

A SUMMARY HISTORY OF VIETNAM

It is indeed a dangerous enterprise trying to outline for you the entire history of a people in a few pages. One runs the risk of making arbitrary choices of subject matter and of giving an inadequate summary. Thus before beginning this historical summary we must take into account some general considerations. We must notice the presence of China to the North, a huge mass of land and men, hanging over us as in eternal threat. Secondly, the mountain ranges which stretch out from our Northern borders to the South and reduce the "living space" of the Vietnamese people to the coastal plains (fertile indeed, but sometimes quite insufficient for our needs). These two factors will help us understand the many details which must enter into this summary. A third element is our climate.

You surely know that Viet-Nam belongs to or is affected by the regions which together, form what we call "Monsoon Asia". Two types of winds bring either dryness or rain. What may not be so easily understood is the extreme dependence of the Vietnamese upon these two seasons. If there are too many weeks of extreme sunshine or if too much rain falls during the wet season, the entire crop for the year may be ruined. To illustrate the importance and influence of sun and rain one has only to hear some of the popular sayings of our people - sayings which have evolved from the hard conditions of life in an agricultural area.

" Heaven, let it rain, please;
" I shall, therefore, have water to drink;
" and water in the rice fields so that I may be able to plough"
" In the third month, the first tillings are made,
" in the fourth, one throws seeds and then the rain will fill the rice fields."

The only condition is that the rains come. Another common saying is most revealing:

" If by the eighth day of the 4th month, it has not yet rained one might just as well sell one's agricultural equipment to provide for one's needs."

This is the geographic and atmospheric "milieu" in which the Vietnamese people have been living for many thousands of years.

The ethnic origins of our people have not yet been fully determined. What ever they may be, the ethnologists are agreed that we have a Melanesian and Indonesian background with the additional and perhaps preponderant contribution of many mongoloid elements.

The peopling of the Vietnamese region goes back as far as the close of the Paleolithic age. The first evidences of an evolving civilization are to be found in remnants of chipped stone instruments of what the archaeologists call the Hoabinhian civilization. Then comes the Bacsonian age characterized by axes (sometimes with sharp, sometimes with buffed, edges.)

The centuries which followed were known as the bronze age, or the Dongsonian civilization. This era is characterized by its drums; a specimen of which you are going to see this afternoon in the Museum. It is to this period of* Viet-Nam belongs. According to these legendary sources, the Vietnamese people derived their origin from the union of the spirit of agriculture and a fairy. One of their descendants apparently married another fairy and had a hundred sons which he divided into two groups: one going to the mountains with their mother as descendants of fairy, and the other following their father towards the sea as the race descended from the Dragon. From latter group came the Vietnamese people. That is the reason why, even today, the Vietnamese proudly regard themselves as sons of a dragon and nephews of a fairy.

This first dynasty the HONG BANG appeared to have given 18 kings to Viet-Nam which was at that time called Van-Lang. After several crises and dynastic changes in the year 111, Viet-Nam succumbed to the domination of her Northern neighbor China. From 111 until the revolution of 939 a series of insurrections threw the armies and administrators out of the national territory which at that time extended approximately as far as the present Central Viet-Nam. Unfortunately, these struggles for independence were too ephemeral. As were the rebellions led by the TRUNG sisters, from 40 to 43 A.D. that of TRIEU AU, another woman in 280, that of LY BON, the founder of the first LY dynasty, from 544 to 642; that of MAI THUC LOAN or MAI HAC DE in 722; that of PHUNG HUNG or BO CAI DAI VUONG in 791; and that of KHUC THUA DU in 906, which was a prelude to NGO QUYEN insurrection of 939, which put an end to foreign domination and inaugurated the era of independence.

What are the main results of this thousand year protectorate? In spite of the multiple insurrections from cruelty as well as kindness Chinese civilization has impregnated the life of the life of the Vietnamese people. Its influence is manifest everywhere, in the use of farm equipment as well as in the way of thinking, in religion, and in the administrative organization of the country. One after the other, Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism successively spread over Viet-Nam, and their principles still mark the Vietnamese mind today. However, in spite of this strong Chinese influence Viet-Nam has enough vigor and individuality to preserve and strengthen her independence.

However, after the death of NGO QUYEN, the liberator king, the situation threatened to turn to disaster.

