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SAIGON ARTS, CULTURE & EDUCATION INSTITUTE



To Research, Document & Promote Vietnamese Culture

NEWSLETTER # 81

JUNE 2015

To Night and South Vietnam: Al Gray

As you and others have said, this is a very special and revered day for all those Warriors who served in Vietnam. They, along with our South Vietnam Allies, and the many other Nations who served with us, did it all, and they did it with distinction, with courage, with sacrifice, and with the noblest of causes! Despite the many books, articles, and thoughts about Vietnam, including those liberals (including those in Congress) and other protestors (many of which were not traitors-as well as those who did not serve), but were victims of the superb North Vietnamese Propaganda/ Information Warfare Operation, those of us who served in Vietnam know the truth. Our great Country went to Vietnam because of our solemn promise to support the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization and the United

Nations mandates to take action as necessary to stop Nations from invading and trying to impose their will on other Nations. For those of us that were Sergeants, Corporals, Privates, young officers, et al., it was much simpler!

We fought to keep a struggling Nation Free!

As I write this tonight, it is 40 years plus three hours (Saigon time) that we wrapped up the Vietnam evacuation. Vividly, I remember standing in the rear of the last CH-53 to leave the Tan Son Nhut Air Base Evacuation Site and watching the flames and burning of that area (we had destroyed everything, including equipment, American currency, radars, et al.).

Although I was immensely proud of our Warriors' performance, it was emotionally very sad that we had not kept our word with our brave South Vietnam Allies in accordance with the Geneva Accords. Must report, too, that while we were there, the South Vietnamese forces fought courageously and with much bravery! Had they not done that, we would have suffered casualties! Finally, with two aircraft carriers, plus Marine Air and a ton of Air Force support and five more Marine Battalions available to help us, we could have stopped the NVA invasion! We knew, thru SIGINT and other sources, that they were really worried. In fact, earlier, when we were doing our "recons," we rigged up some C-130's with Oil Drum explosives and dropped them north of Saigon! They stopped and said "the B-52's are back!!!"

When I left Saigon, I thought we were done. Upon landing on the USS Blue Ridge at 0435, I saw my superb battalion commander (the late Lt Col George Slade) moving to the Helo Spot. I said, "George, where are you going?" He said, "They're not out of the Embassy yet!" I said "move over" as we embarked on the CH-46. As we flew back up the Rung Sat and reached the Palace Area, we got the word that we were done and George and I exchanged a "thumbs up."

Have rambled on way too much, particularly for me, but I wanted to say again how proud I am to be associated with all the Warriors, regardless of Service (civilian or military), who did what must be done to help a Country and a people who wanted to be free.

Warm Regards and Semper Fidelis,
Al Gray, Marine



A Reconsideration of K. W. Taylor's "A History of the Vietnamese:" Tai Q. Nguyen

The "Vietnam War" exacted millions of casualties, innumerable destruction and suffering, and continues to destroy the moral fabric of the Vietnamese society in consequence of the unification of the country under a Communist regime with its inherent corruption. Survivors and descendants of victims of the war have many lingering questions as to the factors that led to a war of such ferocity and whether the war and its outcome were inevitable. Many an author have tried to answer these questions over the past 40 years. One of those who are affected by the war is Keith Weller Taylor. After serving in the US Army in Vietnam, K.W. Taylor resumed his Vietnamese studies and expanded his doctoral thesis into a book, *"The Birth of Vietnam"* which he published in 1983. Twenty years later, he completed a 696-page *"A History of the Vietnamese"*, a detailed account of the history of Vietnam from the period where he left off in his previous book. It has been praised as "the finest general survey of Vietnamese history ever produced in any language".

Both *"The Birth of Vietnam"* and *"A History of the Vietnamese"* provide a wealth of data and bibliographic information. The narratives often give detailed accounts of historical events and personae usually not found in history textbooks. They also offer well-drawn maps, complete genealogies of different Vietnamese and Chinese dynasties with corresponding dates of their reigns, and lists of places and personal names, both in Chinese characters and in modern Vietnamese scripts. These two volumes will be very valuable for historians and the general public alike who want to have well-documented sources on the history of Vietnam and the policies of various Chinese dynasties as they were related to Vietnam.

Readers of history, especially the history of their own people, are more or less biased in their interpretation by their upbringing, their education, the society in which they live, their personal experiences, and also by the propaganda of their government. The further away they are in time from and the less they are personally affected by historical events, the more objective they are in assessing the meaning of historical records.

K. W. Taylor warns against this bias in the first few pages of *"A History Of The Vietnamese"*: "What we can know about the past with some degree of confidence is a meager residue of what remains from an ongoing process of accumulation and attrition, of gain and loss, of putting together and tossing away, a process in which all generations participate. Human efforts to remain oriented amidst change can take forms between the extremes of denying change and of seeking change. Historians are not immune to the implications of such efforts, and they do not agree on the appropriate pose to assume toward change in wielding the rhetoric of their craft". (HoV p. 3). In this book, the author wants to reconsider certain aspects of the history of the Vietnamese by looking "at what survives from the past as coming from people with their own existence, not as evidence of people who attain significance primarily as precursors of people today." (HoV p. 3)

K. W. Taylor offers his own assessment of the efforts of Vietnamese historians, both ancient and modern, in the "Introduction" and the "Retrospective" of his book. In this article, I want to examine in particular his criticisms aimed at four main conceptions generally accepted by many Vietnamese historians over the centuries:

- I. The dating of the origin of the present-day Vietnamese people to the people of the Phung Nguyen culture living in present-day northern Vietnam during the first millennia BCE.
 - II. A lasting Vietnamese identity based on a common history, a common language and a well-defined territory.
 - III. The perennial tension between the Vietnamese people and the imperial powers in China since the first conquest of Vietnam by the Han dynasty.
- A united Vietnamese people.

To avoid any bias in the understanding of historical events, I will only use data and narratives in *"A History of the Vietnamese"* to comment on its author's reconsiderations.

