

Preface

In early 1976, less than a year after the fall of Saigon, I gave a lecture in my introductory Asian American history class at the University of California (UC), Berkeley on why more than a hundred thousand Vietnamese had come to the United States. Having been an antiwar activist, what I said was rather critical of U.S. foreign policy, the American conduct of the war, and the behavior of the leaders who had governed the Republic of Vietnam (the official name of the country that Americans called "South Vietnam"), especially during the months before Saigon fell. At the end of that lecture, as well as after the lectures on the same topic that I gave in the following three years, the handful of Vietnamese students enrolled in each class rushed up to the stage to tell me that what I had said was "completely wrong." Some were so angry that their faces were flushed and tears welled up in their eyes. Others called me a Communist. A few even declared that someone with my perspective should not be allowed to teach at an American university.

I understood their rage. After all, some of the very politicians and military commanders I had called "corrupt" or "incompetent" were their fathers, uncles, or other relatives. Most of the Vietnamese students who took my courses in that early period of Vietnamese resettlement in the United States came from well-to-do families that had employed live-in servants, cooks, washerwomen, and chauffeurs in their homeland. Although some of their parents had managed to find jobs as bilingual teachers' aides or as interpreters in government offices and voluntary social service agencies that served refugees, a larger number, after their arrival, were forced to eke out a living in blue-collar or service occupations. Almost all blamed the United States for "abandoning" or "betraying" them. They rejected the idea that Vietnamese themselves, both those in the North and the ones in the South, *also* bore responsibility for the war's outcome.

The students' emotions were so intense and their objections so vocal that I quickly realized that if faculty members teaching Asian American Studies wished to draw Vietnamese students into our classrooms, we had to find ways to come to terms with their vehemently anti-Communist political perspectives and their proclivity to adopt the most conservative currents in American political ideology. This fact created a dilemma for Asian American Studies faculty members, many of whom espoused antiestablishment and anticapitalist beliefs in those early years of the field's development. While I was among the faculty who held such views, I also believed strongly that Asian American Studies must be ecumenical both in terms of Asian panethnic inclusiveness and with regard to ideological openness. As a teacher who cared deeply about students, I tried my best to refrain from alienating any.

While I pondered how to deal with this clash of politics within our classrooms, Dr. Pham Cao Duong, a former professor of history at the National University in Saigon, submitted a proposal in 1978 to the Asian American Studies Program at UC Berkeley to establish what he called a "Vietnamese-in-America component" within Asian American Studies. He argued that such a curriculum "will be of great help not only to these new immigrants [who wish] to learn about and to research themselves, but also to those who have been working or plan to work with them."¹ Dr. Pham had apparently read the statement that seven Asian American Studies faculty had released a year earlier in the midst of a tumultuous internal struggle regarding the program's goals and future direction.² Echoing that statement, Dr. Pham stated that the major goals of the Vietnamese-in-America component he was proposing would be (1) educational work with students, (2) research on the Vietnamese community, and (3) fieldwork to enable students to participate in and to support the Vietnamese communities then sprouting up in America. However, because the Asian American Studies Program at UC Berkeley was still putting itself back on track after a year of turmoil, nothing came of Dr. Pham's proposal.

A few years later, however, the program did hire a Vietnamese faculty member, Chung Hoang Chuong, to teach a two-semester course on Southeast Asian refugees at UC Berkeley. He did so for about ten years. Professor Khatharya Um, a Cambodian American scholar, assumed responsibility for those courses in the early 1990s. San Francisco State University, UC Davis, UC Santa Barbara, UCLA, UC Irvine, and several other schools in California as well as in other states now offer courses on the refugees and immigrants from Southeast Asia.

Before all this happened, back in the late 1970s I felt I had to do something to bring Vietnamese students into the Asian American Studies circle. Accordingly, I offered a course, Asian American Studies 171, "The Vietnamese Experience in America," in spring 1980. Undaunted by the paucity of published writings that could be assigned as readings, I told the students who enrolled in that class that I wanted to make a deal with them: in exchange for their efforts to teach me something about their families' experiences both before and after 1975, I would help them improve their writing and speaking abilities in English.

During the first six weeks, the students had to write an essay of five to seven pages each week. The assigned topics were their family histories before 1975, their memories of their childhoods, how the war had affected their daily lives, their departure from Saigon, the challenges they faced as they adapted to life in the United States, and their impressions and opinions of Americans. After completing the segments, using my comments as a guide, they revised and linked the six short pieces together into a single autobiography or family history. Three of the chapters in this book are from my collection of the papers that students in that class produced. Because the authors were in their teens when they left Vietnam, most of them could deftly analyze their own thoughts and feelings in addition to recounting events. Despite their relatively recent arrival, some students had a surprisingly good vocabulary because they used the dictionary often and learned many uncommon words that way.

