

Viet nam

and the West

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by

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Preface

To write the history of one's own country, though never easy, is a relatively uncomplicated task: whatever the difficulties of source material and interpretation, one is at least writing about people and institutions belonging to one's own cultural tradition. To attempt to write the history of a country as different from one's own as is (for an Englishman) Viet-Nam, is an undertaking so difficult that it might even be called rash. For the subject of such a history must be viewed across a cultural gulf as wide as any that exists within the species of mankind. The problems are not merely those of language: they concern the whole framework of assumptions within which men live and have their being. For this reason, if for no other, the present essay sets out to be something more (as well as something less) than a mere chronicle of political decisions and their results. It seeks to bridge the gap between the study of politics and that of culture or civilization, and to relate the record of events to the framework of thought and belief, ideas and institutions, of the Vietnamese. Such an undertaking is as hazardous as, in the present state of the world, it is necessary. Whether one approaches the problem of cultural understanding as a diplomat or as an academic scholar, it remains one of the most difficult of all problems facing twentieth-century societies in their relations with one another. Especially is this the case between Asians and Westerners, and in the recent history of Viet-Nam there exists an opportunity to study the problem in all its complexity.

The present essay, though its arrangement is not strictly chronological, concerns the period from 1858 to 1963: slightly over a century, in which Viet-Nam moved from the last days of monarchical independence, on the eve of French conquest, to a situation of divided independence in which the two halves of the country were at war with one another. The war itself, whose origins go back to 1957 but which did not reach a level of great

intensity until after 1963, must be the subject of another book. It is still much too early to attempt a detailed assessment of that war, which in all its cruelty and horror is still being waged as I write. But the question why such a war should have begun at all is one which men are already asking, and which can perhaps be given a tentative answer. It is inconceivable that either side at the start expected that it would be so bitter and intense as it became; nevertheless the war itself already existed in the logic of the situation of 1963. And from the point of view of the Westerner, the fact that the war had to be fought at all must count as a tragic failure, whatever may be the outcome of the conflict.

I am conscious that this essay does not do full justice to the subject: it does little more than scratch the surface of problems whose true complexity will only be appreciated when a vast deal more research has been done, and when many more minds are able to contribute to their elucidation. But a beginning must be made somewhere, and whilst there is some truth in the historian's dictum that 'interpretation must wait on scholarship', it is sometimes the case that interpretation will itself inspire scholarship.

The present study would have been impossible without the help and encouragement of a great many friends and colleagues. In view of the controversial nature of the subject, I shall not risk anyone embarrassment by recording his name in apparent association with points of view he may not wholly share. My gratitude is none the less deep for being expressed in general terms. I would mention especially my debt to colleagues at the School of Oriental and African studies; to those who participated in the China and the World study group at Chatham House between 1963 and 1967; and most important of all, to my Vietnamese friends in Paris and Saigon.

January, 1968

Ralph Smith

A Note on Vietnamese Names

VIETNAMESE, unlike most Asian languages, does not present serious problems of transliteration. Although it was originally written in characters similar to those of Chinese, a standard Romanized form was developed by Christian missionaries from the seventeenth century, and during the twentieth century this has become universally adopted by the Vietnamese. Very few people know the old characters.

It is not however possible, using English type, to reproduce all the diacritical marks which are necessary in the Romanized script of Vietnamese to indicate differences of tone. In the present work I have not attempted to do so, though I have included the circumflex mark where appropriate, whose purpose is to indicate vowel quality.

Nor is it possible to indicate the difference between the Vietnamese Đ and D. The name Ngô Đình Diêm, for example, is pronounced Ngô Đình *Žiêm* (in the Tongkingese dialect; the Cochinchinese pronunciation of the last name is something like *dŽiêm*). The name Duy, often found as a middle name, is pronounced *Žwee*. It is impracticable to try to explain here all the subtleties of Vietnamese pronunciation, but one common name which often gives trouble is Nguyễn: it should be pronounced *Ng-wi-en*.

