Vietnam’s History and the Role of China

A Distinct Culture

The Vietnamese people (Viets) are first mentioned in the writings of Chinese scholars in about 220 BCE. The Chinese referred to the Viets as “southern barbarians.” China called the region “Nam Viet,” which means “people of the south.” The area they described is part of the modern-day nation of Vietnam.

There were a few raids by China in Nam Viet, but they were not successful. However, this gave a boost to the trade that had existed between the Viets and the people of South China that had been going on for centuries.

China produced silk, while the Viets were able to offer ivory, tortoise (a type of turtle) shells, pearls, peacock feathers, and rare woods for trade.

The Viets’ spoken language was not related to Chinese. The Viets had a tradition of village autonomy (self-rule) and they favored the nuclear (immediate) family, rather than the extended family (the Chinese model), and the Viets never developed a clan network.

The Viets had customs that were very different from those of the Chinese. Women wore long skirts rather than the black pants that peasant women in China wore. The Vietnamese blackened their teeth, a custom the Chinese found disgusting, and they had more attachment to Buddhism at the local level.

One important difference between Vietnamese women and Chinese women is that Vietnamese women have traditionally had more freedom and influence, both within the family and within the society.

Conquest and Sinification

The Chinese made several attempts to conquer Nam Viet and incorporate it into their empire. At first, China was content to have Nam Viet as a (servant) state that paid tribute [similar to the Chinese relationship with Korea]
But around the year 110 BCE, the Chinese decided it would be better to conquer the Viets outright and govern them directly. Administrators sent from China encouraged the Viets to adopt Chinese customs and culture. The rulers of Nam Viet went along, realizing that they could learn a great deal from their powerful neighbor to the north.

In the following centuries, the Vietnamese elite became Sinified [becoming like the Chinese], attending Chinese-style academies, writing in Chinese script and reading the works of Confucius. The Vietnamese developed a civil service system, with examinations, based on the Chinese model. The Viets also changed their attitude toward the family, learning to respect the extended family and their ancestors in the Confucian manner. In short, the Viet people became very Sinified.

The Viets also learned crop management and irrigation techniques from China, and this made Nam Viet the most agriculturally productive area in southeast Asia. Because the land could support many people, population density [the number of people per square mile, for example] very high.

Using the military techniques they had learned from China, the rulers of Nam Viet had a decisive edge over their enemies to the west and south [especially the Khmer] who had adopted Indian [Hindu] customs.

Seeds of Revolt

Once the Viet leaders realized their culture had been almost taken over by Chinese customs and styles, they began to grow restless. The Chinese looked down on the Viet people, believing that they were backward and inferior. The Viets became filled with self-doubt and anger.

The Role of Women in Vietnamese History

The traditionally independent-minded women of Vietnam resented the Confucian model, which required submission to men and confined them to the house. When this anger was combined with rage against the Chinese, a powerful force was unleashed.

In 39 CE, the Trung Sisters, daughters of a local lord, gathered an army of 80,000 people to help drive the Chinese from their lands.

From among those who came forward to fight the Chinese, the Trung sisters chose 36 women, including their mother. They trained them to be generals. These women led a people's army of 80,000 which drove the Chinese out of Viet Nam in 40 CE.

After their victory, the people proclaimed Trung Trac (the elder sister) to be their ruler. They renamed her “Trung Vuong” or “She-king Trung.” She abolished the hated tribute taxes which had been imposed by the Chinese. She also attempted to restore a simpler form of government more in line with traditional Vietnamese values.
For the next three years the Trung sisters engaged in constant battles with the Chinese government in Vietnam. Outarmed, their troops were badly defeated in 43 CE.

Rather than accept defeat, the traditional story says that both Trung sisters chose the traditional Vietnamese way of maintaining honor — they committed suicide. Some stories say they drowned themselves in a river; others claim they disappeared into the clouds. Over time the Trungs became the stuff of legends and poems and a source of pride for women who lived more restricted lives. Today, stories, poems, plays, postage stamps, posters and monuments still glorify the heroism of the Trung sisters.

The Chinese regained control of Vietnam, but their rule depended on how strong China itself was. Also, there were only a small number of Chinese bureaucrats, soldiers, and merchants who stayed in Vietnam on a permanent basis.

"All the male heroes bowed their heads in submission;

Only the two sisters proudly stood up to avenge the country."

— 15th Century Poem

Independence – and a New Cultural Blend

Finally, in 939 CE, the Vietnamese regained their independence. Vietnam remained independent until the 1860s, when it was colonized by France (and became part of the French colony of Indochina, which lasted until the 1950s).

Even though Vietnam was independent, it still got much of its culture from China. Various ruling dynasties built palaces modeled after Chinese court buildings. The Vietnamese bureaucracy was smaller than that of China. It was based on civil service examinations (like China).

Unlike their counterparts in China, the Vietnamese nobility did not have as much power. The Vietnamese nobles’ control of the countryside was less secure, and because all people had shared in the humiliations of Chinese rule, the nobles and officials tended to sympathize with peasants rather than with the court and its officials. Lords tended to look out for their local interests and people.

In addition, Buddhist monks had very strong links with the peasantry, and this too lessened the power of the lords. Women are held in very high regard in Buddhist teachings, and, of course, this was very popular with the peasants. In fact, a law protecting women’s rights was passed in the 1400s.
1. How did Vietnam differ from China in its view of the family?

2. What was the major difference in the lives of women in China and women in Vietnam?

3. In what ways did Vietnam become “Sinified”?

4. What caused the people of Viet Nam to revolt against the Chinese? Were they justified, in your opinion? Explain your answer.

5. Why are the Trung Sisters still considered to be heroes today?