The feudal chiefs wanted to proclaim their independence. Fortunately, anarchy was rapidly put down and the pacifier founded the DINH dynasty which was followed by the first LE dynasty.

Its first Kings, too absorbed by the fortification of the Vietnamese nation against its turbulent neighbors, paid very little attention to internal organization. This task fell to the lot of the next dynasty, the LY dynasty at the beginning of the 11th century (1010) one of the greatest of Vietnamese dynasties. To its achievements, we must put the rational maintenance of dams thus giving the farmers greater security against floods, a great effort to diffuse education, the establishment of examinations for the recruitment of civil servants, the creation of a National College for the teaching of Letters, and the Royal Academy grouping together all the most eminent scholars. The LY are also known as

* a thousand years that the legendary history of

3/.....

great builders of Pagodas and Temples and during their reign, Buddhism reaches its zenith in Viet-Nam. It is also under the aegis of its kings that the Vietnamese people launches out into the Drang Nach Siid. In the same way as Germany with its Drang Nach Osten and the United States of America in their Westward march, Viet-Nam, on account of the scantiness of its national territory, is obliged to dispute with its neighbors for some shreds of coastal plains. It's only in the 11th century that this push toward the South started, to end only in 1677 in the extinction of the Champa Kingdom which spread over the Southern part of present Central Viet-Nam, and at the end of the 18th century to the annexion from Cambodia of South Viet-Nam. In the North, the LY regularized their relations with China - but not without having shown the Chinese the military genius of General LY THUONG KIET between 1074 - 1075.

In 1224, this great dynasty ended for want of male descendant. The power then passes to the TRAN family until 1400. The new dynasty continued its expansion toward the South and became famous for its struggle against the Mongols. Three times, they beat off the Mongolian invasions, one of which was commanded by the son of the great Quoubilai: Toghan. TRAN QUOC TUAN and TRAN QUANG KHAI distinguished themselves in these battles. The former in face of the fear shown by his sovereign at the threat of imminent Mongol attack, cried out before the Council:

"Sire, if you wish to surrender to the enemy, do me at least the favour of first cutting off my head. As long as this head continues to sit on these shoulders this country will continue to exist."

These brave words were destined to find their proof in the brilliant victory on the river Bach-Dang in 1288 - victory which repeated the glorious feat of arms of NGO QUYEN in 939.

At the banquet celebrating the second victory over Mongol invasion, in 1284, the second of these great soldiers, TRAN QUANG KHAI, composed the following lines which have been immortalized by the centuries:

" From the enemy I took his lances at the port of Chuong-Duong,
Captured my adversaries at the pier of Ham-Tu;
Peace must be the object of our eternal quest
And this nation will eternally."

In addition to its military exploits, the TRAN dynasty continued the intellectual work of its predecessors. During their reign there developed the literature written in the Nom script which was a transcription of the spoken language of the country made by the use of single or combined Chinese characters. This system of transcription would seem to have made its first appearance in the 8th century, but it is not until the 11th that writers begin to employ it in literary works.

In 1400 the last of the TRAN Kings, aged only three years, was forced by court intrigues to abdicate in favour of LE QUI LY who changed his name to HO's. One of the

descendants of the TRAN's called for Chinese who easily overthrew the usurpers in 1407 and made as if to set up a post-TRAN dynasty. Upon an attempt at revolt against the too severe Chinese domination, the last of the TRAN Emperors was captured and sent in exile in China. But before he got there he committed suicide and Viet-Nam passed under the direct domination of the MINH dynasty in 1413. The exactions of the Chinese administration of occupied Viet-Nam caused much discontent amongst the Vietnamese people and a centre of resistance was soon formed by LE-LOI at Lam-Son. The revolution, though, did not see complete success until 1427, though there had been glorious victories, at Tuy-Dong in 1426 and at Chi-Lang in the following year. After the half-hearted restoration of the TRAN's, LE-LOI proclaimed himself king in 1428.

What, we may well ask, were the sufferings endured by the Vietnamese under the brief MINH administration, and what were the difficulties which the king had to contend with? To find an answer to this question we must consult the great Proclamation of the Pacification of the NGO (Chinese) written by NGUYEN TRAI, battle companion of the great LE-LOI himself. This document is a masterpiece of its type and it is much to be regretted that we can only give an extract from it.