In referring to one another Vietnamese normally use the third of their three names, which is the personal name. The only exception occurs in the case of a very distinguished person where it is appropriate to use the first (family) name with a special honorific title. Thus Hồ Chi Minh (a pseudonym anyway) is never known as Minh; and while he lived Ngô Đình Diêm was sometimes known as President Ngô. In order to avoid confusion I have (with the exception of Hồ) adhered to the standard practice of using the personal name. No disrespect is intended to such revered figures as Phan Bội Châu and Phan Châu Trinh, both of whom appear in Vietnamese writings as *cu* Phan.

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PROLOGUE

The Bodhisattva Mahasattva wrapped his body in divine garments, bathed it in oil, made his last vow, and thereafter burnt his own body. . . . And the eighty Lords Buddhas all shouted their applause: Well done, well done, young man of good birth, that is the real heroism which the Bodhisattvas Mahasattvas should develop; that is the real worship of the Tathagata, the real worship of the Law.

Saddharma Pundarika (The Lotus Sutra).

Prologue

On the twentieth day of the fourth month, in the year of the Cat, tenth of the decade, a monk named Quang Duc was covered with oil and burnt himself alive at Saigon.

THE traditional Vietnamese style of chronology, being cyclical and lacking a continuous era, does not distinguish the absolute uniqueness of events. Ten numerals and twelve animals allow for a cycle of sixty years; then one must start again.¹ Consequently, described in this way, the self-immolation of Quang Duc might belong to any of a number of years of the Cat, stretching across several centuries: perhaps, for example, to 1363. The occurrence of such an event in that year would not be of great interest to most Western readers; only the student of the esoteric would probe deeper. He would find that it was not without parallel in the history of Asian Buddhism. In 1034, for instance, two monks are said by the chronicles to have set fire to themselves in the old Vietnamese capital of Thang-Long (the modern Hanoi), their ashes being enshrined in a special temple by the king Ly Thai-Tong. Again, in Bangkok a Buddhist monk sacrificed himself in this way in 1791, and another in 1817. And as recently as 1930 a Vietnamese monk burnt himself alive at Biên-Hoa. Buddhism is a religion in which men seek to escape all sense of attachment to a bodily self and a personal life, and the complete destruction of his body by a monk is applauded by several sacred texts. The monk who takes this extreme step does so in the confidence that his rebirth will be into a higher state of being. Ultimately he hopes to attain *Nirvana*, a state so empty of existence in any sense materialist Westerners can understand that it is neither 'being' nor 'non-being'.²

But the year of Quang Duc's self-immolation was not 1363, it was six centuries later; and the event was not of merely esoteric interest. Immediately it caught the imagination of a world which

was watching every detail of the political crisis then unfolding in South Viet-Nam. During the months which followed there was much debate in American circles about the significance of the 'fire-suicides' and the attitude to be adopted towards them. The opinion which prevailed at the time was that they signified a Vietnamese 'public opinion' near to breaking-point. Accordingly the government of the United States withdrew its support from President Ngô Đình Diêm, and in November of the same year, 1963, he was overthrown by a military coup.

More recent, and more cynical, commentators have suspected that this interpretation may have been too simple.³ Appalled at the chaos which followed the coup of 1963, they have detected in the situation of that year a clever political manoeuvre designed to make foreign journalists dramatize the Buddhist opposition to the government in Saigon, and so to encourage the Americans to take decisions which would ultimately benefit their enemies the Communists. They find evidence of a careful calculation of the effects the 'fire-suicides' would have on world opinion; and they point to the elaborate public relations system of the Buddhist organization, which ensured that whenever such a spectacle took place Western newsmen with their cameras were quickly on the scene. The sacred bonzes, it would seem, were not men totally withdrawn from worldly life, but clever politicians who knew what they wanted and how to achieve it. The American diplomats and journalists fell into their trap.