In addition to writing their family histories, the students had to interview other Vietnamese in order to write reports comparing the interviewees' experiences and perspectives with their own. Then they gave oral presentations discussing the possible reasons for the similarities and differences between their views and those of others. With this exercise, I hoped to show them that the Vietnamese people are by no means homogeneous. For that reason, I pointed out, no individual can claim that his or her outlook represents *the* Vietnamese perspective on historical and contemporary events. What I was trying to do was to encourage them to be more tolerant of viewpoints other than their own.

To further emphasize the heterogeneity among Vietnamese, readings for the course included essays in which the authors expressed starkly divergent standpoints with regard to Vietnamese history and culture, as well as the thirty-year wars that engulfed Vietnam and its neighbors from 1945 to 1975. I no longer have a copy of the syllabus, but I remember that the class read an article on Vietnamese resistance

to foreign intervention, "Vietnamese Nationalism: The Link with the Past," by Truong Buu Lam, a historian teaching at the University of Hawaii and one of the best known Vietnamese scholars in the United States at the time; an essay entitled "Confucianism and Marxism in Vietnam" by Nguyen Khac Vien, a medical doctor who eventually became a Marxist scholar and editor of *Etudes Vietnamiennes* and *Courrier du Vietnam*, both published in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (Communist-ruled "North Vietnam"); and excerpts from *Reflections on the Vietnam War* by General Cao Van Vien and Lieutenant General Dong Van Khuyen, who had commanded units of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). The readings also included selections by French journalists and scholars such as Bernard Fall and Paul Mus, and short pieces by various American political leaders, soldiers who had fought in the war, antiwar activists, and journalists. Students had to turn in one-page comments on each of these readings. I was not asking for "book reports" that simply summarized the readings; rather, I wanted thoughtful critiques in which they evaluated each reading by "debating" each author whose work they read.

What I learned while teaching "The Vietnamese Experience in America" course at Berkeley was so heartwarming and eye-opening that I continued to assign autobiographies, family histories, and biographies as part of the course requirements in my introductory history courses in subsequent years. (Before I became convinced of the learning experience that writing such reflexive essays offered, I had been very wary of "touchy-feely" approaches to teaching.) Students of Asian ancestry wrote about themselves, while students of other ethnic origins interviewed Asian Americans and wrote their interviewees' biographies, analyzed the differences between their own experiences and those of their interviewees, and discussed what they had learned about Asian Americans in the process of writing their papers. Between 1980 and 1993, when I stopped assigning autobiographies because the enrollment in my introductory courses had become much too large for such an assignment to be feasible, I collected more than two thousand narratives written by Asian American students and by non-Asian students who interviewed them. Of these, approximately a hundred and fifty were autobiographies by Vietnamese and ethnic Chinese from Vietnam and some fifty were biographies written by their non-Vietnamese peers. Students who left Vietnam in 1975 wrote about a sixth of the Vietnamese autobiographies; individuals who fled from the late 1970s to the late 1980s as part of the "boat people" exodus penned the rest.

It may be asked why such “outdated” material should be published. The answer is simple: these life stories are valuable precisely because they are “old.” They are eyewitness accounts of a war, a Communist revolution, and a refugee outflow seared into the memories of both Vietnamese and Americans. They document at an intimate personal level momentous events of great historical interest. While there are several anthologies of memoirs by refugees from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam in print,³ I think the chapters in this book are more analytical than those already available because I encouraged my students to place their autobiographies within the context of the times in which they grew up and came of age. Several of the chapters in this book also reflect the fact that their authors had learned a number of sociological concepts—for example, social stratification, value system, age hierarchy, and role model—from my lectures and the required readings for the courses.

Choosing which papers to include in this volume has been very difficult because every paper contains interesting details and touching coming-of-age insights. My teaching assistants and I used to apologize to our students when we gave them a B, C, or D on their papers: we emphasized that the grades reflected how well written and organized their *papers* were, and not how valuable or significant we considered their *lives* to be. Still, I am certain that students who did not receive an A, A-minus, or B-plus must have felt hurt, depressed, or angry. Once again, I feel compelled to apologize to my former students—this time for not being able to include a larger number of accounts in this book because of space limitation.

Two criteria guided my selection process. First, I looked for papers that reveal the thoughts and feelings of the authors. I excluded accounts that read like “laundry lists” of what the authors had done or seen without any analysis of what those experiences meant. Second, I wanted as wide a range of experiences as possible to be represented. Each chapter contributes insight into events or places that are not discussed or are not told with as much detail in other chapters. In the headnotes, I identify what is most notable about each piece. I made sure there is material about the main refugee camps in as many of the countries of first asylum—Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Hong Kong—as possible. (Hong Kong was not a country but a British colony at the time, but it was usually counted as a “country” of first asylum.) As for variations over time, the authors of Chapters 11–16 left Vietnam in April 1975, while those who wrote Chapters 17–25 escaped as boat people between 1976 and 1986. In

the early years of the boat people exodus, an estimated 70 percent of the refuge-seekers were ethnic Chinese living in Vietnam, but as time passed, more and more ethnic Vietnamese also sought refuge outside their country. This demographic change is reflected in the ethnicity of the contributors to this book. Another factor I kept in mind is gender balance: eight of the authors are women and seven are men.