Origin of the Vietnamese people:

K. W. Taylor criticized “Vietnamese scholars [for having] endeavored to project a sense of national identity back into the past as far as possible. In the modern period, it

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became common for Vietnamese to affirm a national history going back four thousand years to when archaeologists date artifacts that they have assembled and categorized under the name of Phung Nguyen Culture. Phung Nguyen is defined as a late stone and early bronze culture that represents a level of archaeological uniformity in the Red River Plain that did not previously exist. Many Vietnamese scholars are inclined to draw a line of continuity in cultural, and even ethno-linguistic, development from Phung Nguyen to modern Vietnam. This inclination, however, makes an exuberant use of evidence.” (HoV p. 2)

Let’s examine this issue from an ethnic, linguistic and territorial points of view.

Prehistoric Ethnic Origins of the Vietnamese people:

Putting aside for the moment the cultural and linguistic issues, archeology has shown that there existed 3 millennia BCE in the northern part of what is now called Vietnam communities of people cultivating rice, domesticating animals and making pottery. Their culture, called Phung Nguyen by archeologists, evolved during the first millennium BCE into the Dong Son culture with its distinctive, easily recognizable bronze drums. After the conquest by the Han in the first century CE, the Dong Son culture was suppressed by the Han occupation forces and practically disappeared. But the Dong Son people had not. There is no historical or archeological record of mass extinction by cataclysmic events or ethnic cleansing, or mass migration, during the post-Han periods. We have therefore to assume that the descendants of the people who lived during the Phung Nguyen and the Dong Son periods continued to live in their ancestral land and that they were the progenitors of the people who live in the present-day Vietnam. Notwithstanding the fact that the present-day Vietnamese culture is very different from those of the first few millennia BCE and that the Vietnamese owe a great deal to their culture of the people of China, there does exist a continuity over the last 5 millennia of a group of people who live in a definite part of the world and who speak a language that has maintained certain characteristics which make it different from the Chinese languages.

The relationship between the present-day Vietnamese people and the people living in northern Vietnam during the Phung Nguyen and Dong Song periods may be compared to that of the British people living nowadays in certain parts of the United Kingdom with the Britons who lived in England during the period predating the Roman invasion in the first century BCE. People living in the same country at two periods separated by 3 millennia would not be able to understand each other on account of the evolution in the original language, yet we cannot deny their common lineage.

K. W. Taylor specifically criticizes “historians at royal courts in northern Vietnam during the thirteenth and the fifteenth centuries were concerned to affirm their status in reference to rampant northern empires, the Yuan and the Ming. They did this not only by culling references from classical Chinese texts about what they imagined to have been their ancestors in antiquity but also by constructing a “southern” history for themselves that is largely parallel with and a response to “northern” imperial history. The urge for connections with the past is a means of self-affirmation, not a scholarly endeavor”. (HoV p. 2)

This criticism would be well taken by many Vietnamese historians in modern times, and even by King Tu Duc of the Nguyen dynasty in the early 19th century. The legend of the progenitors of the 18 Hung kings and the long duration of their reigns stretching from the end of the 3rd to the end of the 1st millennium are so contrived that it could be no more than an attempt by people who intended to dress up their history to make it as ancient and as venerable as that of any of their neighbors up north. The legend of the Hung kings has been and continues to be used by Vietnamese leaders as a symbol of the ancient and common ancestral origin of the Vietnamese people. Until there are archeological evidence of their existence, they will remain in the domain of legends. The existence of the people who lived in the territory of the Hung kings of the legend however is undeniable, as showed by a multitude of archeological findings.

Modern Vietnamese culture in the 21st century obviously is a long way from those of the Phung Nguyen and Dong Son eras of the 3rd-1st millennia BCE. It nevertheless makes sense for historians to go as far back in time as possible to identify the most ancient ancestors of a people. In writing the “History of the English-speaking people”, Winston Churchill started with the his-

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tory of the people who lived in the island of Great Britain before the arrival of Julius Caesar and his Roman legions, at about the same time the first imperial forces from China arrived in present-day Vietnam to

subjugate the Dong Son people. The local Britons of that time, just as the Dongsonians, had a late bronze and early Iron culture. They also had a queen, Boudica, who led her people in revolt against the Roman occupation, at about the same time the Ladies Trung led their own people in revolt against the Han imperial rulers in the land of their ancestors. Queen Boudica has remained a cultural symbol of Great Britain; her effigy now adorns the city of London. The Ladies Trung were no less Vietnamese in the minds of the present-day Vietnamese people than their own mothers.

The Vietnamese language:

The author of “A History of the Vietnamese” admits that “linguists categorize the Vietnamese language as a member of the Mon-Khmer family of languages”, while stressing that “a large proportion of the modern Vietnamese vocabulary derives from Chinese”. (HoV p. 4). Mon-Khmer (also called Austroasiatic) languages constitute the autochthonous language family spoken in mainland Southeast Asia (Southern China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, Malaysia) and some parts of India and Bangladesh. The fact that the present-day Vietnamese could be traced to an indigenous language belonging to the Mon-Khmer family, and not the Sino-Tibetan language family, to which the Chinese languages belong, is a clear indication that the Vietnamese people continue to speak their ancestral language, despite the influx of vocabulary and tonal system from the Chinese.

The reason the indigenous Proto-Viet-Muong language continued to exist despite the imposition of Chinese culture and the importation of many Chinese words during over one thousand years of Chinese occupation may be the limited usage of Chinese within the population. During the periods of Chinese occupation, Chinese was mostly spoken by administrators from China and by indigenous officials in guarisons and administrative centers, but the large majority of the indigenous population in the countryside continued to speak their ancestral language, and once the influx of Chinese speakers ceased, the loanwords from the Chinese language were transformed into what are now called Sino-Vietnamese (Han-Viet), i.e. words of Chinese origin pronounced in a modified, Vietnamese way.