To choose between the two interpretations is not easy; a characteristic Western reaction would doubtless be to suggest that the truth lies somewhere in between. But the truth is more complex. For neither of these views takes into account what must surely be the most important question about the immolations: that is, how a kind of action which if it happened six centuries ago we should regard as of purely religious significance, should in our own day and age come to be regarded as primarily political. Neither of the interpretations just outlined allows for the cultural significance of these events. Yet surely, whatever their political importance, these acts of self-destruction demonstrate more clearly than anything else the fact that culturally Viet-Nam is quite beyond the normal range of occidental comprehension. This fact is in itself of immense political significance.

Suicide is a deed not lightly undertaken, and in any society

its occurrence will reflect fundamental themes of belief and culture. By Christian standards, to take one's life is a sin against the creator God, in whose sight every man should strive for living perfection on earth in order to be worthy of salvation in a life to come. The only view of suicide which such belief allows is that of an ignoble desire to escape: even the non-Christian humanist in the West condones suicide, he does not praise it. But in Viet-Nam, as in other countries of East Asia, to withdraw from the world is a means of proving virtue. Suicide can even be a way of proving superior virtue in face of a powerful but unvirtuous enemy. At that point, it can become not merely an escape but a weapon of considerable force. In 1963, a few weeks after the death of Quang Duc, another Vietnamese took poison in Saigon: the celebrated novelist *Nhật Linh*. He was about to be put on trial for opposition to the *Diêm* government, and his suicide was a more eloquent defence than anything he could have said in words. Quang Duc, as well as following a religious precedent, was speaking the same language as *Nhật Linh*. It is a language which most Westerners find utterly unfamiliar: so much so that in the summer of 1963 their first reaction to the fire-suicides was to over-dramatize them, and to exaggerate their significance. Inevitably this initial horror led in time to a reaction, and eventually many American observers came to conclude that fire-suicides have no significance at all.

But if the language of the suicides was unfamiliar, their context was even more so. The most important question for the Americans—journalists and policy-makers alike—was not *why* the monks were burning themselves, but how important the monks were in relation to the rest of Vietnamese society. It would seem that the Americans knew little about the nature of Vietnamese Buddhism before the crisis erupted; unfortunately it is not a subject which can be studied with profit at a moment's notice. It is not my purpose here to argue the question whether the American decision to withdraw support from *Ngô Đình Diêm* was the right one, but merely to observe that it was taken almost in a cultural vacuum. Part of the tragedy of the American experience in Viet-Nam has been that a great deal in the political culture of the country and of its people is not readily intelligible to the Western mind. To say that this or that particular failure of cultural understanding has been of a decisive nature would be misleading. The

self-immolation of Quang Duc is simply an illustration of a problem of communication which has pervaded the relationship between Americans and Vietnamese since 1954. The government of the United States has found itself becoming more and more deeply involved in the consequences of events whose causes or motivation it does not properly understand. That such a situation should befall the country whose boast is that its wealth and resources make it the most powerful in the world is galling indeed.

For Europeans to criticize Americans on this score however is not entirely appropriate. It so happens that in Viet-Nam the United States has become more deeply involved than any other Western power; but American involvement is only the most recent chapter in Viet-Nam's relations with the West. The current conflict there is the culmination of a developing relationship which began in earnest with the French attack on Da-Nang in 1858. It is in the complicated nature of that relationship, rather than in any specific decision of contemporary politicians that we must seek the origins of the present situation.

Like all other Asian countries, Viet-Nam has a quality and character of its own, which must not be blotted out under the weight of sweeping generalizations about 'the East'. It must be accepted as unique among the nations of the world. By European standards moreover, it is by no means a small country: taking North and South together it has a population of thirty millions, more than double that of Australia; and in surface area its extent is about equivalent to that of the whole British Isles including Eire. Its recorded history goes back as far as our own, to the first or second century before Christ. Even if it had not become the focus of an international crisis, it would be a country worthy of study in its own right.

