

rich and powerful traders. A whole series of laws and restrictions hindered trade, so that the mercantile economy could not develop, and the bourgeoisie was stifled at its birth, while the grabbing of land by landlords and unceasing war darkened still more the miserable lot of the peasants.

Peasant insurrections and social progress: the Taysons

All those contradictions were apparent in the 18th century, which was perhaps the most agitated and eventful period in Vietnamese history. Right at the start of the century, the **Trinhs** had to take a series of repressive measures against peasants uprisings, which reached their climax after 1730. In the course of those decades there was hardly a quiet year, or an unaffected province. Some peasant groups ruled over great regions for several years. History and popular tradition honour in particular the memory of the peasant leader **Nguyen Huu Cau** who stood up to **Trinh** troops from 1741 to 1751. A good scholar and excellent strategist, he plundered the rich and distributed their wealth to the poor, proclaiming himself "Great Protector of the People", and rallied to himself great masses of peasants. No sooner was he defeated in one battle than he reappeared somewhere else, having rapidly recruited new troops whom he ardently led into combat. His character has been given the heroic quality of a legend.

But the great movement which was to dominate the end of the century was that of the **Taysons** who, starting out from Binhdin province in the south, were to overthrow successively, from 1771 to 1786, the **Nguyen** then the **Trinh** lords. Three brothers led the movement, which was however inspired by one of them, **Nguyen Hue**. Through a brilliant series of campaigns, Nguyen Hue rapidly vanquished the **Nguyen** then the **Trinh** armies, knocking down the two families who had shared power over the country for three centuries. *Thus to the Taysons must go the credit for having reunified the country.*

In the South, a scion of the **Nguyen** family, **Nguyen Anh** (who was to become Emperor **Gialong**) called on Siamese troops in order to try and resist the **Taysons**. At all times and in all places, ruling circles, faced with mass revolt, call on foreigners for help. In 1784, **Nguyen Hue**, in a redoubtable naval battle at Rachgam, on a tributary of the river Mekong, completely routed a 50,000-strong Siamese force sailing in 300 war junks. In the North, the **Le** kings called on the reigning Chinese **Tsing** dynasty to send troops to help them against the Taysons. The **Tsings**, thinking they could avail themselves of this opportunity to reconquer Vietnam, sent 200,000 troops to occupy Thanglong in 1788. But Nguyen Hue, starting from central Vietnam, marched his troops over 600 kilometres in a few weeks, swooped down on Tsing troops in a surprise attack, and within five days captured several fortified posts around Thanglong, penetrated into the heart of the capital and drove out enemy generals and officers,

who fled in panic. It was one of the greatest victories of Vietnamese history (1789). *To the Taysons must go the credit for having defended national independence, betrayed by the feudalists.*

Nguyen Hue's armies had thus waged battle from South to North, over two thousand kilometres, and defeated the **Nguyen** and **Trinh** armies, as well as the Siamese and **Tsing** troops. They showed extraordinary mobility, a high spirit of offensive, and their command had distinguished itself by daring decisions carried out with boldness and promptitude, each battle having lasted but a few days in the course of which large armies had been completely routed. All contemporary witnesses concurred in recognising the military genius of Nguyen Hue, the commander-in-chief of those resounding battles. But the very nature of the **Tayson** movement accounted for the power of its armies. An essentially peasant popular movement, it crystallized the deepest claims and aspirations of the peasant masses exacerbated by centuries of feudal oppression. Traders also adopted the cause of the **Taysons**.

Once in power the **Taysons** promulgated a series of reforms in agriculture, promoted home and foreign trade, and encouraged the dissemination of the *nôm* script. But none of those reforms radically upset the feudal regime and so none could solve the crisis. The trading bourgeoisie was too weak to take the lead of the peasant movement which, left to itself, could only fall back into the ruts of the feudal regime. The tragedy of peasant movements is that they can only be launched on a programme of reforms, not of revolution against

the feudal regime: a new dynasty will replace the old, carrying out a few reforms to alleviate peasant misery temporarily, and then will again lose its dynamism, bitterly defend the class interests of landlords, fall back into the same errors, and prove itself incapable of promoting any social progress, having failed to set up new production relations and a new political regime.