The personnel of occupation forces and the educated classes of the indigenous population spoke Chinese and used Chinese for administrative purposes, but they probably also spoke the local language in their daily intercourses with the indigenous population. Once the influx of Chinese speakers ceased, i.e. during the periods of political independence, the local language remained the sole means of communication among the large majority of the population, Chinese being reserved for official transactions or literary compositions. This continued usage of the same language over successive generations must have played a major role in maintaining a sense of group identity and in the preservation of a common culture.

The Proto-Viet-Muong did not have a script nor did the Vietnamese language as it was spoken in modern times until a logographic writing system called “chữ Nôm” was devised using Chinese characters or a combination of two Chinese characters to indicate one nôm word, one of these 2 Chinese component characters having similar or approximatively similar pronunciations with the nôm word. Since the modern writing system, using the Latin script of the Romance languages, has been devised for the Vietnamese language in the 16th century, the nôm script had fallen into desuetude, and classical Chinese language as it had been used by the literate elite in the past is nowadays no longer taught in elementary schools. Modern Vietnamese language using Latin script is now used thoroughly in all walks of life.

The existence of the vernacular literary work is another indication of the preference for the indigenous language in the expression of their most personal feelings, even among the educated classes who were versed in classical Chinese. Over the centuries in pre-modern Vietnam, there existed concomitantly two sorts of literary works, the erudite (bác học) and the popular (bình dân). While the erudite literature written in classical Chinese were appreciated by a small number of highly educated people and were therefore confined to the circle of administrators in the government, the popular literature, com-

posed in indigenous language and using a different set of literary styles, was widely circulated among the illiterate and the literati alike. It was this popular literature that reflected the deepest and most intimate feelings and aspirations of the common people and where the cultural characteristics of a people may be found.

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The Vietnamese territory:

It has been told in Vietnamese history books that the Han general Ma Yuan, who was sent to quench the Ladies Trung's uprising and imposed the Han imperial administration and culture on the indigenous people of northern Vietnam in the first century CE, had two bronze pillars erected to mark the southern border of the Han empire. The territory of the people that the Han army was sent to subjugate was therefore distinctly demarcated from the Han Empire. This territory was divided into 3 prefectures: Giao Chi, Chiu-chên and Jin-Nan (Giao Chi, Cửu Chân and Nhật Nam in modern Vietnamese script), comprising the basins of the rivers Hong, Ma and Ca. The indigenous people during the periods of independence under their local kings advanced further south until they reached the southernmost tip of the Indochinese peninsula in the mid-18th century. The successive generations of people that now constitute the majority of the Vietnamese nation have lived in their own territory for the past 3 millennia.

K. W. Taylor quotes a poem that was traditionally dated to the 11th century and put in circulation among the Vietnamese of that period to draw people's attention to the fact that “the border between the northern (the Song empire) and the southern (Vietnamese) countries had been “fixed in Heaven”. Although K. W. Taylor interpreted these verses as indicating “the connectedness, if not the unity” of the two “domains within the same imperial world”, it no doubt indicated the will of the southern people to maintain their independence from their northern neighbors.

It is therefore not farfetched for the Vietnamese to recognize their most remote ancestry in the people who lived in the first millennia BCE in the basin of the Hong River in present-day North Vietnam. Despite profound modifications in their language, in their customs and their physical traits due an amalgamation with other peoples coming from the North (as well as from the South later on) of their cradle of civilization, the same people continued to grow in number, mix with other people, undergo many cultural modifications, survive many wars and expand their territory to form what is now called Vietnam.

The Vietnamese culture and an enduring Vietnamese identity:

When the Han imperial army invaded northern Vietnam in the first century BCE, the people who had been living there for millennia had their own culture, a different social organization and a different administrative structure. Over one thousand years of occupation, Chinese imperial administrators imposed changes in all aspects of the indigenous culture. The Dong Son culture of the people of present-day North Vietnam was totally destroyed after the Han invasion in first century CE. In the 15th century, the Ming destroyed on the spot all historical and literary writings of the indigenous people or transported them north. These works all but disappeared. As a consequence, all the writings by the indigenous people from before the 15th century no longer exist. The Ming imperial policies were to turn Vietnam into a province of China, by eradicating all cultural particularities of the local population, from their emphasis on Confucian education to the imposition of hair styles and women's clothes. It is therefore undeniable that after 10 centuries of occupation, the present-day Vietnamese bears a deep imprint of Chinese culture.

K. W. Taylor states in the last chapter of his book: “It is clear that who and what we call Vietnamese did not exist prior to the centuries during which Vietnamese ancestors lived as inhabitants of Chinese dynastic empires.” (HoV p. 621). That statement is however true only if we limit our view to the cultural similarities and ignore the particular aspects that allow the Vietnamese people to maintain so far their political independence and to see themselves to be Vietnamese rather than ethnic Chinese. The people whose ancestors had lived in present-day North Vietnam continue to speak their language (although using a large vocabulary of Chinese origin), to live in their own country, to have their own government and to fight foreign invaders.

If we want to identify what is Vietnamese in the domain of literature in contradistinction to what is Chinese, we need to distinguish the popular literature (văn chương bình dân) from the erudite literature (văn chương bác học). While the Vietnamese literati enjoyed composing poems in Chinese and in Chinese poetry styles, adorning their works with references to the Chinese classical literature, the common people expressed their personal feelings in vernacular Vietnamese and in Vietnamese poetic forms. These spontaneous compositions by unknown authors, most of them in short forms, have been orally transmitted from

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time immemorial and only in modern times collected in different anthologies. Scholars in Vietnamese history may get a false impression of the Vietnamese people's cultural characteristics if they ignore these

more popular forms of expression and limit their studies to the literary works of the elite minority. For example, Liam C. Kelley, a history professor at the University of Hawaii, based on his reading of poems composed by Vietnamese envoys to the Chinese courts in the 16th to the 19th centuries to affirm that these authors wholeheartedly accept the relationship of Vietnam as a vassal vis-à-vis the Chinese empire (*Beyond the Bronze Pillars: Envoy Poetry and the Sino-Vietnamese Relationship. Asian Interactions and Comparison*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press. 2005). From the literary efforts by these special envoys, it would be certainly erroneous to extrapolate the sentiments of the Vietnamese people or the Vietnamese imperial court in dealing with the perennial menace by the neighboring empire. As an aside, a cultural anthropologist who wants to appreciate the differences between the Vietnamese and the Chinese cultures will enjoy comparing their cuisines. The Vietnamese diaspora after the end of “The Vietnam War” has introduced the Vietnamese cuisine to the many countries where they have taken refuge. Nowadays, one can find Vietnamese restaurants in cities in the US, Europe, Asia and Australia, with their special flavors easily distinguishable from those served in traditional Chinese establishments.

