeeded in swallowing up a small country situated on its border. Yet after ten centuries, **Cao Bien** had to admit failure, and the definite departure of the occupier, which he foresaw, was to take place less than a half century later. In 905, **Khuc Thua Zu** proclaimed himself **Tiet Do Su** and Vietnam became definitively an independent country.

### **From the paleolithic to the bronze age**

That the Vietnamese people had been able, after more than a thousand years of occupation by the Chinese feudalists, to ward off their domination, was because long before the Chinese conquest they had created for themselves a specific mode of life and civilisation, one that had of course been

enriched by foreign influence but certainly not integrated into another to the point of total absorption.

The discovery made in November 1960 of Paleolithic artefacts (Clactonian flakes, choppers, hand-axes of the Chellean and Acheulean periods) at Nui Do, Thanhhoa province, attests indisputably that Vietnam was the centre of one of the most ancient stone age cultures — a fact unknown to French archaeologists of the colonial period. The discovery of important Neolithic stations as well as discoveries relating to the Bronze Age, made since 1959, have considerably widened the scope of archaeological research. In particular, the **Thieuzung** cemetery (Thanhhoa) discovered in 1959, reveals that, contrary to the opinion held by some Western scholars, the Bronze Age existed in Vietnam long before the period of feudal Chinese domination.

The number of Neolithic and Bronze Age stations discovered during the last few years in Phutho province confirms that this region was the first centre of Vietnamese civilisation; this is in accordance with the legendary history of the **Hung** kings, whose kingdom was located in this province and whose dynasty was in power during several centuries before our era. (1). The multiplicity of Bronze Age objects, especially the size and the refined decoration of the bronze drums, testifies to a high technical and artistic level.

At the height of the Bronze period the kingdom of Aulac was founded, with Coloa (near Hanoi) as capital,

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(1) See "*Beginnings of Archaeology in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam*", Vietnamese Studies, no 2.

where vestiges of a spiral-shaped citadel have been found whose outer circumference measured about 8,000 metres and where nearly 10,000 bronze arrowheads were discovered in 1959. This store of arrowheads supposes a fairly high level of production and a fairly advanced social and political organisation. The **Aulac** kingdom victoriously resisted invasion by troops of the Chinese Tsin imperial dynasty towards the end of the third century B.C.. But in the year 179 B.C. the Chinese general **Trieu Da**, who had his fief in the south of China, invaded **Aulac** and incorporated it into his own territory. **Trieu Da's** successors failed to stand up to the powerful armies of the **Han** dynasty following the unification of China under the latter. In the year 111 B.C., Vietnam fell in this way under Chinese feudal domination.

### **The long march towards independence**

Then began a thousand-year struggle, which went on together with the assimilation of Chinese culture, the struggle safeguarding Vietnamese individuality while the country's own culture got richer under Chinese influence and its socio-economic structure evolved progressively towards distinct feudalism — a process which was to last several centuries. Chinese annals recorded a population of about 900,000 for the recently conquered **Aulac** kingdom.

In the year 40 the first great insurrection against foreign domination broke out, led by the **Trung Sisters**

who held out for three years in the face of powerful Chinese armies and whose cult was to be perpetuated throughout the centuries, up to the present day. History and the people's memory also record the name of Lady **Trieu**, an intrepid woman warrior who revolted in 248, riding on elephant-back at the head of her troops. The prime reason for those revolts was economic exploitation by the Chinese feudalists: the Imperial Court extorted an important tribute of pearls, ivory, gold, silver and other precious products, whereas governors and officials, veritable local potentates, carved out for themselves large domains where they employed slave labour. Iron implements, already known before our era, were widely disseminated after the Chinese conquest; this brought about a development of agriculture and handicrafts and consequently increased consciousness by the peasants and handicraftsmen of their rights.

The Chinese administration also employed native agents, former tribal chiefs, clan heads or recent upstarts, who gradually adopted feudal modes of exploitation and whose slaves were somewhat better treated than those of Chinese governors. The introduction of Chinese script and at the same time of doctrines prevailing in China—Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism — together with the necessity of training local functionaries led to the formation of a stratum of native "scholars". The interests of native feudalists and scholars entered into contradiction with those of the foreign occupiers, against whom gradually unity was consolidated between the ordinary people and a growing number among the privileged.