"They grilled innocent people over infernal flames and threw young people into the bottomless pits of misery. They lied openly and snared men in all sorts of ways.... Their depredations lasted twenty years. The wrongs done to the principles of Justice and Charity were so profound that the normal movement of the universe seemed in suspension, taxes and contributions were so exorbitant that the mountains and the lakes nearly disappeared.... Indeed all the water of the Eastern Sea hardly seemed enough to wash away the stains; all the bamboos of the Southern mountains insufficient to record the crimes committed. The spirits and men were united in a great wave of indignation; Heaven and Earth together refused their Pardon."

It was then that the Saviour LE-LOI appeared-already weighed down with difficulties and worries.

"I took leave of Mont Lam-Son and vowed my life to the battle and the bush.

"At the moment I raised the banner of Justice, they enemy was at the pinnacle of his power. Alas! all around me, men of talent were like autumn leaves, the elite like morning stars....that was why my carriage was always open on its left side--longing to welcome men of good will. Waiting for the happy event I had the impression of looking out into the loneliness of a limitless ocean."

But Heaven looks kindly on the Just and LE-LOI finally succeeded in repulsing the invader:

"Oh! a warrior's coat has brought back order, a great victory has been achieved; the four seas will henceforth be calm and a new era is coming."

Such are the main themes of the Great Proclamation. Through its words we can feel all the affection which the writer feels for his sovereign. His feelings vibrate with such an accent of sincerity and truth that it is impossible to believe that he only intended to flatter his king.

After having frustrated the designs of the Chinese Imperialists, LE-LOI, founder of the later LE Dynasty (the former LE's had reigned from 980-1010) devoted himself entirely to the reorganization of his country. The short MINH occupation had left many traces in Viet-Nam. Vietnamese books written in Chinese had been taken away to China and this is why the King's first task was to reconstruct education, creating a "College for the Sons of the State" open to all gifted children, even the poorest. The administration was reformed and the army largely demobilised.

Of the successors of LE-LOI (or LE-THAI-TO) the only king worth mentioning is LE-TANH-TON who continued the work of the founder of the dynasty giving his attention successively to administrative organization, the collection of taxes, education and agriculture.

It was he who gave to the historian NGO SI LIEN to write a complete history of Viet-Nam and asked the learned men to make a collection of the most representative works of Vietnamese literature. In his leisure time he devoted himself to poetry, of which the pieces we still possess today show a refreshing purity and an obvious delicacy.

At the death of this eminent King the dynasty fell into decadence and finally succumbed to the blows of the usurper MAC DANG DUNG in 1527. The Macs, however, had little success, for the supporters of the LE were still numerous and powerful. They managed, nevertheless, and thanks to Chinese help, to remain in power until 1600 when the partisans of the LE dynasty forced them to abandon the capital and take refuge in the high plateau. In the fight against the usurper the TRINH and NGUYEN families particularly distinguished themselves and after the victory the restored dynasty conferred upon them respectively the administration of the Northern and Southern Territories. The latter, however, lost no time in seeking their own independence and, about 1615, built the wall of Dong-Hoi - the better to fight against their northern neighbours. For two centuries Viet-Nam was to be divided and the period is characterized by the fight for power between the two clans, the southward expansion of the NGUYEN and the religious and commercial activities of Europeans in Viet-Nam.

Is it really necessary to enter into the details of all these wars, all these sterile massacres? We think not, for it is much easier to gain an idea of contemporary feeling by glancing at a few short extracts of "The Complaint of the Warrior's Wife":

"Three hundred years the Empire enjoyed a Peace Serene,
Henceforth the brave officers shall wear the warrior's coat.
He about to part respects his orders and the separation too;
His wife and child grip lovingly his sleeves.....
The banners and standards crack in the wind, melancholic
emblems of departure for the frontier:

"Flutes resound, and big drums too, sad complaints of family separation.

Your eyes gazing to the clouds, you left me, oh! you left me;
My eyes gazing to the mountains, I looked away, I thought of you;
I turned around, you were leaving, we both turned round and our eyes met.

The clouds were of azure and the mountains blue...."

And then the pain of departure and separation gives way to the unconsolable loneliness and sadness of the wife left behind:

"I use my sadness as my pillow,
I use my grief for my meals,
With wine I try to slake my sadness;
But the sadness weighs heavy and the wine's no use.
With flowers I try to dissolve my grief
But the grief is persistent and the flowers seem dull."