K. W. Taylor states that “the search for the “real” Vietnam or for the “cultural core” of being Vietnamese is bound to fail”. Such a judgement may be understandable by historians who analyzed only ancient historical records, not by anthropologist who has lived within the Vietnamese society for a period of time, someone who knows and understands the feelings and aspirations of the common people. Even though the Vietnamese people love Chinese literature, imitate many Chinese artistic forms, admire many Chinese historical heroes, cite the teachings of the Confucian schools and use them in the education of their children, they believe that they are not Chinese and that their culture and mode of living are different from the present-day Chinese. This strong sense of national identity of the Vietnamese people may be the effects of intangible factors, such as the apprehension of a constant threat of renewed subjugation by the Chinese empire and the loss of their own cultural heritage, these factors are nevertheless real.

K. W. Taylor states again in the last chapter of his book: “It is clear that who and what we call Vietnamese did not exist prior to the centuries during which Vietnamese ancestors lived as inhabitants of Chinese dynastic empires”. He goes on to affirm that: “Vietnamese language, literature, education, religion, historiography, philosophy, family system, social and political organization, cuisine, medicine, music, and art: all are deeply imprinted with the marks of what is commonly called East Asian or Sinitic civilization”. All of these assessments are undeniable. The author however is right in moderating the above assertions by recognizing the resilience of the local culture and stating that the Chinese aspects in the indigenous culture “eventually melted into the local population when the imperial connection was severed”. The persistence of an indigenous culture despite the imposition by occupational forces of foreign customs and literature indicates a solid cultural basis in use by the majority of the population and which remained alive notwithstanding the accumulation of imported cultural novelties.

This survival of the indigenous culture in the presence of foreign importation was better assessed by the author in this first book with the following remarks: “The ancestors of the Vietnamese had their own kings and cultural symbols before the arrival of the Chinese armies, and presumably their continued existence could have been assured even if they had never heard of China” and : “The spirit [of the Vietnamese] was rooted in a conviction [...] that they were not, and did not want to be Chinese”. (BoV xviii)

The perennial tension between the Vietnamese people and the imperial powers in China

In his first book on Vietnamese history, “*The Birth of Vietnam*”, K. W. Taylor expressed the following view on the relationship between the Vietnamese people and the Chinese empires in the first millennium CE. “Tenth-century Vietnamese were very different from their ancestors of twelve century before. They had grown to understand China as only a slave can know its master”. By this short sentence, the

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author has grasped the whole implication of centuries of subjugation on the psyche of the people in the conquered territory suffered at the hands of the Chinese imperial forces.

K. W. Taylor also cited a passage by an imperial administrator named Xue Zong (Tiết Tống) 薛綜, who in the 3rd century CE wrote: "According to the records, civilizing activities have been going on for over four hundred years, but, according to what I myself have seen during many years of travel since my arrival here, the actual situation is something else ... In short, it can be said that *these people are on the same level as bugs.*" (HoV p. 16).

The Han people over millennia of imperial history in fact considered those who did not follow their customs and who lived outside of their territorial control as “barbarians”, and used derogatory appellations to designate them, such as mán 蠻, yí 夷, dí 狄. In the composition of the above characters, words that designate animals (dog, goat, bug) are often used, such as chóng 虫 (bug) in mán 蠻, quǎn 犬 (dog) in dí 狄 and also in Zhuàng 獐. About the Ming occupation in the 15th century, K. W. Taylor admits in his second book “the arrogance and prejudice of Ming people toward the local population. [...] northerners viewed local people as less civilized than themselves. [...] Ming soldiers garrisoned in Giao Chi dismayed some local people who felt their presence as an intrusion, an imposition, or even as a subversion of good social relations”. (HoV p. 179)

The first Chinese conquest during the Han dynasty in the first century CE resulted in the destruction of the whole Dong Son civilization of the indigenous people and the imposition of Chinese culture on all aspects of the local people’s lives. The 13th century saw three successive invasions by Mongol hordes. The next Chinese invasion during the Ming dynasty occurred in the 15th century and saw the destruction and confiscation of all historical and literary works by indigenous authors resulting in the complete loss of all Vietnamese documents existent until that time. The prospect of another invasion from the North was always alive in the minds of Vietnamese leaders if not the common people.

It is therefore very surprising that K. W. Taylor affirms that “The nationalistic conceit of being in a constant state of aggravation with the Chinese has no basis in fact. For centuries, during the first millennium of the Common Era, ancestors of the Vietnamese lived in relative peace and security as residents of the Sinitic empire”. He then went on to state that “Subsequently, Chinese military operations were launched against Vietnamese rulers only five times, and each of these resulted from unusual circumstances”. (HoV p. 622)

Let’s examine each of the 5 invasions by imperial forces from China to assess the effects they produced on the indigenous population and to see if K. W. Taylor’s characterization as to their nature is well founded.