With this political and economic struggle on the one hand, and the development of agriculture and handicrafts on the other, a national consciousness took shape which gave the insurrections increased scope and higher organisational level.

The great peasant movements which periodically shook the feudal regime in China were a help to the Vietnamese people's movement for self-liberation. Thus as early as those remote times, unconscious solidarity developed between the Vietnamese and Chinese peoples struggling against the same enemy, feudalism, embodied in the Chinese imperial court and its agents. This solidarity was to become conscious and be brought to its full scope with the victory in our days of popular revolutions in both countries.

The above factors led to a victorious insurrection by **Ly Bon** who founded in 544 the first independent Vietnamese state under the name of Vanxuan, with Longbien as capital, and its own national currency. This state was to last 58 years until 603, when it succumbed to renewed Chinese feudal pressure which was to last three centuries and was marked by the insurrections of **Mai Thuc Loan** (722), **Phung Hung** (791) and the efforts by Governor **Cao Bien** to turn the country into a veritable Chinese province.

Contradictions grew ever more acute between the Vietnamese people and the occupier, while the Chinese Tang dynasty was shaken by a peasant movement of wide scope. The beginning of the 10th century saw the start of a long period of insurrection which ended in 905 with the coming to power of **Khuc Thua Zu**.

The resounding naval victory of **Ngo Quyen** over the Chinese troops at Bachdang in 938 definitively foiled all attempts at reconquest. The following year, **Ngo Quyen** proclaimed himself king and established his capital at Co Loa. Vietnam became definitively an independent country (1).

### **A firm and prosperous state (1010-1400)**

Attempts at feudal parcelling out or at reconquest by the Chinese feudalists were frustrated one after another by the various dynasties reigning from 939 to 1010 when the great Ly royal dynasty took over power, which for the next two centuries (1010-1225) was to give Vietnam a new face, that of a centralized monarchy, an entirely independent state, with the development of a specific national culture. It was succeeded by the Tran dynasty, and for four centuries, the Vietnamese feudal regime gained status and became consolidated, while the Vietnamese state victoriously repelled all foreign attacks and began its expansion southward. As early as 1010, the Lys transferred their capital to Thanglong, the site of present-day Hanoi.

In 1075-76, General **Ly Thuong Kiet** had warded off a large-scale attack conducted by over 100,000 troops (not including the carriers) of the Chinese Song court. In a Vietnamese counter-offensive, launched to ward off an enemy attack, the Ly troops advanced

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(1) *Eight centuries before the proclamation of American independence.*

into Chinese territory itself. This victory proves that the Vietnamese state was sufficiently solid and well constructed to be able to repel large-scale invasions. The decisive test came in the 13th century when the powerful Mongolian armies of Kubla Khan, after conquering China and a large part of Europe, sought to annex Vietnam.

The first Mongolian onslaught took place in 1257 and reached Thanglong itself, but a Vietnamese counter-offensive rapidly drove the enemy out. In 1284, Kubla Khan launched 500,000 men on Vietnam, under the command of his son Toghan. The Mongolian troops occupied a large part of the country, the capital included, but the resistance was organised in a masterly way by General **Tran Hung Dao** who combined harassing operations with big battles and inflicted a series of defeats on the aggressors, who were driven out of the country in 1285. A new Mongolian offensive was launched in 1287, which ended in 1288 with the big battle at Bachdang, where 500 combat junks were destroyed or captured by the Vietnamese forces. This put a definite end to the Mongolian emperors' designs on Vietnam.

The Tran strategists, commander-in-chief **Tran Hung Dao** in particular, had managed, on the political plane, to weld all strata of the population into a solid bloc, and on the military plane, to work out appropriate strategy and tactics for a protracted resistance with broad popular participation. This victory was also due to the solidity of the socio-economic regime.