The autobiographies are presented anonymously because even though many students gave me permission to publish their work when they submitted it I can no longer track them down to ask if they *still* wish to see their life stories in print. The writers attended four different campuses of the University of California where I taught—Berkeley, Santa Cruz, San Diego (as a visiting professor), and Santa Barbara. The chapters are arranged chronologically according to the authors' dates of departure from Vietnam. To further protect the authors' identities, I deleted place-names in Vietnam that the narrators had mentioned except for large geographic entities (North Vietnam and South Vietnam); the two capitals (Hanoi and Saigon); Dien Bien Phu because of its historical significance; and Vung Tau and Rach Gia, where many refuge-seekers went to make arrangements to escape by sea. However, I retained the titles that the authors had given their papers as the titles indicate what the authors themselves considered the most salient aspects of their lives.

Much as I admire my former students' indomitable spirit, there is a danger that these life stories may contribute to the misconception that *all* Asian Americans, including Vietnamese Americans, are a "successful model minority." Certainly, the authors fit that image but they are by no means a "representative sample" of the Vietnamese refugee and immigrant population as a whole. All the narrators were high achievers who, through fierce determination and perseverance, managed to master the English language well enough in a few short years to graduate from high school at or near the top of their classes, which qualified them for admission into a University of California campus. (The University of California considers for admission only the high school graduates in the top 12.5 percent of their graduating classes. The two University of California campuses in greatest demand—Berkeley and UCLA—turn down thousands of applicants with straight A grade point averages every year.) Benefiting from this education, all the authors were destined to become well-paid and respected professionals, thereby compensating for the downward mobility their families had suffered. Some families whose stories are told here experienced downward mobility not once, but twice, and in some

cases, thrice—first, when they left North Vietnam in 1954, then after the Communists came to power in South Vietnam in 1975, and finally after they arrived in the United States.

Because I generally favor structural explanations over cultural ones, I am inclined to think that quite apart from the students' own determination and hard work, the pre-1975 socioeconomic status of their families very likely contributed significantly to their ability to overcome severe challenges in the United States. Their families possessed what sociologists call "class resources" and "human capital"—a conglomeration of higher education, pertinent work experience, an entrepreneurial drive, familiarity with Western ways of doing things, and experience with urban living.

The grandfathers of the authors of Chapters 13 and 15 were wealthy landowners in North Vietnam. One of the landlords was also a "mandarin." The prestige, power, and wealth of such landowning officials, who acquired their government positions by passing rigorous examinations on the Confucian classics, were similar to the elite social position that scholar-gentry in traditional Chinese society enjoyed. The grandfather of the author of Chapter 11 was a teacher in North Vietnam who became a government official after migrating south in 1954. The fathers in Chapters 14, 18, 21, and 23 were also government officials (two were employed by the South Vietnamese government and two by various agencies of the United States). The fathers in Chapters 13, 24, and 25 were South Vietnamese military officers. The mother in Chapter 15 likewise worked for the U.S. military as an office manager, while the mother in Chapter 11 worked for an American oil company. The fathers in Chapters 17, 19, 20, and 22 (three of whom were ethnic Chinese) were businessmen. The mother in Chapter 13 was also in business—she owned and ran a restaurant. Members of the extended family of mixed Chinese and Vietnamese ancestry whose story is told in Chapter 16 were health professionals even though the author's grandfather, who came from China, had begun life in Vietnam as a "coolie"—a common laborer. This is the only family whose members managed to retain, albeit with much effort, their occupational status in the United States. In short, a large majority of the authors' families were middle class. Aside from the grandfather in Chapter 16 who started life as a menial laborer, only three other families came from humble origins. The parents in Chapter 12 were both peasants (in the late 1960s the father became a security guard at an American consulate while the mother lived in a village with her children and continued to farm). The grandparents in Chapter 19 were fishermen, but the father was a traveling businessman. The father in Chapter 20

also grew up in poverty but had become a prosperous owner of an automobile dealership by the time the author was born.

The narrators are also distinguished by the fact that they belong to the "1.5 generation"—immigrants who come at a young age who retain their ability to speak, if not always to read and write, the ancestral language as well as Asian values and norms. Such individuals perform a unique bridging function, given their ability to understand both their elders and their American-born peers. They often act as cultural brokers, regardless of whether they wish to do so, between their grandparents, parents, aunts, and uncles, on the one hand, and the younger, usually American-born members of their families, on the other. As the narrators analyze their own experiences and ever-changing consciousness, they are quite conscious of the in-between spaces they occupy. They mediate not only between different generations in their families, but between American and Vietnamese ways of life and thought as well.