Conquest by the Han in the 1st century:

This conquest is not counted among the five operations that, according to K. W. Taylor, “the Chinese empires launched against the Vietnamese rulers [as the results] of unusual circumstances”. (HoV p. 622). It is however the one that imposed the most radical changes and caused the most destructive effects on the indigenous civilization. When the Ladies Trung in the first century CE revolted against the imposition by Han administrators of taxes and laws that destroyed the traditional matriarchal social structures of the indigenous people, an army of twenty thousand troops were sent under the command of the empire’s

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best general, Ma Yuan, to suppress the uprising and impose from then on total control over the subjugated people. In the author’s narrative: Ma Yuan “captured and be-

headed the Trung Sisters after a series of battles in which thousands of their followers were killed, were captured, or had surrendered. He spent the next year receiving the submission of local leaders, tracking down and killing those who refused to submit, deporting hundreds of prominent clans to the north, building fortified towns localities could be governed, establish garrisons, and settling his soldiers on land from which they could supply their own provisions”. [...]. The expedition of Ma Yuan ended the age that historians associate with Lac lords and that archeologists associate with the Dong Son Culture” (HoV p. 22). In other words, the indigenous civilization with its distinctive administrative and social structure were completely destroyed and replaced by the conquerors’ Han culture.

For nine centuries, the conquered land was ruled by the successive imperial dynasties as a province of China and it was during this period that, according K. W. Taylor’s assessment, the “ancestors of the Vietnamese lived in relative peace and security as residents of the Sinitic empire” (HoV p. 622). In fact, there were no less than ten recorded uprisings during that same period, the last one led by Ngo Quyen who succeeded in ending the Han’s rule.

The Southern Han campaign in the 10th century:

At the end of the 9th century, the T’ang imperial dynasty lost its control over Vietnam as China was ravaged by rebellions and divided between different kingdoms during the so-called Five Dynasties period. When the Southern Han came out victorious over their rivals, they wanted to assert their control over Vietnam. Their ambition was however foiled by a young Vietnamese leader, Ngo Quyen, who at that time was in charge of a province in the south. The Southern Han army was soundly defeated; this victory of the Vietnamese over the imperial forces from China marked the beginning of Vietnamese independence.

This episode was one of the many instances where a new imperial dynasty in China wanted to re-assert their rule over Vietnam and keep it in vassalage.

The Song Expeditions in the 10th century:

Recounting this episode, K. W. Taylor wrote: “The Song dynasty did not expand to the north, the northwest and the northeast to the extent that the previous dynasties had, but instead was blocked by other powers along the borders. As for the southern frontier, the Song court waited for an opportunity to reclaim the legacy of Han and Tang. This opportunity came in 980 with news that Dinh Bo Linh [the Vietnamese king] had been assassinated and that his followers were fighting among themselves. This came at a time of relative quiet on the northern frontiers and an expedition was quickly organized to reclaim the far south” (HoV p. 48)

K. W. Taylor may qualify the court troubles in a neighboring kingdom as an “unusual and contingent” circumstance for the Song invasion, its execution was obviously the attempt at reconquering to subjugate under imperial rule another country that had gained independence.

The Song Expedition in the 11th century:

In the 1070s, the war between the Song imperial forces and the Vietnamese kingdom was initiated by an imperial effort to cut the trade between the Vietnamese capital and the kingdom of Nan Zhao in the southwestern part of present China. As the Song amassed troops and supplies in preparation for military operations, a Vietnamese general initiated a pre-emptive strike. “The Song court made the decision to launch a full-scale invasion of the Viet kingdom”. (HoV p. 82). In the final phase of the war: “With each side having demonstrated the best that it could do in battle but without dislodging the other, the stalemate began to work against the Song forces. Provisions were nearly depleted. Over half the army was dead from battle, heat exhaustion, or tropical fevers, and most survivors were weak from illness. Furthermore, the monsoon rain were about to begin. The Song generals wanted to withdraw but they dared not do so without some token of success. The Viets understood this, and a message from [Vietnamese king] Ly Can Duc to the Song emperor was delivered to the Song encampment apologizing for having violated Song territory in the past, promising not to do so again, requesting to send tribute and re-establish normal relation, and offering proposal for making a mutually accepted border”. (HoV p. 84)

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This was one of the instances in the Sino-Vietnamese relations since the 10th century, where the victorious apologized to the vanquished and offered them tributes. In order to live “in peace and amity”, as K. W. Taylor characterizes this state of affair in his book” (HoV p. 623), the Vietnamese had to submit to a continuous vassalage within the Chinese empires.

The 3 Mongol Invasions in the 13th century:

The first Mongol invasion occurred in 1257 when a force of 25,000 men entered into Vietnamese territory on their way to attack from the south Southern Song troops. The Mongol occupied temporarily the capital but were defeated by a counterattack by the royal army and quickly repulsed out of the city.

The second invasion occurred in 1258 when 2 Mongol armies crossed the northern border and a third one attacked from the south. All three were able to enter the capital. However the Vietnamese kings retook the capital and expelled the invaders across the border.

The Mongols returned in 1287, also with three armies. They were again able to occupy the capital but were defeated within a few months.

K. W. Taylor probably does not consider these invasions by the Mongols as of Chinese origin because the Han were themselves conquered by the Mongols at that time. Nevertheless, whether these attacks were by Mongols or by Han, they all came from northern people, ravaged the country, had to be similarly defeated, and had the same effects on the memory of the Vietnamese people as the other Chinese conquests.

The Ming invasion and occupation in the 15th century:

After an unsuccessful attempt at escorting a man who claimed to be a member of the Vietnamese royal family and to put him on the throne, the Ming emperor sent two armies totaling over two hundred thousand men across the border to defeat and capture the “usurper” and his followers, and then on the pretext that the royal family was extinct, ordered the organization of the conquered land in the mold of an imperial province. This occupation lasted twenty years until the imperial armies were defeated by the uprising led by a local leader who subsequently established a new royal dynasty.