It might have been possible for the **Taysons**, who included mercantile elements and came to power at a time when handicrafts and trade were making headway, to have promoted the advance of Vietnamese society, but the premature death of **Nguyen Hue** interrupted the progress of the movement. **Nguyen Hue's** sons and nephews quarrelled among themselves, and putting no check on their personal ambitions, failed to stand up to the feudalists' counter-offensive.



In spite of the **Taysons'** failure, the 18th century remained none the less a great period in Vietnamese history, marked by the wide scope of the peasant insurrections and by an unprecedented blossoming of culture. For the first time, literature written in *nôm*, i.e. in the national and popular language, took precedence of writings in classical Chinese. For the first time also, novels appeared in verse which gradually reached the masses. To **Nguyen Hue** went the credit of using *nôm* even for official writings. This literature differed from that of previous centuries also by its content. For the first time romantic love was sung, love that was based on personal choice and not on

social conventions; for the first time satire directed against feudal society, especially the vices of the mandarin and monarchic system, became truly scathing. Poetess **Ho Xuan Huong** castigated scholars, mandarins, bonzes in unforgettable poems, claimed for women the right to equality. **Nguyen Du** (pronounce **Zu**), born 1765, published his masterpiece **Kieu** only at the beginning of the 19th century, but one can affirm that he had conceived it with the ideas and aspirations of the 18th, all his work, including **Kieu**, being part of the literary movement of the 18th century.

Scientific culture also developed. We may cite the medical treatises of **Le Huu Trac**, alias **Lan Ong**, which embrace clinical instruction, the treatment of numerous diseases, pharmacopoeia, and general theories; and the encyclopedic work of **Le Qui Don**, poet, historian, geographer and philosopher.

The feudalists' betrayal

The question has remained unsolved as to what new developments might have taken place in the Vietnam of the 18th century, had not feudal reaction triumphed over the **Taysons**. The feudal counter-offensive launched by **Nguyen Anh** and favoured by inner weaknesses of the **Tayson** administration following **Nguyen Huê's** death, ended in 1802 with the founding of the **Nguyen** dynasty. **Nguyen Anh** proclaimed himself emperor **Gia Long**, transferred the capital to Huê, far from the Red River

delta where peasant unrest was rampant. The feudal regime was restored in all its harshness, from all points of view: economic, social and ideological. The **Gia Long** code, written in the 19th century, marked a step back from the **Hong Duc** code, compiled in the 15th.

In both North and South, **Gia Long** and his successors had to face peasant uprisings, rebellions by ethnic minorities, while Western capitalism showed itself ever more aggressive. Western traders and missionaries sought to penetrate forcibly into the country and reported to their governments about the regime's weaknesses. Some missionaries even stirred up troubles and sought contact with rebel movements. A few clear-sighted people proposed reforms, the adoption of Western science and technique, but the dignitaries were ignorant and self-seeking, cared only about their privileges, and feared popular movements even more than foreign plots. While food shortages were on the increase and French imperialism prepared for the conquest of the country, emperor **Tu Duc** had his mausoleum built at great costs.

The French onslaught, which began with numerous provocations, was confronted by an impotent monarchy and mandarins who were both chicken-hearted and hated by the people. Danang was attacked in 1858, Saigon occupied in 1859. For twenty-five years, colonial conquest unfolded according to a pattern that had become classical: first, under pretext of defending the Catholic religion, French troops compelled the spineless royal Court to sign a treaty surrendering to them

certain territories ; then, violating the treaty, they used force to grab new territories and new privileges. The process went on like this until 1884 when the Court of Huê, after successive capitulations, ended by wholly submitting to France and accepting French " protectorate ". The root cause of this policy of national renunciation lay in the **Nguyen** monarchy's great fear of the people : it could not rely on them to resist the aggressors. Eventually, in order to safeguard a few privileges, the king and the court dignitaries put the feudal administrative machinery at the service of the colonial conqueror. A lasting collusion was established between the reactionary feudalists and the colonial administration to maintain the people under a double yoke of exploitation and oppression.

