



POSTCOLONIAL VIETNAM

NEW HISTORIES OF THE NATIONAL PAST

PATRICIA M. PELLEY



POSTCOLONIAL VIETNAM

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Editors: Rey Chow, H. D. Harootunian, and Masao Miyoshi

Patricia M. Pelley

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In loving memory of
Irene N. and Thomas R.

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A Note on Diacritics

Because Vietnamese is a tonal language that is unpronounceable and meaningless without diacritical marks, I have included them when they were present in the original text. However, recognizing that nonspecialists may find the diacritics difficult to manage, I have omitted them from terms that are familiar to an English-speaking audience. Widely known toponyms (for example, Vietnam, Hanoi, Haiphong, Hue, Saigon, and so forth) appear without diacritical marks, as do proper names such as Ho Chi Minh, Ngo Dinh Diem, and Vo Nguyen Giap. The major exception to this practice is that proper names familiar to ethnologists, who may or may not be specialists in Vietnamese studies, are written as they normally appear in English. Without doubt this solution is imperfect, but I am convinced that it is preferable to the alternative of omitting the diacritics altogether or, worse yet, using only those that occur in Western languages—the circumflex, for example, and accent marks.

For the purposes of narration and analysis, the idea of “postcolonial” Vietnam is essential but also problematic. In terms of the intention of Vietnamese revolutionaries the postcolonial period was ushered in by the August Revolution of 1945 and announced yet again in Hanoi on September 2, when Ho Chi Minh recited Vietnam’s Declaration of Independence before an exuberant crowd of one million Vietnamese. From the perspective of the revolutionaries, the fact that they staged this drama in Hanoi was especially poignant because the French had transformed the city into the headquarters of the colonial regime. The occasion was also significant because it marked and celebrated the emergence of “the people” as a potent political force, for it was tens of thousands of ordinary Vietnamese who brought about the demise of their colonial oppressors. At the level of rhetoric and intention, this moment inaugurated the postcolonial period in the history of Vietnam: it formally concluded more than eighty years of French colonization and marked the end to nearly five years of Japanese occupation. The meaning of this moment — the demise of French Indochina and the emergence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) — was also communicated in symbolic terms. By the time Ho Chi Minh made this historic utterance, Viet Minh revolutionaries had already received the imperial regalia from Bảo Đại, the last of the Nguyễn emperors. They had begun to make the rupture between the colonial past and the postcolonial present clear in practical and logistical terms as well: even before the recitation, they had established many of the basic institutions of government and, in the days and weeks following the declaration, they continued to elaborate the administrative capacities of the new state.

This representation of events, however, is partial in the extreme because it reflects only the experience of the Vietnamese who were allied with the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) and the Viet Minh. In the aftermath of World War II (and perhaps even at the beginning of the war), Vietnamese of all political faiths recognized that French Indochina was a thing of the past; but not everyone agreed that Vietnam should be governed by Ho Chi Minh and his revolutionary associates. Indeed, one could argue that the unstated goal of DRV culture in the period after 1945 was to make the revolution “stick,” to make it mark the kind of historical upheaval that in 1945 it did not, in fact, represent: the political and social terrain was far more ambiguous and complex. In other words, the idea or chronology that we now take for granted—that the August Revolution of 1945 marked a new beginning in the history of Vietnam—attests to the success of DRV efforts *after* 1945 (and especially after 1954) to reconstruct the events of 1945 in terms of rupture and clarity. In this study of postcolonial Vietnam I accept the now-standard chronology, but my emphasis is on the process through which that narrative became conventionalized.

Within a domestic context, Vietnamese in all parts of the country contested the meaning of the August Revolution, questioned the legitimacy of the Viet Minh, and challenged the authority of the Democratic Republic. On their own, however, the disputes among the Vietnamese could not have caused the postcolonial moment to be postponed. On the contrary, one could reason that these sorts of disputes are an essential and intrinsic part of genuine decolonization. But the intervention of foreign powers—Chinese Nationalists (GMD), Britain, and France, initially; the Soviet Union and the United States within a short while; and, eventually, the People’s Republic of China (PRC)—vitiated what the revolutionaries had so triumphantly proclaimed. In fall 1945, when the Allies (the GMD in the northern part of Vietnam and the British in the southern part) moved in to supervise the Japanese surrender, plans to reestablish French control in the South were already in place. In addition to undermining the revolution militarily, the Allies also sought to undo it through diplomatic offensives. Thus, before the revolution was socially consolidated and before the apparatus of the postcolonial state was fully in place, the momentum was interrupted by Allied attempts to reestablish prerevolutionary patterns or, to be more precise, to create what they disingenuously called a “democratic” state—meaning non-communist, pro-Western, and dependent. By December 1946, revolutionaries were at war—against France, most obviously, but also internally. In

March 1949, the Associated State of Vietnam was established in the southern part of the country with the emperor emeritus Bảo Đại as its head. And yet, as these events unfolded in the South, and at a time when the Associated State actually had more international support than the DRV, the North continued to claim that Vietnam was a single country governed exclusively from the national capital in Hanoi. This was a claim that many Vietnamese rejected. To the extent that the DRV was internationally acknowledged—in 1950 the Soviet Union and the newly constituted PRC officially recognized it—it was understood to encompass only the northern part of the country. In the period after 1945, official culture in the DRV sought to suppress this confusion and these conflicts. And yet, the uncertainty surrounding the events of 1945 persisted.