In K. W. Taylor’s own assessment, this conquest by the Ming “brought social and economic disaster. With disruptions caused by military operations, there was no harvest. Famine combined with an epidemic, and

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corpses piled up faster than they could be buried”. (HoV p. 178). The occupation forces gathered thousands of skilled craftsmen, shipbuilders and their families and sent them to

China, apparently for the preparation of a large-scale naval expedition. They confiscated all the local administrative documents and literary works, and either destroyed or sent them to the imperial capital, where they all disappeared except for an anal of a previous dynasty. The Vietnamese were therefore left with no writings of their own production from before the 15th century.

K. W. Taylor admits that by this conquest “the ascendant Ming dynasty endeavored to take advantage of dynastic change among the Vietnamese to restore the Han-Tang imperial borders”. Taking advantage of dynastic troubles in a neighboring country to invade, subjugate it under harsh imperial rules and completely destroyed its cultural and literary treasures certainly did not seem to be justifiable under any circumstances, contingent or otherwise.

The Qing Intervention in 1879:

To support the Le king to regain his throne, the Qing emperor ordered an expedition to be led by the governor general of “the two Guangs”, the two southernmost provinces of the Qing Empire, to occupy the Vietnamese capital. The Qing troops were however attacked and pushed back shortly after by the troops of a newly self-proclaimed emperor.

K. W. Taylor considered this expedition of Qing troops as a noble action on the part of the Chinese emperor in support of his vassal. Whatever ultimate intentions the Qing emperor might have had in his own mind, the presence of imperial troops from China in Vietnamese soil was always a dire portent in the Vietnamese’s eyes, considering their past experiences.

The Chinese Invasion in 1979:

According to K. W. Taylor, “in 1979, China attacked Vietnam to prevent Soviet influence from stabilizing in Vietnam and Cambodia after American withdrawal from the region”. The war lasted one month and caused over one hundred thousand casualties and destroyed the economic and infrastructure of the border provinces on the Vietnamese side. What “special and contingent circumstances” can justify such killing and destruction by foreign invaders?

According K. W. Taylor’s assessments, the Vietnamese people should have considered the invaders from China as their protectors and enjoyed the security and the “mission civilisatrice” that were offered. It was obviously not the case in any of the invasions by the imperial forces from China, either during the Han, the Song, the Mongol or the Ming dynasties, nor during any other occasions when the imperial courts sent troops from China into Vietnam seemingly for benevolent purposes. K. W. Taylor probably wants to ignore the exactions that the Vietnamese people suffered over the centuries as the results of all those Chinese expeditions. Does he ignore the price that the present Communist government in Vietnam has to pay to the Chinese for their “assistance” during their wars against the French and the Americans from 1945 to 1975, or does he mix up the intentions of the Americans in intervening in South Vietnam to prevent during the Cold War the “domino effect” of Communist expansion in South-East Asia, with the assistance that the Chinese Communists provided to their Vietnamese counterparts

in the 1960s and 1970s?

“A History of the Vietnamese:” ...

I do not want ignore the four instances of Chinese interventions that K. W. Taylor cites in his book as benevolent and not aggressive acts towards the Vietnamese. (“[...], refugee Song Chinese armies were allied with the Vietnamese during the Mongol Wars of the thirteenth century. In the eighteenth century Qing China sent an expedition to support its vassal, the Le dynasty king, against rebels, but had no ambition to take over the country. In the 1880s, China, at great cost and with little prospect of success, honored its obligations to the Vietnamese court by attempting to prevent the French conquest of northern Vietnam. In the early 1950s, China served as the ally of an aspiring Vietnamese protégé”. (HoV p. 623)

“Refugee Song Chinese armies were allied with the Vietnamese during the Mongol Wars of the thirteenth century”. In fact, these Song army units had been defeated by the Mongols and sought refuge by the thousands in Vietnam. They “were welcome [by the Tran generals], placed under their own officers, and allowed to wear Song uniforms”. (HoV p.132): The incorporation of Song troops into the Vietnamese army units in their fighting against the Mongols could not be considered as a military support offered by the Song court at that time to the Tran.

“In the eighteenth century Qing China sent an expedition to support its vassal, the Le dynasty king, against rebels, but had no ambition to take over the country”: According to K. W. Taylor’s narrative, the Qing emperor, “took his duty as an overlord seriously”, although “he was not interested in territorial expansion in the south. (HoV p. 378). The author probably bases this assertion on the proclamation by the Qing emperor in re-establishing the Le king on this throne, where the suzerain assured that the imperial court had no territorial intentions. However, according to Gao Zong Shi Lu 高宗實錄, the official annals of the reign of Emperor Gao Zong, the Qing emperor issued in 1788 an edict showing his intention of also attacking the southern part of Vietnam and not just escorting the Le king back to his capital.

“In the 1880s, China, at great cost and with little prospect of success, honored its obligations to the Vietnamese court by attempting to prevent the French conquest of northern Vietnam”: Indeed, when the French attacked Hanoi, the ancient capital in North Vietnam, the Vietnamese court asked the Qing emperor for help. In fact, the Qing court’s intention in sending their troops into Vietnam was to reassert their suzerainty over Vietnam and protect its southern border. When Qing troops were finally defeated by the French, it had to renounce its rights over Vietnam.

“In the early 1950s, China served as the ally of an aspiring Vietnamese protégé”: During the wars against the French and the Americans, Communist North Vietnam received military supports of various sorts from the Chinese Communist government. After their victories, they had to pay dearly their debts by redrawing the Sino-Vietnamese border to the disadvantage of Vietnam and by ceding the control over a number of islands in the South China Sea.