Unshakable patriotism

However, in spite of surrender by the monarchy, all strata of the population vigorously resisted the foreign invaders. Disregarding the Court's orders for a cease-fire, scholars and a few mandarin patriots together with the common people organized, as early as 1860, a popular resistance movement which considerably slowed down the French conquest. The guerillas inflicted on the invaders much more serious losses than the royal troops did. Pallu de la Barrière, a French eye-witness, author of a " History of the 1861 Expedition to Cochinchina " noted that

" The insurrection seemed to spring up from the soil... The fact was that the centre of resistance was everywhere, subdivided *ad infinitum*,



Bronze drum (Bronze age)



Ornaments on bronze drums

almost as many times as there were Annamese (Vietnamese-Ed.) It would be more accurate to say that every peasant tying up a sheaf of rice was a centre of resistance." (p. 245)

To the memory of those popular combatants, the writer patriot **Nguyen Dinh Chieu**, in 1861, wrote a famous funeral oration :

"They were not professional soldiers, whose trade was war, but simple inhabitants of villages and farms. Through love of the fatherland, they had volunteered to fight. (...) For uniforms, they had only pieces of coarse fabrics. They asked neither for cartridge belts nor powder containers. For weapons, they had only bamboo spears: they asked neither for swords nor helmets. (...) The officers did not have to blow the assault trumpets: by themselves they broke through the stockades as if the enemy were not there. Without fearing either cannon-balls or bullets, they dashed through the gates into enemy posts. They dealt stunning blows and filled the enemy with panic. They shouted, set at defiance the enemy iron ships whose guns were blazing away...".

Unfortunately, the Court's surrender confused the people who had been wont for centuries to obey the king, whom they considered the supreme head of the nation. The resistance lacked nation-wide leadership, which would have co-ordinated activities all over the country. In those days, only the monarchy could

have played that role, which it refused to play. However, even after the complete capitulation of the Court in 1884, popular resistance continued everywhere, led by scholars, patriots or men of the common people. The French officers themselves paid tribute to their adversaries' heroism:

"The rebels," wrote a French officer in his "Military History of Indochina", "feared neither artillery shellings, nor infantry salvoes...".

But the resistance was short of arms. Above all it lacked a democratic programme of action which would have mobilized the deep-lying forces of the nation against an adversary with superior equipment and Machiavellian schemes. The restoration of monarchy and Confucianism, proposed by the leaders, could not raise much enthusiasm among the peasants and the youth. Because of such weaknesses, the various movements, in spite of their number, were gradually and mercilessly repressed by the enemy. By 1900, all armed resistance, except in the Yenthê mountain range where **Hoang Hoa Tham** was to hold out until 1913, had ceased. But to those patriots must go the credit of having held the national flag proudly aloft for more than thirty years, delayed and considerably hampered the establishment of the colonial regime, accumulated precious fighting experience, and by doing so prepared for the future. Engraved in the minds of the people remain the images of the heroes of the 1860-1900 period: **Truong Dinh, Nguyen Trung Truc, Phan Dinh Phung, Tan Thuat, Hoang Hoa Tham**, to give only the names of the most famous

In every province, in every village, old folk still recall with vivid details their battles and exploits.

In face of the patriots loved and honoured by the people, the colonial administration could only find as collaborators

“intriguers, disreputable or ignorant, whom we (the French-Ed.) had rigged out with sometimes high ranks, which became tools in their hands for plundering the country without scruple. (...) Despised, they possessed neither the spiritual culture nor the moral fibre that would have allowed them to understand and carry out their task.”