Years later, when they were pushed to the limits by the Viet Minh siege of Dien Bien Phu, French troops and colonial subjects who fought with them surrendered; and at the Geneva Conference in July 1954, French imperial ambitions in Asia were definitively thwarted. Although northern historians often depicted the “Anti-French Resistance War” (1946–1954) as an example of Vietnamese fighting to free their country from the French, the war was far more complex. Indeed, far from acting *en masse* in a uniform bloc, “the Vietnamese” were internally divided and they struggled violently among themselves to determine the shape and meaning of postcolonialism. To the extent that they acknowledged these cracks in what was supposed to be a monolithic facade, northern historians dismissively labeled the Vietnamese who opposed them as “reactionaries” or “traitors.” Just as the opposition “Vietnamese against French” obscures critical dimensions of the postcolonial experience, the distinctions between “patriots and traitors” or “revolutionaries and reactionaries” camouflage key elements. The point is that although they struggled among themselves and against each other, the Vietnamese were not simply lined up on one side or another of the revolutionary divide. Mere dualisms are too crude to account for what actually transpired. Moreover, explanations that rely on fixed and static notions of the Viet Minh, for example, or assume that alliances remained in place once they were declared, similarly miss what makes the meaning of the postrevolutionary and postcolonial periods so difficult to seize.

When the Viet Minh repossessed the (northern) capital in fall 1954, there were parades and festivals throughout Hanoi to celebrate the restoration of peace after nine years of warfare and to mark the military victory over France. Intellectuals in the DRV presented the events of 1954 as a great vic-

tory, and reasonably so, but the euphoria of 1954 was mixed with an unacknowledged but keen sense of foreboding. As revolutionaries restated and reaffirmed the break with the colonial past, the Vietnamese (North and South) were forced to submit to neocolonial kinds of asymmetry. In the South, the patrimonial presence of the United States negated the possibility of decolonization in a genuine sense. In the North, where new ties of dependence developed with the Soviet Union and China, Vietnamese attempts to free themselves from colonial and neocolonial meddling were similarly fettered. Historians in the DRV criticized neocolonial developments and the imposition of cold war politics on the people of Vietnam—but only in the context of the South. Late in 1954, they characterized Ngo Dinh Diem as the “right hand of the American imperialists and the war-like French,” and early the next year they referred to the “American imperialists who were threatening the unity of Vietnam.” Later that year, DRV officials established the Front for the Ancestral Land in order to counter the efforts of “Ngo Dinh Diem and the United States to divide the country.”¹ As for northern leaders, however, who were also entangled in neocolonial and cold war dynamics through their reliance on China and the Soviet Union, historians presented them as autonomous agents. In short, they refused to acknowledge that Vietnamese politics after the Geneva Conference were even more muddled than they had been nine years before.

Although the defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu could not have been more dramatic, the political consequences of what the Viet Minh had militarily achieved were not so easy to decipher. On the one hand, the Geneva Accords stipulated that Vietnam was a single state; on the other, they also established an administrative division between the North and South. Although the agreements emphasized that the two “administrative zones” would last a maximum of two years, the seventeenth parallel quickly evolved into a political boundary. While the DRV claimed to represent all of Vietnam, a separate state, identified as the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), had already been created in the South. In effect, then, there were not two administrative units, but two states and two capitals.

Political and intellectual elites in the DRV did not acknowledge that the postcolonial moment had been postponed or that the Vietnamese in an inclusive sense had been overwhelmed by cold war agendas. Instead, in 1954 they began to rewrite the past, from remote antiquity to the present. But they worked with special diligence to reconstruct the events of 1945 and to reshape the meaning of the nine years of warfare, which they depicted as a

confrontation between the Vietnamese on one side and the French on the other. They also insisted that the defeat of the French in 1954 signaled the restoration of peace and the emergence of the (unified) postcolonial state. To banish the idea that the revolution had been derailed, they concocted narratives of its unassailable coherence. To dispel the fear (and the realization) that they were embroiled in a situation they did not control, they insisted on their own instrumentality and power. Because the situation was so confused, they endlessly tried to make it clear: there was but one Vietnam—the DRV, and but one capital—Hanoi. Inadvertently depicting the ambiguity of this time, some historians described it as the period “when peace had been restored and the North was fighting to reunify the country.”² Parenthetically, one could add that after the defeat of the United States and the RVN in 1975, the postcolonial period was yet again postponed as the Vietnamese adjusted to new kinds of neocolonial ties. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, still new forms of domination emerged. Given the degree to which the interests of foreign capital govern Vietnam today, many Vietnamese are haunted by the thought that the horrendous loss of life and vast ecological damage they have endured over the past fifty years merely set the stage for what they are witnessing today: the reappearance of a wealthy capitalist elite, the reemergence of extraordinary poverty, and the reminder that the destiny of Vietnam is only partially controlled by the Vietnamese.