K. W. Taylor seems to have made a 360° volte-face in his view on the relationship between the people of Vietnam and the imperial forces from China. In his previous book, *“The Birth of Vietnam”*, he recognized that “China never renounced its presumed right to rule the Vietnamese and has more than once tried to reconquer Vietnam. (BoV xvii) and that “Over the past one thousand years, the Vietnamese have no less than seven times defeated attempts by China to assert its influence by armed forces, and that “Chinese rules bred an instinctive resistance to Chinese and, by extension, to all foreign political interference, (BoV xviii). In his second book, *“A History of the Vietnamese”*, he softens his statements by saying that “the Chi-

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nese military operations were launched against Vietnamese rulers only five times, and each of these resulted from unusual circumstances.” One cannot help wonder whether he has discovered new historical facts in the 30 years after the publication of his first book or this shift in interpretation of historical facts was somehow affected by recent changes in policy of the two neighboring Communist regimes in their relationship. In his first book, the author seemed to be strongly influenced by the viewpoints of Vietnamese historians of the 1970s and 1980s. In the second book, the author seems to assume the role of a conciliator. If he tries to defuse the tension that is steadily building between the two countries in view of the programs of expansion by the Beijing government into the South China Sea, his intension is laudable, but his assessments of past events to justify this present stance fly in the face of historical records.

A united Vietnamese people:

In his reconsiderations of the Vietnamese history, K. W. Taylor warns against “the conceit of a unified Vietnamese people.” He cites the many factors that allegedly contributed to their fragmentation, among them: 1. The attitudes of mutual disdain of the people of the region of the Red River basin and the people of the coastal regions further south; 2. The pride that the people of the region of the ancient capital Hue in Central Vietnam show in their desire to speak with moral authority for the rest of the country; 3. The stereotyped differences between the people of North Vietnam and the people of South Vietnam. The author also mentions the different religious, ideological, and cultural orientations among the Vietnamese people as the results of their more recent contact with other civilizations: French, Russian, American... He does not seem to want to stress the major differences between the people in Communist North Vietnam and those who live in non-Communist South Vietnam from 1954 to 1975 during the war, and the present conflict between people who want to maintain the one-party totalitarian so-called “Communist” regime and those who want a democratized Vietnam.

In fact, the Vietnamese themselves are very well aware of the various sorts of difference that cause their disunity. Although regional, religious and social differences exist in every nation, it is a very particular flaw in the national character of the Vietnamese that has caused many of their endeavors to fail, prevented them in many instances from building a unified front to face a common enemy, and made it difficult for them to set up a large corporation to challenge foreign competitors. The Vietnamese people have a hard time cooperating with each other if they are not of the same family, do not come from the same geographical region, believe in the same god or belong to the same political party. They seem to be unable to put aside differences in their viewpoints in order to find a common ground where they can join forces to accomplish a mutually beneficial endeavor. They prefer instead to go their own ways.

These factors have caused the Vietnamese to engage in many internecine wars, from family feuds to century- or decade-long infightings between political factions; the last one in the 20th century has killed close to one million of their own people. However, whenever the Vietnamese people in the past have always been able to rally under the command of strong leaders to preserve their national independence. After 40 years of Communist control, can they do it again in the present international geopolitical situation?

Recapitulation:

K. W. Taylor has contributed two very well-documented volumes on the history of the Vietnamese people and shed new light on certain events and historical personalities that had not been mentioned in history textbooks. This long-term work that the author took several decades to bring to fruition deserves the highest praise. The final assessments by the author on the formation of the Vietnamese people and the Vietnamese culture have to be challenged, however, in view of the contra-

diction between these views and the historical facts that were indisputable and were duly mentioned in his books: 1. The ancestors of the present-day Vietnamese and their descendants had lived since the first millennia BCE in the territories that now constitute the country of Vietnam. 2. A lasting Vietnamese identity dating back to the first conquest of their territory by the Han empire and the following dynasties from China, thanks to the survival of an ancient language (a Proto-Viet-Muong language, as it was called by linguists) and the preservation of their territory; 3. The perennial tension vis-à-vis the imperial dynasties from China caused by repeated invasions over the centuries and 4. A united people despite their perennial internectional divisions and infightings.

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This paper does not aim at stoking nationalistic sentiments among the Vietnamese people in view of the current tension between Vietnam and China resulting from the expansionist maneuvers in South-East Asia by the present Chinese leadership. Its purpose is to draw the attention of readers of the *“A History of the Vietnamese”* to the fact that the main final assessments by its author seem to be skewed in regard to the relations between the people of Vietnam and the successive empires in China. The foremost desire of people in any nation is to live in peace, but empires by nature are expansionist to the detriment of smaller countries. In writing this article, I do not put any blame for the past invasions from China on the Chinese people, but on the imperial dynasties with their disdain for the desires of other people to live their lives in their own ways. The Vietnamese nation is now a mixture of many ethnicities, including many immigrants from China who came and settled in Vietnam, originally either as traders, imperial administrators, soldiers or refugees, and after a generation or two, adopted the Vietnamese culture and were no longer distinguishable from the other inhabitants. Many of the immigrants from China served in high positions in royal courts or in various governments in modern times; many others have served and made the ultimate sacrifice in the Vietnamese military. They contributed to the development of the economy and participated in all aspects of their country of adoption. They are part of what we now call the Vietnamese people.

I think K. W. Taylor’s interpretation as it is exposed in the last paragraph of his Introduction to his first book, *“The Birth of Vietnam”*, may more closely reflect the historical development of the Vietnamese people: “The birth of Vietnam described in this book was the birth of a new consciousness within the East Asian cultural world that had its roots outside that world. Within the context of East Asia as a whole, this was a frontier consciousness but for the Vietnamese it was simply what they happened to be. They had learned to articulate their non-Chinese identity in terms of China’s cultural heritage. Given the constraints imposed by Chinese power during long periods of their history, the survival of this identity is as significant as the cultural form in which it came to be expressed”. (BoV p. xxi).

The Vietnamese people still constitute a distinct nation; any Vietnamese still consider him/herself foremost as Vietnamese, and not a member of any regional, political, religious group, no matter how strongly partisan-minded he/she is. When threatened of foreign invasions, Vietnamese leaders in the past have been able to rally their people to confront a common enemy. The real question is whether the same unity and determination can be reproduced in the present political and social conditions.