Only an infinite confidence in the future could comfort such a broken heart:

"When honours and glory outweigh the years of separation,
We'll make love at leisure during the long years of peace:
The years of the Great Peace, may they last forever;
Together again, we'll make many vows, exchange many secrets,
Dearest husband, it will be thus?"

Thus we can see that, from peaceful peasants, the Vietnamese can turn easily into courageous warriors; and thus it is that, at the end of the 18th Century, the whole of the South is incorporated into Viet-Nam at the expense of Champa and Cambodia. This great movement is, however, compromised by the revolt of the 'three TAY SON brothers in 1771 who overpowered both the NGUYEN and the TRINH. Chased out of his country, Chief NGUYEN ANH took refuge in Siam, and his distress asked, through the good offices of the Bishop of Adran (Monseigneur Pigneau de Behaine), for military aid from France.

However, TAY SON's forces weakened as they spread out and the brothers started to quarrel. NGUYEN ANH made capital out this favorable turn of events and within two years (1787-1789) managed by his own efforts to reconquer the whole of the South. The French forces arrived in 1789; but, affected by the reverberations of the French Revolution, many of them returned immediately to France. NGUYEN ANH, after having pacified the South, in 1790 set out to reconquer the North accompanied by a group of eminent generals of whom the most famous was LE VAN DUYET whose tomb is at Gia-Dinh, on the road to Bien-Hoa. The task of reunification took until 1802 and hereafter NGUYEN ANH reigned over a country of about the same area as present-day Viet-Nam. He started the NGUYEN dynasty and took as his title the name GIA-LONG.

At this point we should perhaps try to correct a misunderstanding; how is that the defeated chieftain NGUYEN ANH could think of asking help from the French? The question raises the whole problem of the relations between Viet-Nam and the West in general, and with France in particular.

Commercial relations between Viet-Nam and Europe go back in all probability as far as the first centuries of our era. The recent research projects at Oc-Eo in South-West Viet-Nam have brought to light several Roman coins which seem to lend credence to the assertion of the Chinese chroniclers that Roman merchants arrived at Canton about the year 166. Nothing further is known of Vietnamese-European relations until the 16th Century when Portuguese missionaries and merchants arrived, and Christianity was introduced into Viet-Nam. It was in collaboration with the Portuguese missionaries that the French jesuit father, Alexandre de Rhodes, wrote his Dictionnarium annamiticum-latinum at lusitanum, published in Rome in the year 1651. This work, subsequently altered and filled-out several times, was destined to serve as a basis for the romanization of the spoken language. This transcription - the Quoc-Ngu - gained such popularity from the end of the 19th Century that the use of Chinese characters and the Nom tended to disappear. Today it is the only script officially recognized.

The French were destined to play the preponderant role in the evangelization of Viet-Nam thanks to the foundation in Paris in 1658 of the Societe des Missions Etrangères, association which was soon to send some of its members to Viet-Nam. In such circumstances it was not at all surprising that NGUYEN ANH should turn in his troubles towards France. But once he had become King he tried to see farther in to the future and thought well to try to discourage the influence of France and of the West by any means in his power. By 1861, in the reign of TU DUC, Western influence was practically eliminated. But to speak of European renunciation of all interest in the country would be to minimize the consequences of the industrial revolution in Europe. In the 19th Century Europe had to seek outlets for the products of her industry. The Opium War in China, the forcing open of the Japanese Empire, the establishment of the British Empire in India and the Dutch colonization of Indonesia - all these events boded a similar future for Viet-Nam. And we see this materialize towards the middle of the 19th Century, when the expansionist policy of the Second Empire pushed France naturally toward the Far-East. The conquest of South Viet-Nam is completed by 1863. And the quest for access to the Chinese market leads France to conquer the North which, in 1885, leads to a French protectorate over the whole of Viet-Nam.

This all too brief sketch needs a conclusion. The French occupation is by now a part of history - even if its study is far from completed. All we can say is that, like the Chinese domination, it resulted in numerous revolts and great numbers of lives were sacrificed that today we might be free and independent. We desire most dearly to deserve our freedom, and this wish comes naturally to our lips:

"That one day the unity of Viet-Nam will be achieved
That we may live together in everlasting Peace."

(SOURCE UNKNOWN)