What is missing in this book are the experiences and voices of five other groups: elderly and adult refugees and immigrants who speak little or no English; former political prisoners released from re-education camps who paid the heaviest price of all in terms of suffering (the experience of one such prisoner is filtered through the eyes of his son in Chapter 18); members of the American-born second, or even third generation; *Viet Kieu* (overseas Vietnamese) whom some scholars characterize as transnational migrants who shuttle both physically and imaginatively between Vietnam and America; and youth who have not succeeded academically and socially as the narrators in this book have done. Among the last group, some became low-paid working people, while others dropped out of school, joined gangs, and hoped to become rich through criminal activities.

A subgroup within those who do not conform to the Asian American "model minority" stereotype are Amerasians, the mixed-blood children of American fathers and Vietnamese mothers. Even though in the late 1980s Congress passed an act to allow them to enter the United States with their mothers, stepfathers, and siblings, as a group Amerasians continue to encounter virtually insurmountable obstacles. People in Vietnam disdained and ostracized them; some of their mothers abandoned them; while most of the fathers long ago forgot about them. Most devastating of all, they had to fend for themselves from a very young age, living on the streets and receiving no education in post-1975 Vietnam. Thus, they entered the United States unprepared for either school or the world of work. (The bibliography

contains titles of books that focus on those groups that are not included in this book.)

When I taught the "Vietnamese American Experience" course for the last time, at UC Santa Barbara in 2000, a year before I retired, I was shocked to discover that only one of the students in the moderately large class had been born in Vietnam and only one had been born in a refugee camp. All the others had been born in the United States. (The class also had two European American students whose fathers were Vietnam War veterans and who wanted to learn something about the tragic history of that long, long war.) How much has changed! When I first taught the course in 1980, all the students had been born in Vietnam and all of them had vivid recollections of the war and their escapes. In contrast, almost none of the Vietnamese students attending college in the twenty-first century have any personal memories of those years. That realization gave me the impetus finally to put together this collection of poignant life stories.

Editing this volume allowed me to retrace the steps in a journey toward understanding and tolerance that my Vietnamese students and I embarked on together a quarter century ago. Even though I still believe that American participation in the wars in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia was unjustified and the means the United States used to fight those wars were too brutal to be moral, my students have shown me how important it is never to forget the multifaceted human toll wreaked by war on both the victors and the vanquished. I shall always be grateful to them for sharing their life stories with me and reminding me that human connectedness is ultimately more important than ideology. One reviewer of the manuscript that became this book suggested that I be more "explicit and directive" in stating that my relationship to my students reflects "the expected pedagogical practice in Asian American Studies." However, I do not wish to make such a claim because teaching is an art more than a science. *How* we teach is intimately related to who we are. I do not have the right, therefore, to tell others to teach the way I did. Each teacher has to experiment and find approaches that seem most effective in terms of nurturing students and that feel most meaningful to herself or himself.

Two of my encounters with Vietnamese Americans in particular are etched in my memory. In 1988, when I was a visiting professor at UC San Diego, several students told me they felt frustrated and silenced because they were not allowed to express their true feelings about anything, especially with regard to their ancestral land. They said that their parents and other adults refused to tolerate any views other

than the ones they themselves espoused. In contrast, having arrived in the United States when they were very young, the students' sense of who they were had been strongly influenced by American culture. They yearned for the freedom to express their thoughts and feelings. "Why don't you," I suggested, "write some short stories or plays in which the characters say what you yourself wish you can say? That way, if anyone criticizes you, you can respond it's just fiction." Such an outlet for expression had never occurred to them; they loved the idea and left my office elated.

A second interchange was more heartrending. After I had shown a film made by the first Western camera crew allowed into a reunified Vietnam, a freshman at UC Santa Barbara asked if he could borrow the videotape. He told me his father had just been released from a re-education camp in Vietnam and had been given an exit visa to join his family in America. He was extremely worried about how he would relate to his father, a complete stranger he had not seen since he was three years old. Because the film contained scenes of a re-education camp, he wanted to take a closer look. When he returned the videotape to me, he told me he had watched the four- or five-minute segment on the re-education camp almost twenty times with tears streaking down his cheeks. Three years later, just before he graduated from college, he dropped by to say goodbye to me and to thank me for helping him to get along with his father. "But I never did anything!" I protested. He explained that had he not seen the film, he, a young man who resented all authority figures, probably would have started fighting with his father right away. But after viewing the harsh physical settings in which his father, along with tens of thousands of former South Vietnamese government officials and military leaders, had been incarcerated—in his father's case, for more than a decade—he tried his best to be respectful as he and his father became reacquainted and told each other, bit by bit, about the lives they had each led during their long years of separation.

This book is primarily for Vietnamese American youths who would like to know a little something about their people's past. Written by students like themselves, the Vietnamese American voices in this book sing of anguish, bereavement, courage, and determination. Even more important, the authors chronicle how they became strong and eloquent young adults not in spite of, but rather, *because of* their tragedy-filled childhoods. Thus, their accounts should be inspiring, meaningful, and compelling to readers of other ethnic origins as well.