(report by Resident Muselier to the Resident Superior, December 1897)

History will repeat itself until the end of the colonial era—including the period of American domination in South Vietnam.

The contradictions within the colonial regime

After 1900, the colonial regime settled down to a relatively long period of economic exploitation and investments. We shall not insist on the too-well-known characteristics of this colonial economy, built for the exclusive profit of a few companies, unbalanced and crippled, on top of a feudal system with unchanged structure. For if the colonial

administration needed mandarins and notables to collect taxes and hunt down patriots, the mandarins, notables and landlords needed French bayonets to protect their privileges.

Thus a line of demarcation gradually appeared between, on the one hand, the colonialists allied to the compradors and feudalists, and on the other, the other strata of the population who aspired to independence and the renovation of feudal society. National struggle was to become inseparable from the fight for a new society where democracy and science would have their rightful place. The Vietnamese revolution had to be national and democratic, the questions being only: which force was to lead this national democratic front? which social class was to hold the banner of independence and social progress?

With the establishment of the colonial regime, new social classes and categories appeared, first of all a working class and a bourgeoisie. What characterizes the Vietnamese working class is that it was born before the bourgeoisie, its birth being connected not with the growth of native capitalism but with colonialist exploitation. Concentrated in rubber plantations, railway construction sites, mines and factories, the workers received starvation wages, were subjected to a ferocious regime of heavy fines and corporal punishments. Of all social classes, they were in the best position to know imperialist exploitation and oppression, and in the most intimate contact with modern "technique. Unemployment and frequent dismissals often compelled workers to return to their villages, whereas bad

harvests and famine drove large numbers of peasants to the towns and cities. This unceasing shuttling wove close ties between the working class and the peasantry. Peasants fallen on bad times, unskilled workers, and workers out of a job formed in the cities and ports an army of "coolies", day-labourers hiring themselves out for a few cents a day, but most of the time without a job, that is without either rice or shelter.

In the countryside, the ruin of handicrafts brought about by the influx of French manufactured goods, the grabbing of land by landlords and French colonists, the weight of all kinds of taxes, drove the peasantry to despair. Exhausting labour brought the peasant 1.2 tons of rice at most per hectare of rice-fields, that is one of the lowest yields in the world, for agricultural techniques, especially agricultural implements, were of the most backward kind. Rice consumption per head fell from 262 kilograms in 1900 to 182 kilograms in 1937, population increase being faster than agricultural production increase. Besides, this was merely an average: the extreme discrepancy in wealth led to a situation where some exported rice to get luxury goods for themselves, while the majority of the people died of hunger.

The urban petty bourgeoisie also knew a precarious situation: small traders, low-ranking functionaries, handicraftsmen had a hard time trying to find a job, even a poorly-paid one, or engaged in business activities which were both unprofitable and uncertain, for the lack of a truly national industry and commerce barred

the way to all development. The monopoly in the hands of French companies, and the hampering policy of the colonial administration prevented all progress by the national bourgeoisie: the number of national capitalists with more or less substantial businesses could be counted on one's fingers. The other bourgeois vegetated at the head of rickety undertakings or carried out some paltry trade. Only compradors closely tied to foreign capital succeeded in attaining some success, but their activities were reduced to the reselling of imported products or to playing an intermediary role.



This colonial and semi-feudal society contained all the elements for a future explosion. Indeed, it never ceased being shaken by a series of struggles and uprisings, in spite of ferocious repression.

The bourgeois democratic ideology was the first to bring a new ferment into traditional Vietnamese society: industrialists and traders aspired to develop national industry and commerce, while intellectuals dreamt of setting up a parliamentary democracy or at least a constitutional monarchy. A fraction of the petty bourgeoisie also adopted these views, and for a good many years, before and after the First World War, associations, groups, and parties were formed with these aims in view. From time to time, an uprising or a native soldiers' mutiny served as a reminder of persistent unrest. However, the congenital weakness of the Vietnamese bourgeoisie made it impossible for the movement to assume such scope as to seriously disturb