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Indeed, after acquiring independence, the royal dynasties developed agriculture through big water conservancy works. The dyke and irrigation canal network was especially improved, and its management called for centralisation of power, the liquidation of attempts at feudal parcelling out, and the setting up of a bureaucracy. Handicrafts were developed, leading to the making of beautiful ceramics and precious fabrics. The expansion of the Buddhist cult caused many pagodas to be built in which an original architecture was embodied. In 1075 a temple of literature, dedicated to Confucius, was erected. A national written literature was budding, in addition to an already rich popular oral literature, and was marked at its beginning by patriotic poems, historical works and poems of Buddhist inspiration. Official documents and literary works were at first written in classical Chinese (1), but in the 13th century appeared the *nôm*, a script derived from Chinese ideograms but used to transcribe works written in Vietnamese.

The socio-economic basis was a land regime in which the monarchy was the legal owner of all lands in the country. Some were directly exploited by the monarchy but the king distributed domains of various sizes to members of the royal family or to great dignitaries at the Court: these were typical feudal holdings in which the aristocracy had at its disposal

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(1) Like Latin in Europe, it was the learned language of the Far East.

lands and the peasants' servile labour. The serfs could not be sold or killed, but were attached for life to their masters. Buddhist monasteries also possessed large estates. There were also communal lands which could be allocated by the communes to their members, a tax being paid to the monarchy. But soon there appeared a section of peasant owners, free men who possessed their own lands.

After the **Ly-Tran** regime's dynamism had run out, it was undermined by agrarian contradictions: revolts of serfs on large estates, struggle between members of the nobility, owners of fiefs and latifundia, and the class of peasant owners, which represented a more progressive form of economy. The existence of fiefs and latifundia constituted, besides, a permanent danger for the monarchy. Serfs and peasants, mobilized against foreign invasions, or for big hydraulic works, demanded their due, while the mandarin bureaucracy, recruited through competitions, disputed with the nobility the high administrative posts. Parallel to those economic and political struggles, an ideological one unfolded between on the one hand Buddhist monks, who until the 12th-13th centuries had been the country's master-minds and the monarchs' advisers, and on the other Confucian scholars whose doctrine finally gained the upper hand.

A crisis broke out towards the end of the 14th century, and in the year 1400, the **Trans** gave way to the new dynasty of the **Hos** whose founder, **Ho Quy Ly**, promulgated a series of economic, social and cultural reforms. But these reforms aimed less at suppressing the aristocracy, owners of large domains, than at

limiting their power ; the liberation of serfs and domestic slaves was only partially achieved. In spite of his great talent, **Ho Quy Ly** failed. The crisis continued.

### The climax of the feudal regime (15th-16th centuries)

Meanwhile, in China, the **Ming** dynasty, after driving out the Mongolians, had established itself firmly. Taking advantage of the crisis in Vietnam, in 1406 the **Mings** despatched there a big army, which took the **Ho** kings prisoner in 1407. A few descendants of the **Trans** opposed some resistance (1407-1413) but to no avail.

The **Mings** sought to impose direct rule over the country, took radical measures to eradicate all national consciousness and culture, and subjected Vietnam to savage exploitation. This time, it was no longer some **Tran** descendant or member of the aristocracy who raised the banner of revolt, but a peasant landowner, **Le Loi**. In 1418, **Le Loi**, starting out from his domain at Lamson, created a first base of resistance in the mountainous region of Thanhhoa province. **Ming** troops, hampered by other popular uprisings, did not succeed in liquidating this base. With the help of a man of genius, the scholar **Nguyen Trai** who was at the same time a great strategist, a talented administrator, an outstanding writer and a veritable encyclopedia of knowledge, **Le Loi** gradually expanded the resistance base. built up an army, rallied around

him comrades-in-arms devoted to him body and soul, and little by little liberated many provinces. The **Mings** sent in reinforcements numbering 50,000, which brought the total occupation forces to 100,000, but failed to ward off a series of stunning defeats. In 1427, a new expeditionary corps of 150,000 was despatched to Vietnam, but hardly had it arrived when it suffered a crushing defeat at Chilang. In December of the same year, the **Ming** troops withdrew from the country.