My contributions consist of correcting grammatical and spelling errors, rearranging sentences here and there to enable the narratives

to flow more smoothly, deleting repetitious material, writing the ten chapters in Part I, and preparing the bibliography and videography. I anticipate that most readers will probably not be specialists in Vietnamese or Vietnamese American Studies; that is why I include a succinct presentation of the history of Vietnam and the successive stages of the refugee exodus so that readers can understand the larger historical, political, and social contexts within which the events described in the chapters in Part II occurred. The endnotes, many of which suggest additional readings, the bibliography, and videography are meant to facilitate the efforts of students, faculty, and other readers to explore in greater depth the specific topics that interest them.

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CHAPTER ONE

Vietnam before the Mid-nineteenth Century

Scholars generally agree that the ancestors of the Vietnamese originated in the valleys of the Hong (Red) River and its tributaries in northern Vietnam—an alluvial plain that has sustained a significant portion of the country's population for several millennia. Archeologists have discovered large ornamental bronze drums, as well as bronze arrowheads, javelin tips, cleavers, sickles, and fishhooks at Dong Son in Thanh Hoa province that provide evidence that the forebears of the Vietnamese people had entered the Bronze Age by the third millennium B.C.E. The Bronze Age in the Hong River valley and delta peaked in the seventh century B.C.E. The people there called themselves Lac, lived in small villages, grew rice in irrigated fields, hunted, and fished.¹ While Vietnamese claim the Lac as their ancestors, some scholars have pointed out that the Lac were only one of many racial and ethnic groups, including Mongolian, Chinese, Thai, Austro-Asian, Melanesian, and Negrito, that amalgamated to form the Vietnamese people.² Among the ethnic groups that contributed to the evolution of Vietnam—the country as well as its people—the Chinese have exerted the greatest influence.

Chinese Colonial Rule and Vietnamese Resistance

The historical relationship between Vietnam and China has been a paradoxical one: after valiantly resisting Chinese domination for a thousand years, the Vietnamese dynasties established after the Chinese were driven out adopted many Chinese social, cultural, and political institutional forms mainly because the rulers recognized that the teachings of the Chinese philosopher, Confucius, were useful for exerting social and political control over their subjects. For that reason, Truong Buu Lam, a prominent Vietnamese historian teaching

in the United States, thinks Vietnam should more properly be considered a part of East Asia rather than Southeast Asia because "from the Bronze Age down to the present, Vietnam has evolved within the Chinese world order, with Chinese cultural patterns and Chinese political institutions."³ True enough, but an indigenous culture did exist centuries before Chinese imperial armies subjugated Vietnam and some of the Chinese ideas and practices the Vietnamese adopted were modified in the process of transplantation.

China began asserting its influence on the land that eventually became Vietnam in the third century B.C.E. when the founder of China's Qin dynasty, Qin Shi Huangdi, sent an army of half a million men to conquer and pacify the territory lying south of the Yangzi River and extending inland from the southeastern coast of China. People known by the generic name *Yueh* lived in that region. In 206 B.C.E., Chao To (Trieu Da in Vietnamese), the son of the Chinese governor of the Yueh region, founded a kingdom called Nan Yueh (which means southern Yueh and is pronounced Nam Viet in Vietnamese) that encompassed Guangdong and Guangxi provinces in southern China, the Hong River valley and delta, and the coastal strip stretching from the delta southward to what is now called central Vietnam.

In 111 B.C.E., China invaded Nam Viet and colonized it. During the next millennium, Chinese officials sent to govern the region divided it into provinces and districts, set up an administrative structure staffed mainly by Chinese appointees, sent tributes to the Chinese emperor, collected taxes from villagers, introduced the plow and the use of water buffalos as draft animals, opened schools to teach the Chinese language (which became the official language of Nam Viet) and the Chinese classics, erected buildings in the Chinese architectural style, and built roads, canals, and harbors with coerced Vietnamese labor. An increasing number of Chinese settlers also came to farm and trade.⁴ The Chinese started calling the region An Nam (Pacified South)—a reflection of the Chinese perception that the region had become a subdued part of the Chinese empire. (In later years, the name Annam was used to refer only to the central part of Vietnam even though the French called all Vietnamese "Annamites.") As its rice acreage increased, Nam Viet became a prosperous region but the riches accrued to the Chinese empire and its colonial administrators and not to the Vietnamese people.

The Vietnamese chafed and seethed under the Chinese yoke. Revolts against Chinese rule punctuated the history of Nam Viet. The first uprising, in 39 C.E., was led by Trung Trac and Trung Nhi, two sisters whose husbands the Chinese had killed, according to conventional belief. Keith Taylor, however, observes that there is no

documentary evidence that indicates their husbands had been killed, so he thinks the lore probably reflects the "patriarchal bias of later centuries, which could not countenance a woman leading a rebellion and being recognized as queen so long as her husband still lived."⁵ The sisters and their army won their battles against the Chinese occupiers and established a kingdom in 40 C.E. with Trung Trac as queen. Even though a Chinese army led by General Ma Yuan with eight thousand regular troops and twelve thousand militiamen recaptured the territory two years later, the Trung sisters have come down in history as Vietnam's most cherished heroines.

