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HEALTH, EDUCATION AND WELFARE

VN H-37
FILE SUBJ
DATE SUB-CAT
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JUST-PUBLISHED OFFICIAL HISTORY OF VIETNAM REVIEWED

Article by Nguyen Khanh Toan: "History of the Vietnamese People, a Great Epic"; Hanoi, Nhan Dan, Vietnamese, 14, 15 September 1971/

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Editor's Note: In connection with the 26th Anniversary of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, Social Science Publishers have published the first volume of Lich Su Vietnam (A History of Vietnam). This is the first volume of an official history of our nation of Vietnam, covering the period from the establishment of our nation to the middle of the 19th century. Following is an article by Nguyen Khanh Toan written in connection with the publishing of Lich Su Vietnam.

Vietnam is a heroic and indomitable nation. Our people have long had a concept of "There is nothing more precious than independence and freedom." This concept originates with the pride of a nation which has built one of the most ancient cultures of mankind, achieving a great leap forward in history from an era of ignorance to one of civilization.

This pride is justified because the culture was built by laboring people and is the common property of all Vietnamese from the period of first national construction, the property of the "Hong and Lac descendants" and children of the Vietnam Fatherland with no distinction between ethnic Vietnamese or minorities, the lowlands or the uplands.

Therefore, our people had an extremely early concept that the nation of Vietnam belonged to the Vietnamese, the people of Vietnam were one, the nation of Vietnam was one, and no force could erase this historic reality.

Not only that, this culture created by the people of Vietnam forged for the Vietnamese the noble quality and nucleus of virtues forming a position of strength for those fighting for right with a concept of controlling their own nation and fate: heroic, indomitable, unyielding, firm, unafraid of sacrifice or hardship, unafraid of the enemy, a spirit of cooperation and solidarity, consistent, loyal, unpretentious, spontaneous, intelligent and creative, optimistic, and confident in one's own strength and the final victory of justice.

Therefore, if on one hand the people of Vietnam lived under special circumstances as stated above of constant threat and attack from foreign aggressors twice as strong, they on the other hand won special glory in constantly saving themselves, meeting every challenge, and continually winning final victory.

Victorious struggle against foreign aggression and subjugation to win and protect the right to live, independence, and freedom of the people is a special feature of Vietnam's historical development.

At the beginning of the Christian era, the rebellion of our people led by the two Trung sisters to liberate the nation from the ruling yoke of the invading Han army is a great page in the history of struggle for independence and freedom of our people during 2,000 years.

This was an incomparably brave victory of justice and a concept of independence and freedom against injustice, aggression, and subjugation while the disparity in forces between the two sides was formidable.

It was a victory of the progressive historical trend -- a road of developing the independence of nations -- against a reactionary trend -- to block, restrain, and suffocate the free development of mankind.

It was a victory of the fraternal solidarity of all nationalities on the soil of Vietnam who enthusiastically responded and assembled round the banner and cause for national independence and a united Fatherland.

It was a victory of our people's creativity of which the nucleus was the revolutionary army of the two Trung sisters symbolizing love and righteousness against the regular army of the aggressors, tool of brutality.

The victory of the Trung sisters, national heroines, was a victory of the will of independence and freedom, strength of the people, and national solidarity.

After 3 years of independence for the nation, the Han army returned. This time, the nation was placed under foreign rule for an extremely long time -- nearly 1,000 years -- generally called the period of "Chinese domination."

Our people many times completely upset them with powerful blows such as the heroic uprisings of the peasant girl from Thanh Hoa, Trieu Thi Trinh, and the peasant from Nghe An-Ha Tinh, Mai Thuc Loan, disturbing the enemy ranks and pushing their undertaking to the edge of an abyss. There were also the glorious liberation wars of notables Ly Bi, Trieu Quang Phuc, and Phung Hung who for a time drove them over the border, established the country's name and throne, and restored the sovereignty of the Vietnamese people.

The liberation struggle for 1,000 years was a continuation and development of the nation's indomitable traditions. By this struggle, our people continued to write their own history.

This struggle, although at times of different intensity and organization, was extremely resolute, from beginning to end oriented toward an objective of winning independence for the nation, bearing a spirit of attack, and relying on the strength and rising zeal of the people.

This struggle was a demonstration of the wonderful vitality and unceasingly rising will of the people of Vietnam and also was a school of self-reliance.

This resolute struggle reached a decisive turning point at the beginning of the 10th century with the Bach Dang victory of Ngo Quyen, completely liberating the nation, totally collapsing and ending the yoke of foreign slavery, and avenging the humiliation of losing the country for more than 10 centuries.