With **Nguyen Trai**, the anti-**Ming** resistance had taken on the character of a truly popular war, in which combatants were essentially peasants, the most varied forms of struggle used, armed and political struggles combined, and political propaganda among enemy troops given great importance. This explains how, starting from scratch, the movement had won considerable growth, and succeeded in completely defeating the big Ming regular armies which were supported by the enormous economic and military potential of feudal China.



Independence once wrested back, the **Le** dynasty was enthroned but with a considerably modified socio-economic structure, far different from that of the **Ly-Tran** period. The king remained the owner of all the lands in the kingdom and continued to distribute estates to great dignitaries, but these estates were no longer hereditary and the peasants who worked there were freed from bondage, and had only to

pay rents. The landed aristocracy lost its pre-eminent place to the new class of land-owners which expanded rapidly. The great majority of the toiling peasantry, although freed from servitude, failed however to acquire land and had to till plots belonging to others to whom they paid high rents. Communes still controlled their plots of land which were periodically distributed among their members, and paid rents to the state.

The mandarin bureaucracy administered the country in the name of the king. All attempts at feudal parcelling out having been liquidated, the stabilisation of measures and weights, of regulations and rules, having been achieved, the Vietnamese monarchy reached its acme during the reign of **Le Thanh Tong** (1460—1497). It was during this reign that the **Hong Duc** code was compiled, which regulated the distribution of lands and incomes, the multiple day-to-day social activities, and set up the principles of civic morals. These laws and principles were to remain virile until the end of the 18th century. The army was organised on the principle of an army of peasant-soldiers, the men alternating between agricultural production and military training.

Confucian doctrine became the official ideology of the regime, directing all activities towards the building of a well-regulated society, carefully graded into ranks, governed by strict rites but without any mystical preoccupations. Loyalty to the king was the supreme virtue; filial piety and the wife's submission to her husband the cornerstone of morals. Buddhism

and Taoism were relegated to the rank of secondary doctrines, speculated upon by original minds or practised among the masses in the form of more or less superstitious cults.

Public education, organised both by the state and the family, showed great progress. Mandarin competitions drew thousands of candidates. Literature knew new development. It was mainly written in classical Chinese, but works in *nôm* (vernacular) began to hold an important place. Particularly worthy of note were the works by **Nguyen Trai**, written in both classical Chinese and *nôm*, and including many poems, political and military writings and an outline of geography. Historical treatises of great value were compiled. King **Le Thanh Tong** presided over a literary academy and took pleasure in writing many poems himself. Music and the theatre showed great progress. However, the plastic arts accounted for no original creations worth comparison with previous centuries.

Relying on this strongly-centralised state and a solidly organised society, the first **Le** kings, continuing the southward expansion already started under former dynasties, gradually annexed the territory of Champa, which bordered on Vietnam to the south. In 1471, **Le Thanh Tong** pushed the southern boundary of Vietnam to present-day Phuyen province.

### **The great crisis of feudalism (17th-18th centuries)**

Vietnamese feudal monarchy reached the zenith of its power towards the middle of the 15th century. But new contradictions

appeared, and towards the end of the 16th century, a general crisis of feudalism took shape, which became ever more serious and was marked by many peasant insurrections.

A basic social contradiction faced the landless peasants, who had to pay high rents and were at the same time subjected to forced labour and exploitation by landlords and the State machinery, i.e. the communal administration. Landlords, mandarins and notables formed a triad against which the peasants rebelled periodically, shaking feudal society to its foundation.

New forces were moreover emerging. Handicrafts made great progress. Whole villages specialised in the production of various goods, and so did the various quarters of the capital city, which became veritable beehives. Mercantile production developed, and with it, a stratum of traders, who caused new ferment in the old feudal order. The mandarin bureaucracy imposed a severe policy limiting trade, and official ideology relegated traders to the lowest rank in the social hierarchy.