Another uprising led by a woman, Trieu Au, took place in 248 C.E., but the Chinese crushed it also. The next notable revolt, led by Ly Bon, a descendant of Chinese settlers, occurred in 542 C.E. His armies fought to expel the Chinese from Nam Viet, his family's adopted land. His ethnic origins and his political allegiance reflect the complexities of the Vietnamese-Chinese connection: over the centuries, Chinese who lived in Vietnam became Vietnamized while Vietnamese became Sinicized.⁶ Despite major uprisings in 590, 600, 722, and 791,⁷ the Vietnamese failed to drive out their Chinese overlords until the tenth century, when Ngo Quyen successfully reestablished Nam Viet as an independent country in 939.

Vietnamese Dynasties

The dynasty that Ngo Quyen founded lasted barely thirty years. It was followed by the similarly short-lived Dinh (968–80) and Early Le (980–1009) dynasties. (The word *Early* is used to differentiate this first Le dynasty from another dynasty of the same name—the *Later* Le dynasty.) Emperor Tien Hoang of the Dinh dynasty incorporated Taoist and Buddhist priests into Nam Viet's administrative hierarchy, while an Early Le emperor helped proselytize Buddhism. The two faiths blended with indigenous animistic beliefs to form the Vietnamese variant of Buddhism, but scholars are not certain whether Buddhism initially came to Vietnam directly from India or via China.

The next dynasty, the Ly (1010–1225), renamed the country Dai Viet (Great Viet), established its capital, Thang Long (Rising Dragon), at the site now occupied by Hanoi, and in 1075 adopted the Chinese system of examinations that determined who would qualify for office at various levels of government. Henceforth, Vietnamese, rather than Chinese scholar-gentry, administered Vietnam. Since the main texts used in the examinations were the Confucian classics, Confucian values and norms spread among both the ruling class and those

they ruled. Confucianism, which taught rulers and subjects, fathers and children, husbands and wives, elders and youth, and friends how to behave properly vis-à-vis one another in a hierarchical social system, became the foundation of Vietnamese culture, in which the extended family was, and still is, the fundamental social unit. Confucian doctrine favored the superordinate member in the first four dyads named above—that is, the rulers, fathers, husbands, and elders. Equality existed only among friends. Confucianists valued social harmony, which they believed would prevail only if people acted according to the norms appropriate to the statuses into which they had been born.⁸ However, Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism did not completely erase preexisting Vietnamese practices. For example, women in Vietnam, like women in other parts of lowland Southeast Asia, enjoyed more rights than did women in China, Japan, and Korea, where patriarchal Confucian doctrine exerted a pervasive influence over the social structure. Vietnamese daughters could inherit property along with their brothers and could engage in business outside the home. Moreover, Vietnamese villages were not organized by clans or lineages as was the case in China.

The two dynasties that succeeded the Ly, the Tran (1225–1400) and the Later Le (1427–1788), continued to rely on Confucian tenets as part of their statecraft and adopted the court manners of China's Song dynasty.⁹ After Emperor Le Thang Tong, who ruled from 1460 to 1497, promulgated the Le Code, Buddhism and Taoism lost their standing among the elite as Confucianism reigned supreme.¹⁰ Commoners, however, continued to adhere to the syncretized form of those religions. More important, despite the formal adoption of Chinese orthodoxy, the Vietnamese made sure that future generations would never forget the humiliation of a thousand years of Chinese rule. In 1407, during China's Ming dynasty, the Chinese reconquered Vietnam and held it once again in its grip. A landowner and official named Le Loi and a military commander named Nguyen Trai teamed up to lead a guerrilla war against the Chinese and drove them out of the country in 1427.¹¹ Since then, the Chinese have never succeeded in reimposing their domination over Vietnam.

The Vietnamese Colonization of Champa and the Mekong Delta

Soon after the Vietnamese regained their independence, they themselves embarked on a centuries-long campaign to expand their territory and colonize other lands. They began a slow but steady

southward march to conquer Champa, a kingdom occupying the southern half of what eventually became Vietnam. Dai Viet and Champa engaged in a seesaw series of battles over the course of several centuries: sometimes the Vietnamese held the upper hand, at other times the Cham did. Both the Vietnamese and the Khmer (Cambodians) were interested in annexing Champa, a wealthy realm. Its strategic location along one of the major trade routes in the South China Sea enabled international trade to flourish there. The Vietnamese finally captured the capital of Champa in 1471, but it took them two more centuries to vanquish the remaining pockets of the Cham kingdom at the end of the seventeenth century.¹²