The Bach Dang victory of Ngo Quyen was a noble expression of the concept and determination to smash the fetters of slavery. It also indicated the outstanding strategy of our people, meaning that at that moment, our nation not only had sufficient determination but also sufficient strength to deal the enemy decisive blows in order to attain final victory.

For a nation living 1,000 years under the enslavement of a foreign country to suddenly, in a face-to-face war (and even fighting on the water), heroically defeat their oppressors -- an imperialist country of feudal groups maintaining their rule primarily by armed force and military dictatorship -- was strange and difficult to believe.

Throughout the period it was deprived of its sovereignty, Vietnam naturally could not have its own regular army. However, our people continually engaged in armed combat with the nation plundering army. Many times, they tasted bitter defeat in our nation. Moreover, compared with the foreign aggressor enemy, we possessed many superiorities.

First of all, we had justice. Our nation was struggling against subjugation for independence and sovereignty. A just struggle against a nation plundering army always has the sympathy and support of many people with the constant solidarity and assembly of the majority.

Our people have a tradition of "when the aggressor comes, even the women fight." The fighting armed forces of a just rebellion and liberation war are a revolutionary army, coming from the people and rising against subjugation to liberate themselves.

Finally, our people were fighting in their own country, clearly understanding and knowing how to take advantage of the terrain, topography, weather, and climate. The mountains, hills, rivers, streams, birds, beasts, grass, and trees could all be allies of the revolutionary army.

One thousand years of resolute combat solidarity for national independence with an atmosphere of rebellion and attack by their own efforts and

methods created superior traditions and accumulated much precious experience for the undertaking of national liberation, teaching our people to dare to attack, know how to attack, and know how to win. This is the basis used by our nation to build a unique, creative, and completely Vietnamese military science. Our military science of which the Bach Dang battle in 938 was only the first page is an extremely important factor assisting our nation to recover integral sovereignty and during the following centuries, to maintain independence and defeat all aggressors, including those who have lorded it over half the world and never been defeated.

There is nothing strange about Ngo Quyen in only one battle defeating the powerful war fleet of the Nam Han army, ending the slavery of foreign feudalism and laying the first foundation for the independence and strong self-government of the nation.

The 10th century opened a new era for Vietnam, marked by the brilliant victories of founding and safeguarding the nation. These great unyielding efforts were a measurement of our nation's maturity. This was the time in which the Vietnamese people had the strength, both materially and spiritually, to successfully complete two historic duties; one, to liberate themselves in an extremely glorious fashion while the enemy held a position of strength and two, to build a perfect nation with the status of a powerful and civilized Asian nation of the Middle Ages with the capability to defeat the most powerful aggressor armies at that time.

During the first 400 or 500 years of this historic period, after the Bach Dang victory, Vietnam was nearly always in an arduous and most dangerous situation. Although shamefully driven from our country, the foreign feudalists continued to watch with ambition this "Cochine" land of golden forests and silver seas.

From the 10th to the 15 centuries, the three famous dynasties of Thong, Nguyen, and Minh, especially the Nguyen Dynasty which had shook and spread mourning over the continents of Asia and Europe, successively brought hundreds of thousands of strong troops and brave generals in an attempt to destroy our country. However, they were disastrously defeated.

An extraordinary effort, a marvelous vitality, and a nation recently restored to life after 1,000 years of cruel foreign subjugation were required to drive away this terrifying nightmare.

This effort was not far away but right in the extremely firm and strong roots of an ancient tree, the Vietnamese nationality which had existed for thousands of years. It was in the heroic and indomitable traditions of a nation through scores of centuries. It was in the cultural and spiritual values created by our forefathers from one generation to another, long restrained under the yoke of slavery but now leaping into the light like a waterfall from its source.

It was an effort of the national concept reaching a rare pinnacle during that period, a contribution to history glorifying our nation. During

these life-and-death situation, our people both courageously worked to build the nation and heroically fought to protect independence and sovereignty and develop the fine qualities of the nation, expressing the creative strength of the Vietnamese people's imposing patriotism.

Naturally, both aspects of construction and combat had to be coordinated before defeating the powerful enemy forces and maintaining independence. Our people clearly recognized this truth because they were a nation with a concept full of their ownership rights, had fought untiringly for thousands of years to protect that right, and clearly understood the value of independence and freedom.

However, on what foundation should the combat and construction be based? How should the combat and construction be conducted? This was a decisive step.

The greatness and creative intelligence of our forefathers during the period of independence and self-government relied on a national foundation and developed the national cultural legacy to fight and build. They had the intelligence and independent policies to maintain and strengthen the national independence.