In abbreviation: BoV

In abbreviation: HoV

(Peter Zineman, UC Berkeley)

For example, “chữ Nôm” is written in logographic nôm script as 𡵹喃, where 𡵹 “chữ” is composed of 2 Chinese characters, 宁 and 字, which are assembled together to form a single nôm character, while 喃 (“nôm”) is a single Chinese character used to indicate a nôm word.

Phuc Quang Phan, Composer

his home country's traditional music pieces to be played on classical musical instruments.

PQ Phan, 51, whose full name is Phan Quang Phuc and has a D.M.A (Doctor of musical arts in composition) from an American university, has spent years composing contemporary classical music by using orchestra instruments to re-create his homeland's traditional music, including the "cheo", "tuong", and "cai luong".

Phan, who is currently an associate professor of composition at Indiana University's Jacobs School of Music - one of the US's leading music institutions - wrote an intriguing concerto titled "Concerto for percussion and mixed ensemble" during his university years. The piece was inspired by northern Binh Dinh province's hallmark battle drum rhythm style, in which one artist plays 32 different drums simultaneously.

His most important work is "The Tale of Lady Thi Kinh."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BArOKZUHcoM> Part 1

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y4-MEZNX70A> Part 2

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n7LFAcxHwYI> Part 3

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R6GqGgBo5LQ> Part 4



PHAN QUANG PHUC
(1962~)

Do Thien Thinh: Entrepreneur

Mr. and Mrs. Do Thien Thinh, originally from Ben Tre, South Vietnam escaped from Vietnam and immigrated to the U.S. He put himself through school and became an engineer then entrepreneur. He built a \$2.5 M Vietnamese Community Center in Sacramento and gave it to the Vietnamese community there.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8eBsG28GgEg>



Tom Cross: Film Director and Oscar Winner

So I was jolted out of my sad Asianspotting stupor last night when **Tom Cross**, who is Vietnamese American, took home the Academy

Award for editing for his work on the feature film *Whiplash* -- the movie's third Oscar of the evening - beating out the category's heavy favorites *Boyhood* and *The Grand Budapest Hotel*.

This was only Cross' third feature film as editor. His previous credits include *The Space Between*, *Any Day Now* and *Time Lapse*. This was his first Academy Award nomination.



Michelle Phan: Entrepreneur

Michelle Phan, the beauty vlogger OG who's now a [multi-millionaire](#), didn't always have beauty brands fighting to hire her. In a recent Into The Gloss [profile](#), Phan admitted that Lancôme refused to hire her as a sales associate when she was just getting into the beauty business. "I didn't have the sales experience they were looking for," Phan explained. "But I told the lady, 'Look, I can sell makeup. I want to empower women and do makeup demos on people.'"

While that line may not have panned out initially, things worked out pretty well for Phan. A few years down the road, Lancôme's head of PR came to her with a deal to make her the brand's first official video makeup ambassador, and now Phan's business is reportedly [worth \\$84 million](#).



<http://www.racked.com/2015/2/17/8051215/michelle-phan-lancome>

Ride the Thunder



Vietnam heroes: 'I've been waiting 40 years for this!'

Box-office hit has warriors in tears, finally gives them celebration they deserve

<http://www.wnd.com/2015/03/vietnam-heroes-ive-been-waiting-40-years-for-this/>

"...a film that exploded at the box office and ranked as the top movie in the nation in per screen revenue this weekend."

Ride the Thunder film project has been several years in the making: Author Rich Botkin and Director Fred Koster joined forces to bring the true story of the Vietnam War to the screen.

Friday night, March 27, after hundreds of hours of filming, editing, and interviewing, the long-awaited movie premiered at the

Westminster Regency 10 in Westminster, CA.

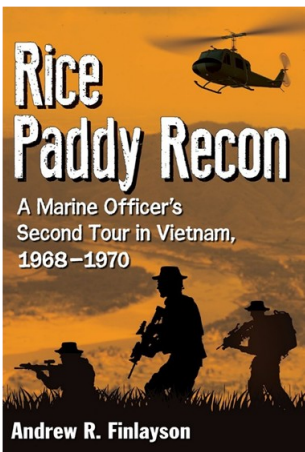
About 500 invited guests descended on the theater, including Veterans — both American and South Vietnamese — friends, family, cast and crew. The crowd was all smiles and great expectations, knowing this movie might just be the vehicle to spread the truth about Vietnam.

America has largely been ignorant for 40 years plus concerning the Vietnam war: why we were involved, who were the NVA, the ARVN, and others? Who was funding and supporting the North Vietnamese Army? Did the South Vietnamese really want our help?

Were we winning and defeating communism in that small country in Southeast Asia? If so, why DID we pull out when we did? And for 40 years Main Stream Media, academia, certain famous personalities and others have spread outright lies about the intent and the successes in Vietnam.

The truth of Vietnam, a country oppressed and occupied for hundreds of years, has been mostly hidden and unknown...until now.

<http://www.ridethethundermovie.com/2015/03/ride-the-thunder-premiere-takes-the-westminster-theater-by-storm/>



A young U.S. Marine officer recounts his experiences of the Vietnam War over a nineteen month period. He graphically describes what it was like to perform three distinct combat missions: long-range ground reconnaissance in the Annamite Mountains of I Corps, infantry operations in the rice paddies and mountains of Quang Nam Province and special police operations for the CIA in Tay Ninh Province. Using Marine Corps official unit histories, CIA documents, and his weekly letters home, the author relies almost exclusively on primary sources in providing an accurate and honest account of combat at the small unit level. Of particular interest is his description of his assignment to the CIA as a Provincial Reconnaissance Unit (PRU) advisor in Tay Ninh Province, where he participated in several secret missions as part of the controversial Phoenix Program.

Rice Paddy Recon: Andrew Finlayson

Available on Amazon

<http://www.amazon.com/Rice-Paddy-Recon-Officers-1968-1970/dp/0786496231/>