The Vietnamese also started moving into the marshy lands of the Mekong Delta that belonged to the Angkor kingdom in Cambodia. During the reign of Emperor Le Thang Tong, Vietnamese officials started sending soldiers to the delta to open up sparsely populated land for rice cultivation. The state gave these soldier-peasants tools to clear and cultivate the land, buffalos to pull their plows, seed grain for planting, and enough food to sustain them until the first harvest. The colonists were organized into groups called *don dien* and were exempted from paying taxes during the first seven years.¹³ Army deserters and bandits also found their way to the delta in search of, if not quick fortunes, then at least a livelihood. The Cambodians who remained in the delta after the Vietnamese captured it bit by bit call themselves Khmer Krom and still refer to the region as Kampuchea Krom (Lower Cambodia).¹⁴ The Mekong Delta, after the swamps were drained—first on a small scale by the Vietnamese settlers and later on a large scale by the French—became and remains the most fertile and productive arable region in the country. The southward march to conquer, colonize, and settle lands belonging to other kingdoms was the first large and prolonged population movement in Vietnam's history.

While they were expanding their territory, the Vietnamese had to fend off two major invasions. After Kublai Khan conquered China and established the Yuan dynasty in 1279, the Mongols tried to invade Dai Viet, Champa, and Cambodia. Approaching the three countries by land and by sea, a Mongol army numbering half a million men sacked the Dai Viet capital but a smaller Vietnamese army of about two hundred thousand troops led by Tran Hung Dao managed to repel the invaders in 1284. The Mongols tried again to take Dai Viet three years later, this time with three hundred thousand warriors. Again they failed despite occupying Thang Long (Hanoi) briefly three separate times during these two campaigns.¹⁵

Upon the Chinese departure in 1427, Le Loi established a new dynasty known as the Later Le dynasty, which lasted for three and a half centuries. However, by the latter part of the sixteenth century that dynasty began to decline. Two powerful families, the Trinh *chua* (lords) in the north and the Nguyen *chua* in the south, came to dominate the country even though Le emperors remained nominally on the throne. Feuds, intrigues, and assassinations kept both sections of the country in turmoil, while a series of civil wars between the Trinh and the Nguyen wracked the countryside and reduced the common people's lives to abject misery. Vietnam was split in two when the Nguyen built two rows of walls stretching from the sea to the mountains in a location where the country was less than fifty miles wide, thereby preventing the Trinh armies from breaching that line of defense. That historical precedent of dividing Vietnam into two halves would be repeated centuries later in 1954.

A revolt led by three brothers from the village of Tay Son in Binh Dinh province that began in 1771 brought down the house of Nguyen in 1777, the house of Trinh in 1786, and the Later Le dynasty in 1787. The Tay Son soldiers took the land of the gentry and distributed it to peasants. They burned tax registers to give commoners reprieve from the heavy levies that had burdened them. One of the Tay Son brothers proclaimed himself emperor in 1788. The Tay Son forces defeated a Chinese army that marched into Vietnam in response to the Le emperor's call for help,¹⁶ but the Tay Son kingdom lasted only until 1802. In that year Nguyen Phuc Anh (commonly called Nguyen Anh by Western scholars), who had managed to escape in 1777 as the Tay Son army killed the members of his extended family, the Nguyen *chua*, founded the Nguyen dynasty.¹⁷ During his reign and those of his successors, Europeans became the greatest threat to Dai Viet's independence.

Enter the Europeans

The Portuguese were the first Europeans to reach Southeast Asia. They built a seaborne empire consisting of a string of coastal trading stations stretching from the Iberian Peninsula to Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, India, across the Indian Ocean, through the Straits of Malacca, on to the spice islands of Southeast Asia, and northwards across the South China Sea to China and Japan. Goa, in India, served as the headquarters of that empire. In Dai Viet, the Portuguese set up their first trading station, which also functioned as a Catholic mission, at Faifo (now called Hoi An) located a few miles south of present-day

Danang, in 1535. They established another one in Thang Long a decade later. In the seventeenth century, however, the Dutch captured many of Portugal's trading posts and gained control over the sea-lanes as they vied with the English for supremacy in Southeast Asia.

Though the Portuguese carried out their colonizing activities for the glory of God, it was the French who became the main propagators of Catholicism in Vietnam. French Jesuits established a mission at Faifo in 1614 and one at Thang Long in 1626 despite Portuguese objections. A missionary, Alexandre de Rhodes, was stationed at Faifo from 1627 to 1630, during which he converted several thousand Vietnamese to Catholicism and wrote a catechism in the Vietnamese language. He learned Vietnamese so well that he could preach in it. He also created a Romanized script for the Vietnamese language, using diacritical marks to indicate the tones of Vietnamese words. Known as *quoc ngu* (national language), this script is still in use today. In 1630, the Vietnamese authorities forced Rhodes to leave but he managed to reenter Dai Viet in the mid-1640s and proselytized there for several more years before returning to Europe in 1649, where he published a Latin-Vietnamese dictionary, a history of Tonkin (the northern part of Vietnam), and a map of Dai Viet. In 1658, he secured the Pope's blessing for a plan to train Asian priests to serve their compatriots. French priests slated to undertake this task were educated in a seminary established in 1663 in Paris, which became an integral part of the Société des Missions Etrangères (Foreign Missions Society).¹⁸