This was the secret of splendid success of the Ngo, Dinh, early Le, Ly, Tran, and the first period of the later Le dynasties, dynasties which represented the basic powers of the nation, unity, independence, and sovereignty. The name Great Vietnam given the country by the Ly Dynasty as well as moving the capital to the lowlands and calling it Thang Long reflected an impressive national pride and independent and self-strengthening spirit.

Concerning the form of government within the nation, after the days of liberation, a centralized power absolute monarchy was established. This was a necessity in the actual conditions of Vietnam at that time. It was necessary to end the divided condition (the confusion of 12 parts) in order to unite the nation, forming a foundation for strong independence. However, the village still had wide autonomy. The Vietnamese village has played an active role in resisting natural conditions and foreign aggression since the period of Hung Vuong. The village was closely connected with the nation. Matters of village and nation did not oppose or contradict one another. During the period of Chinese domination, the village was the location retaining the national characteristics of language, customs, and rituals.

Within the framework of feudal land ownership (supreme ownership of the emperor) was a system of public land.

In culture, the Vietnamese language, one of the most ancient and united languages of Asia through thousands of years of enemy enslavement maintained its distinct character. The many imported literary styles did not cause the Vietnamese language to forget its origin but only enriched and strengthened its original vocabulary. Establishing the Nom language, our nation expressed the trend to replace the language of a foreign country with their own in the life of an independent nation.

In art forms and fine art, foreign influence was creatively accepted, not losing but bringing out the unique features and customs of Vietnam.

The great merit of the Ly and Tran dynasties was in efforts to restore the image of the people in the nation from the distant past. The first national history of Le Van Huu appeared. Vietnamese scholars collected and recorded the legends, folk stories, and facts of national heroes. Although there were many limitations (and this is natural), these projects were the first threads allowing those later to gradually unveil the secrecy concealing the origin and ancient culture of our nation, assisting to build historic truth and discard the distortions of historians following the aggressor viewpoint.

Concerning ideology, ethics, and morals, Confucianism was the orthodox concept of the northern feudal dynasties. The aggressors used these to spiritually enslave our people.

However, the people of Vietnam, a civilized nation from the beginning, resisted, rose up to resist enslavement and even cultural enslavement, countered with proposals from national reality, or Vietnamized those things which could be used as tools to increase their strength.

In the nation of the Hung emperors, our ancestors built a high agricultural civilization and our people soon acquired experience in growing rice and farming in general, summarized in the four words: water, fertilizer, diligence, and seed. When the Western missionaries arrived in the 17th and 18th centuries, they recognized the extremely high farming capabilities of our farmers.

Great Vietnam produced outstanding scholars in botany, chemistry, mathematics, medicine, construction, and the manufacture of explosives.

Vietnam had an advanced military science for that period of time. It was the science of victors in resolute and indomitable struggle against foreign aggression. Its foundation was an indomitable spirit and brilliant national culture, its motive force was justice, and its power was the people.

These factors are personified in the genius of the great immortal national strategists and heroes Ngo Quyen, Ly Thuong Kiet, Tran Hung Dao, Nguyen Trai, and Quang Trung.

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During the 10th, 11th, 13th, and 15th centuries, we had to confront other powerful feudal forces of aggression (the Tong army during the 10th and 11th centuries, the Mongol-Nguyen army during the 13th century, and the Minh army during the 15th century). Each of these aggressors had its own individual superiorities causing the struggle of our people each time to become additionally complex and arduous.

However, most wonderful and glorious for our nation and our people during each of these challenges, the more our people united, the higher the will to protect the Fatherland and determinedly annihilate the enemy became, and the more impressive the national status became, the more rapidly Vietnam matured, and the more resounding the victories.

The Tong was a great dynasty which united China (after the turmoil and division caused by the collapse of the Duong Dynasty) and brought feudal centralism into an extremely prosperous stage.

The determination of our people in resisting the Tong invading army at the end of the 11th century,* relying on the status of a nation with a profound concept of its ownership rights, resembled that of a nation totally equal to other nations.

The army of Genghis Khan invaded Vietnam when half the world was subdued from Asia to Europe and established rule over all of China, setting up the Nguyen Dynasty.

The determination of our people to resist the Mongol-Nguyen army (which invaded our nation three successive times during a period of 30 years at the second half of the 13th century) relied on the status of a civilized nation pursuing the Huns, understanding only how to destroy, burn, and murder, not only fearless but despicable.

This was the bearing of a nation not only with sufficient courage but also the strength to challenge the leading invader Kublai Khan sitting on the emperor's throne in the north and demanding the "heads of those at the palace gate."