The point of these details is to clarify that in the case of Vietnam, and in other decolonizing societies as well, one cannot precisely locate the moment when the colonial period is past. Taking a formalist and, from the perspective of the Viet Minh, an intention-centered approach, one can affirm that the colonial period ended in 1945. And yet, almost immediately, because they were again involved in asymmetrical relations of power, the Vietnamese had to push the social, cultural, and even political aspects of decolonization aside. Moreover, even without the machinations of cold war rivalries, one can look for without really finding the purely postcolonial moment. The Vietnamese who orchestrated the revolutionary break from France were often imbued with colonial sensibilities—about the quasi-sacred status of science, for one, and the idea that certain groups of people were destined to dominate and “civilize” others. In other words, well after the French withdrew from Vietnam in 1954, many colonial norms and colonial representations remained in place, either as the objects of unconscious assimilation or as negativities to be rooted out and eradicated.

To summarize my first point, postcolonial culture in the DRV is based on a

series of reconstructions, especially of the events of 1945, the period extending from 1946 to 1954, and the period after 1954. It is also based on denials — of the South above all. From 1954 to 1975, southern historians (a designation that probably includes northern immigrants to the South) were extremely prolific. Northern historians only very rarely acknowledged their perspectives, and in the period after reunification in 1976 the stifling of southern voices was even more complete. In a sense, in what follows I am complicit in the attempt to silence the South because I dwell exclusively on cultural productions in the North. My sources, as I have noted, usually refused to recognize the Republic of Vietnam as a legitimate (or even illegitimate) and separate state. Instead, they glossed over this difference, this gap, by clinging to the idea of a single Vietnam ruled unproblematically from Hanoi. But my work is not absolutely complicit. To disrupt what has now become the official narrative of the national past, I examine the fictive dimensions of the North's totalizing claims.

My second point is: the “postcolonial” moment implies a process of decolonization, which I will define here as the extrication of Vietnam from colonial paradigms and structures and the effort to institute new notions and new sources of authority. In short, it refers to the attempt to establish a distance between Vietnam and France precisely because, I would argue, so many aspects of daily life — ranging from the built environment to personal hygiene and styles of dress, from notions of politics and history to ideas about time — stemmed from the French occupation. With the withdrawal of French colonial troops and officials in 1954, the DRV briefly shifted its attention from conducting the war to recovering from it. Postwar reconstruction depended most obviously on the cultivation of food, the rebuilding of cities and towns, and the resumption of industrial production, but it was also much more than restoring the material bases of social life. Reconstruction also required the elaboration of new institutions and the clarification of new social norms. Although this need stemmed from the years of warfare, it was related much more dramatically, as well as more diffusely, to the trauma of colonization.

New national histories constituted a critical part of the process of decolonization. One can argue, indeed, that they formed the very basis of a genuinely new sense of nation. In investigating postcolonial attempts to rewrite the past, my research focuses principally on the work of official historians affiliated with the Research Committee and, later, with the Institute of History.³ Through lavish commemorative events, changes in the visual

cues and symbols of everyday life, and information presented in textbooks and public schools a new sense of the past — crystallized and condensed into memorable bits — was instilled in the people. New histories of the nation were also part of a bigger pattern. From its inception, the committee and, subsequently, the institute, responded to a web of social, political, and cultural dynamics. Party officials often set the agenda for historical research, and although historians did not slavishly adhere to political directives, their activities were circumscribed by the state. Thus, instead of regarding historiography as a conceptual problem unrelated to politics or daily life, I have tried to investigate the links between them, because the historians whose work I discuss were profoundly engaged in a tumultuous setting.

Newcomers to colonial scholarship on Vietnam may see postcolonial texts as needlessly combative; but when they are read as part of a conversation and as a response to what Edward Said has described as the “colonial tradition of disparagement,” the content and the tone of postcolonial texts are more easily deciphered.⁴ It is probably unfair to generalize about a century of colonial scholarship and to conflate the work of ideologues with that of specialists in religious studies, linguistics, history, anthropology, archaeology, and art history, but colonial scholars and colonial ideologues often shared similar assumptions, and in popular as well as specialized works several common themes emerged.