The first French Jesuit missionaries sent out by the Société des Missions Etrangères reached Dai Viet in 1669. Missionary work was full of dangers: Vietnamese authorities sometimes imprisoned the proselytizers, while some common people killed local Christian converts and burned church buildings from time to time.¹⁹ The French central government did not offer the missionaries any protection. Instead, the French Navy, which had imperialistic ambitions, became their champion. The missionaries, naval officers, and merchants affiliated with the French East India Company actively lobbied for the reestablishment of a French colonial and commercial presence in Asia after the British drove the French out of India.²⁰

The Nguyen Dynasty

The French became entangled in Vietnam's political affairs when the French apostolic vicar at Ha Tien (located near the Vietnamese-Cambodian border), Pierre J. G. Pigneau (commonly known as Pigneau de Behaine in honor of Behaine, his birthplace), befriended

Nguyen Anh, who was only fifteen years old when he escaped the Tay Son massacre of his extended family. When the Tay Son armies marched north to attack the territory controlled by the Trinh chua, Nguyen Anh slipped back into Cochinchina (the name the Portuguese gave the southern part of the country—a name that the French later adopted) and rallied enough supporters to capture Gia Dinh (Saigon and its vicinity). He proclaimed himself king of Cochinchina and ruled for four years before the Tay Son ousted him in 1782. He found sanctuary in Siam (today's Thailand), where he met up again with Pigneau, who offered to seek help from the French government on his behalf. However, Pigneau failed in this mission. By the time he returned to Saigon in 1789, Nguyen Anh had already been back there for a year. It took the young warrior another thirteen years to complete the military campaigns that brought the entire country under his control in 1802. He renamed the country Vietnam, ascended the throne as the Gia Long emperor, and chose Hue as his capital, ruling a unified Vietnam that for the first time covered the entire eastern section of the large peninsula known as mainland Southeast Asia.²¹

Gia Long ruled as a Confucian monarch. He revised the Le Code and brought it into conformity with the Qing Code in China. He founded a National Academy in Hue to train the sons of officials and other ambitious young men in the Chinese classics. Though he was friendly to and rewarded a small number of Frenchmen who had supported him during his military campaigns, he did not grant any Western powers the commercial privileges they sought. He allowed Western merchants to trade only at selected ports under a state-controlled Merchant Superintendency, but he did instruct his officials to aid foreign vessels shipwrecked along Vietnam's coastline, which is more than a thousand miles long. He also allowed Catholic missionaries to travel around the country to preach even though he had issued an edict in 1804 that branded Catholicism a dangerous foreign doctrine.²²

Gia Long died in 1820. His successor, Minh Mang (also transliterated as Ming Menh), was also a staunch Confucianist but, unlike his father, he felt no debt of gratitude to the French. He persecuted both foreign and local Catholics, executing half a dozen of the former and punishing the latter when they refused to renounce Christianity. He broke diplomatic relations with France in 1826. However, after the First Opium War between China and Britain erupted in 1839, Minh Mang, fearful that Vietnam might suffer a similar fate as China's, tried to make peace with the French. Before anything came of his overtures, he died in 1841. His successor, Thieu Tri, who ruled from

1841 to 1847, continued the efforts to rid the country of Christians by expelling (but not executing) missionaries. In response, French naval vessels bombarded Danang (which the French called Tourane) to spring French missionaries out of jail.²³ Catholics in France demanded that their government retaliate against Vietnam's actions.²⁴ Thieu Tri's successor, Tu Duc, who ruled from 1848 to 1883, likewise opposed the presence of Christians, but he stopped harassing them after 1862 when Vietnam and France signed the Treaty of Saigon.

Scholars have interpreted Vietnam's reaction to Christianity in opposite ways. An older generation of scholars, relying mainly on French sources, tend to depict the Vietnamese rulers' anti-Christian actions as "Oriental" xenophobia. In contrast, Mark McLeod, who reads Vietnamese and has plumbed the archives of the Nguyen dynasty, offers a more nuanced interpretation. He argues that the Vietnamese rulers had good reason to see Christians in a negative light. A Christian convert, Le Van Khoi, led an insurrection that broke out in the southern part of the country in 1833 and lasted several years. French missionaries, Vietnamese Catholic converts, and King Rama III of Siam, who sent his armies to attack Vietnam, all supported this rebellion. Some two thousand Vietnamese Catholics led by a Vietnamese priest aided the Siamese invaders. This was by no means the only antidynastic effort in which Christians participated. Thus, in McLeod's (and my) view, the Nguyen rulers had reason to be wary of a foreign religion whose adherents attempted to overthrow the dynasty.²⁵ The missionaries' presence encouraged other Frenchmen, who desired not only converts but also an empire, to go to Vietnam to see what riches might be found there.