With an air of treading on the heads of the foe, Tran Hung Dao three times annihilated the Mongol-Nguyen army at the battles of Tay Ket, Hang Tu, and Chuong Duong and definitely buried the prestige and bodies of the aggressor army in the Bach Dang River (the third Bach Dang victory in 1288), eliminating a terrible scourge to Vietnam and all nations of Southeast Asia.

After the Nguyen Dynasty was overthrown by the people of China, the Minh Dynasty ascended the throne, considering itself the power to force submission of the "Cochine" people. At the beginning of the 15th century, the Minh army invaded and dominated our country in the Tan and Han style. The occupation of our country was not because the Minh army was strong but because at the end of the 14th century, the reign of the Tran Dynasty was ended, the nation entered a situation of turmoil and weakness, the throne was stolen by Ho Quy Ly, and a situation was created of additional turmoil and dispersal of the people's forces. Taking advantage of this opportunity, the Minh army jumped in to place to place an extremely brutal yoke of slavery around the neck of our nation.

Not long afterward however, the people of Vietnam came to and swiftly rose everywhere to strike the nation plundering army, firmly united under the

banner of Le Loi and the staff of national liberation of which Nguyen Trai was the soul. Ten years of resistance war ended at the victory of Chi Lang with a great historic significance. Like a pile of dry leaves, the aggressor army was swept from Vietnam.

This glorious victory indicated that at the beginning of the 15th century, the people of Vietnam had completely matured in their realization of their dignity as an active factor of historic progress. The war of resistance of Le Loi in every aspect except for the national spirit and patriotism originated from nothing because when occupying our country, the enemy had destroyed every national and social structure and even our cultural legacy.

However, to mankind the substance was a fight of civilization against barbarity and love and righteousness against brutality.

Therefore, all superiority shifted to us during the war of resistance, a development to the highest level of the basic factors of a just cause, humanity, intelligence, and courage and creating for us a position of standing on the head of the foe.

The historic value of this victory completely smashed the aggressive will of a savage and stubborn enemy, the first time in the Middle Ages in which a large country was forced to recognize and respect the self-determination of a small nation.

When Great Vietnam had won independence, Le Loi, the hero who led the victorious national liberation war, ascended the throne and established the Le Dynasty (later Le).

Because it had relied on the essence of a nation created by previous generations, especially during the period of the Ly and Tran dynasties to drive out the Minh army, the Le Dynasty continued to develop this essence after victory was won and to promote a spirit of independence and self-strength.

Thanks to this, the wounds of a terrible war were quickly healed. Brilliant development was made in the economic and cultural aspects. During the 15th and 16th centuries, Great Vietnam was a nation with firm order and rules and a prosperity among the highest in Southeast Asia.

However, a new factor had appeared containing complex aspects, new foreign aggression.

When the centralized power absolute monarchy was liberated, it was necessary to strengthen independence and concentrate efforts in rebuilding the nation. However, if the protection of independence is not the primary duty, the effect of strengthening the centralized power absolute monarchy of the feudal group in power, first of all a clan, can only have an internal objective of the people.

From this, the task of national construction with a steadily increasing rate is completely dependent upon protecting and strengthening the ruling interests of the feudal clan in power.

The economy continued to develop but many things were produced which did not improve the living standards of the people, "lowered the strength of the people" (the words of Tran Hung Dao), and industry and commerce were developed to supply the palace, aristocracy, and increasingly larger official organization. Trade with the outside was also aimed at this objective.

Culture and education were promoted but to support the luxurious and extravagant life of the rulers and bureaucracy, tools of the centralized power absolute monarchy.

The autonomous system of the village and public land was maintained but gradually in name only and became a tool to steal land and chisel and suppress the peasants of the landowner class and bureaucracy, two pillars of the system.

Each social system must rely on a philosophy. The ancient philosophy of our ancestors was to use the people and nation as the foundation and the will of independence and freedom as the reason for living. The relationships between emperor and subject, father and son, wife and husband, brothers, and friends were all built on this principle.

The Le Dynasty, appropriating the interests of the entire nation and people for itself, naturally considered the philosophy of Confucianism as a golden rule to the social and spiritual life of Vietnam. The Le Dynasty honored Confucianism as the national religion.

Strengthening the rule of the Le Dynasty through the centralized power monarchy swiftly revealed and compounded the dissensions of society, first of all and primarily the dissension between the feudal class and peasants.

It was not that the previous dynasties -- also all feudal -- did not have these dissensions. Naturally they did and many times, the dissensions broke out savagely such as at the end of the Ly and Tran Dynasties. However, at those times, the common and apparently constant concern of the nation was a concentration of effort in resisting foreign aggressors.