True, Viet-Nam is not one of the great centres of creative civilization radiating impulses in all directions, like India or China or Greece. The Vietnamese character is poetic before it is analytical, and for ideas capable of becoming the basis of institutional organization the Vietnamese have tended to borrow from other areas of the world. In particular, down to the nineteenth century they borrowed from the Chinese; and the relationship of Vietnamese to Chinese culture is in consequence an extremely subtle one. During the thousand years before about A.D. 900, when Viet-Nam was the southernmost province

of a Chinese empire, the peoples of the 'Indonesian' civilization which had previously flourished in the area were greatly influenced by the Chinese who came to inhabit and to govern their country. The position of those peoples in relation to their conquerors was not unlike that between the British and their Roman rulers at about the same period in time. The subsequent development of the relationship might also have been paralleled in the West, if the Roman Empire had recovered its unity after the fifth century but had never again succeeded in reconquering the British Isles.⁴ But just as the Britons were never completely Romanized, so the Vietnamese were still not wholly Sinicized when, about A.D. 900, the break-up of the T'ang empire brought about their independence.

In the thousand years that followed, they created and defended a state of their own in the South, calling it first Dai-Viet (meaning 'Great Viet') and later Dai-Nam ('Great South'). From time to time they were threatened with incorporation into a reunified China, but on four occasions they succeeded in resisting or in quickly terminating Chinese attempts at reconquest. Although they sent periodic tribute to the Chinese capital, their king or emperor was ruler in his own right, making his own sacrifices to Earth and to Heaven. He and his officials continued to use the Chinese language for administrative purposes—and for classical literary composition—down to the nineteenth century: just as Latin was employed by clerics and lawyers in England and France long after the decline of Rome. The principles of Vietnamese government were based on those of the Confucian classics, and current Chinese literature was readily available to those who knew the characters.⁵

The parallel with England and France must not however be taken too far. The cultural gulf between Viet-Nam and the West, which became apparent in the nineteenth century, was much more than a gulf between 'traditional' and 'modern' societies. To think of traditional Viet-Nam as *culturally* comparable to medieval France or England would be a serious error. The nature of Western social and intellectual traditions made possible, from about the seventeenth century, developments which in time were to place European and Asian culture still farther apart: the 'scientific' and 'industrial revolutions'. Whether such developments could have ever taken place, given time, in

China or Viet-Nam is a question beyond our power to answer; for with Western expansion the traditional frameworks of East Asia were interrupted and forced to respond to Western influence. Conquest by France compelled the Vietnamese to turn away from China, at least for the time being, as their principal source of culture inspiration, and to turn towards the West. They accepted Roman script as a medium for writing their own language, and they were exposed to a wide range of new ideas and techniques in all spheres of activity.

Viet-Nam is possibly the most 'un-Western' of all Asian countries to have been conquered and ruled for a time by a European power. At the same time its colonial masters were probably the most eager of those powers to impose Western civilization on their Asian subjects. This coincidence has made Viet-Nam's relationship with the West culturally as well as politically dramatic. French rule has undoubtedly left its mark upon the culture and civilization of Viet-Nam, especially on those individuals who were so completely educated in French that they were accepted as virtually Frenchmen in France. Yet despite several decades of chanting 'nos ancêtres les Gaulois' there is no question that even the most Gallicized of them remain in essential respects Vietnamese.

In the past century or so, therefore, the philosophy of harmony derived from China was challenged by the philosophy of achievement brought by the Europeans. The encounter is not yet over, and those tempted to make too hasty a judgment of its outcome might do worse than to recall the reply of a Chinese scholar to a question about the effects of the French Revolution: it is much too early to say. But since we must live with this encounter, and some of us may have to die because of it, we ought to try very hard to understand it.

PART ONE

*Our Great Viet is a country where prosperity abounds,
Where civilization reigns supreme.*

*Its mountains, its rivers, its frontiers are its own;
Its customs are distinct, in North and South.*

*Triêu, Đinh, Ly and Trần
Created our nation,
Whilst Han, T'ang, Sung and Yuan,
Ruled over theirs.*

*Over the centuries,
We have been sometimes strong, sometimes weak;
But never yet have we been lacking in heroes.
Of that let our history be the proof.*

Lê Loi's proclamation of independence
after driving out the Ming, 1428.