The Le dynasty had also put under its authority the various ethnic minorities living in the mountainous regions. Between these minorities and the Vietnamese state, born in the plains of the delta, a twofold process took place in the course of the centuries, involving both antagonism and integration. There was economic integration (plain and mountain regions being economically complementary) and also a common defence against invaders, but there were no less persistent

antagonisms due to exploitation and oppression by the Vietnamese feudalists. Many uprisings were staged by ethnic minorities living in the mountainous regions. Territorial expansion to the South also gave rise to new difficulties due to difficult communications. Far-flung provinces escaped control by the central administration, and ambitious feudalists tended to govern for their own profit, and finally to secede. For three centuries, from the 16th to the 18th centuries, Vietnamese feudalism went through a perpetual crisis, in the course of which rival seignorial families wrangled for power, while the **Les** were reduced to the role of figureheads and peasant insurrections assumed ever wider scope.

In 1527, The **Mac** family usurped power at Thanglong. The **Le** kings took refuge in the South, supported by the **Nguyen** and **Trinh** lords. In 1591, a victorious counter-offensive led by a **Trinh** lord drove the **Macs** from the capital, and reinstated the **Les** in Thanglong, but this time effective power remained in the hands of the **Trinhs**. By 1558 however, a **Nguyen** lord, appointed governor of the Thuan Quang provinces (Hue and further south), had already installed an autonomous administration. Following the complete take-over by the **Trinhs** of royal powers in Thanglong, the **Nguyens'** administration proclaimed itself wholly independent. Yet both **Trinhs** and **Nguyens** pretended to remain subjects of the **Le** monarchy. In fact, they were two reigning families sharing between themselves power over the country. From 1627 to 1672, they waged war on each other, then came a

period of equilibrium of forces, and the river Gianh in Quangbinh province became a line of demarcation between the two principalities. Meanwhile, the great peasant insurrections which shook China prevented the Chinese emperors from taking advantage of the Vietnamese crisis to attempt a reconquest.

In the North, the **Trinhs** continued to enforce the **Le** laws and institutions, but they had to cope with frequent insurrections by the ethnic minorities and large-scale peasant insurrections. The civil war waged by the **Trinhs** and **Nguyens** weighed heavily on the peasants. The subordinate role played by the **Le** kings and rivalries between the clans in power had deeply undermined the prestige of the monarchy and provoked a most serious ideological crisis, for loyalty to the king was supposed to be the cornerstone of Confucian doctrine. In this period of great peasant insurrections and internecine struggles between noble lords, the people thought less and less of the king as reigning in virtue of a celestial mandate. A popular saying affirmed that "the king is simply the winner, the rebel the loser".

In **Nguyen** territory, the miserable peasantry found an escape southward, at the expense of the remains of the Kingdom of Champa, and from the 17th century, in direction of the Dongnai and Mekong deltas, which were almost wholly unpopulated but related to the kingdom of Cambodia. Taking advantage of the dissensions which rent the Cambodian court, the **Nguyens** gradually occupied villages and provinces. By the start of the 18th century the **Nguyen**

principality had reached the shore of the Gulf of Siam, the Saigon area having been occupied towards the end of the 17th century.

This deep crisis of feudalism did not however prevent handicrafts and commerce from developing, especially in the North: pottery, earthenware, porcelain, silk fabrics, footgear, printing, paper-making, bronze foundry, silverware, were making headway. Copper, zinc and tin mines were exploited. The state had its own plants and workshops, where money was coined, war vessels built and luxury goods manufactured for kings and mandarins. Home trade expanded, exchanges were carried out between the plains and the mountain regions. In both North and South, foreign trade assumed as early as the 17th century considerable importance in urban centres, to which came ships from China, Japan, Indonesia, and to an ever greater degree from the West. Grasping traders and enterprising missionaries, working hand in glove, came on the same ships, swapped goods, sold weapons to rival princes, promised them alliances, and offered to distressed souls, especially the peasants', the solace of Christianity. Missionaries evangelized, at the same time teaching the art of the gunsmith to the princes and drawing up detailed reports on the country's wealth and social and political situation for Western governments.

The development of handicrafts and home and foreign trade was however hampered to a great extent by the restraining policy of the feudal bureaucracy, which was not at all keen on seeing the birth of a class of