Only after the class and group in power accompanied the people (basically peasants), relied on the people, and led the people in resisting aggression and protecting the independence and sovereignty of the nation were they able to maintain and strengthen their ruling position. At this time, the interests of the feudal class and the nation were basically in agreement.

Under the Le Dynasty, especially one century after the nation liberated itself from the Minh army, the situation differed as we have seen above. The agreement gradually weakened and then disappeared completely.

The dissensions became increasingly acute, propelling the Le regime into continuous crisis and finally to destruction under the decisive blows of an unprecedented glorious peasants' war.

The crisis began with the disintegration of national unity. From a situation in which two courts (Le and Mac) emerged, the situation steadily worsened, led to a savage power struggle between Trinh and Mac and then Trinh and Nguyen, divided the country into two opposing kingdoms, and began a civil war which lasted from one century to the next, causing endless suffering for the people and destroying much of the nation's vitality. Regarding the ethnic minorities, the feudal kings and emperors implemented a policy of intimidation and expansion.

During the transitional period of history from the Middle Ages to the present time, while the objective conditions of this transformation ripened in an increasingly rapid manner in the West, in Vietnam, the potential capabilities for creating these conditions were severely restricted and suffocated by the heavy control of the feudal relationships. Therefore, the feudal system contradicted all of Vietnamese society.

However, the peasant -- comprising the absolute majority of the people -- had to bear every heavy load of these afflictions. The Vietnamese peasant has constantly played an active and primary role throughout the history of building and maintaining the country. Besides their indomitable national spirit, they were imbued extremely early with democratic traditions. The peasant movement was continually developed during the 17th and 18th centuries with an increasingly stronger spirit of independence and attack strength, profoundly influencing the social struggle of all the people against feudalism, breathing new life into this movement.

The orderly hierarchy, ethics, and principles of feudalism collapsed. The kings, emperors, officials, Confucian scholars, village bullies, and parasites of the people sunk into the mud. The cruelty, decadence, and false virtues of feudalism were condemned. The happiness of mankind and the wholesome, loyal, and righteous feeling and the legendary virtues of the nation were upheld.

The Vietnamese language was widely utilized. Because it served justice and expressed the obstinacy of a nation of which peasants were the nucleus, the Vietnamese language became rich and melodious, closely resembling the modern version of the Vietnamese language, on the basis of developing the superiorities and clarity of the common language coordinated with the creative acceptance of the good things from the culture of other nations. Outstanding scholars appeared in all branches of knowledge.

The rebellious spirit and national control concept of our people, restrained through many centuries under the yoke of feudalism, now burned brightly with unprecedented strength in the Tay Son rebellion, pinnacle of the peasants' war which lasted through 2 centuries.

The uniqueness and great historic significance of the Tay Son movement was in its close relationship between the internal struggle against feudalism and the struggle against foreign aggression.

With its marvelous exploits -- sweeping out the ruling feudalists, beginning to achieve national unity, and swiftly destroying many tens of thousands of foreign troops -- the Tay Son undertaking represented a strong step in development in the rising vitality and zeal of our nation.

The victories with a mythical nature of Quang Trung -- defeating 200,000 Man Thanh troops in 5 days and totally annihilating 50,000 Xiem troops in only a few days -- were due to the consolidated strength of two factors, the national spirit and the spirit of resistance against feudalism.

However, the extremely brilliant and eternally glorious rebellion of our people was finally defeated. An extremely reactionary feudal regime -- the Nguyen Dynasty of Gia Long -- was restored with the consequences that not long afterwards, 50 years later, Vietnam fell into the hands of the Western colonialists, a catastrophe for which the Nguyen Dynasty -- a monstrosity corrupted by feudal order -- must plead guilty before history.

However, the defeat was temporary. The peasant movement during the 18th century, although strong as a typhoon, did not and could not reveal the forward movement of Vietnamese society. However, its mark was extremely deep. It tempered and strengthened the obstinate will, indomitable traditions, and revolutionary offensive spirit of our people in their struggle against foreign aggression and feudalism for independence and freedom.

This spirit will be maintained and developed to its highest degree during the historic period when "our people rise in the tide of progressive mankind with the intense vitality of the new era, the glorious traditions of the nation, and the full concept of their fate and future" (Le Duan) to achieve the most wonderful and greatest leap forward in the 4,000 year history of the Vietnamese people.

* The Tong army, invading our country for the first time at the end of the 10th century, was defeated by Le Hoan on the Bach Dang River (second Bach Dang victory, 981).