First, most colonial writers interpreted the French conquest of Vietnam as having been advantageous to the Vietnamese. They wrote about the humanity of France and her great generosity in civilizing a “primitive” people. Not surprisingly, therefore, postcolonial texts emphasized the savagery of the conquest and destructiveness of the French occupation. Second, many colonial writers viewed Vietnam as a smaller, less brilliant version of China. They regarded it as a derivative civilization that had only partially absorbed the once-superior (but now fallen) civilization of China.⁵ The postcolonial obsession with origins can be read, at least in part, as a response to the charge and perhaps even the fear of being derivative. The most extensive attempt to decolonize the past (meaning, in this case, to “de-chinese” it) coalesced in the insistence that an unbroken chain of succession linked contemporary generations of Vietnamese to the mythical age of the Hùng kings (traced to the third millennium B.C.E.) and in the effacement of the Hùng kings’ traditional (i.e., Sinitic) origins and meaning. Third, whether they looked at the civilization of China or the civilization of France as the source of Vietnam’s amelioration, colonial writers frequently failed to see the Viet-

namese as historical agents, acting in specific ways in pursuit of specific goals; for them Vietnam was stagnant and passive and could only be brought to life by more vigorous actors.

Like colonial depictions of Vietnam, postcolonial representations were often essentializing, but where colonial texts communicated contempt and condescension, postcolonial ones conveyed images of a dignified past and a self-realized present. In particular, postcolonial texts highlighted the agency and efficacy of the Vietnamese, who both created and responded to the social, cultural, and political conditions of their lives. Countering French narratives of the Vietnamese past, which were mostly shaped by the theme of conquest, postcolonial narratives shifted the emphasis so that the history of Vietnam was structured not by defeat and submission but by resistance and opposition. Even though the colonial past was evidence of Vietnam's weakness vis-à-vis France and seemed to attest to the conflicts and differences that had divided the Vietnamese, postcolonial productions stressed the strength and vitality of Vietnam and its history of unity. But these are only general themes, and in reducing postcolonial representations to pure resistance one misses much of their great richness.

In examining the work of official historians we need to ask why their completion of a new canonical version of the Vietnamese past was so delayed—despite their commitment to it, despite the pressure on them to complete it, and despite their impressive record of publications beginning in 1954. If the Vietnamese themselves had regarded this project as inconsequential, the delay could go unnoticed; but because great intellectual intensity and even a sense of urgency surrounded the problems of history and historical representation the delay raises some intriguing concerns. At this point we must move beyond the dynamic of history/counterhistory and concentrate on those issues that caused the consolidated vision of history to be delayed. And this is my purpose here.

Historical narrative, Hayden White has reminded us, is premised on the belief in a clear set of origins.⁶ Thus, in order to decolonize the past—to narrate it in new ways—postcolonial Vietnamese felt compelled to pinpoint origins. They asked: When did the history of Vietnam begin? Only by determining when it began, they reckoned, could they narrate it in a meaningful way. Only after they had a clear sense of origins could they clarify the trajectory of the past and divide it into meaningful segments. Before the question of origins could be resolved, however, official historians had to naturalize the idea of Vietnam. Colonial scholars and colonial administrators

recognized a number of geographical, social, and political entities: French Indochina, above all, and its constituent parts: Tonkin (the northern part), Annam (the central part), Cochinchina (the southern part), Cambodia, and Laos. They distinguished between the highlands and deltas, between coastal flats and riverine interiors, but never did they mention “Vietnam.” And yet, as Vietnamese scholars launched an assault against French representations, they encountered at the same time the limitations of their own intellectual and emotional habits. At one level, the series of postponements—the inability to bring the new canonical view of the past to fruition—stemmed from the uncertainty over how Vietnam should be defined. In the 1950s, for example, many Vietnamese reflexively believed that “Vietnam” was a particularistic term referring to the land of the ethnic Việt. The process of imagining Vietnam in more inclusive and pluralistic terms was filled with debate and contestation that culminated, at least formally, in 1979 with an official inventory of the fifty-four ethnic groups in Vietnam. For this inclusive vision of Vietnam to become fixed, the Vietnamese had to reject traditional notions of social geography and think in terms of politics and new political boundaries.

The delay in producing a new general history also stemmed from the imperative to write “new history” (*lịch sử mới*). This rubric was introduced by official historians to describe the new types of analysis and new notions of causality that should bear on new narratives of the past. Fundamentally, new history referred to the inscription of the national past in a framework variously described as Marxist (“marxish”), Marxist-Engelist, Marxist-Leninist, and Stalinist. Despite their many debates on the meaning of these “isms” and their disagreements about their relevance to the history of Vietnam, official historians generally agreed that the new paradigms stressed the linearity as opposed to the circularity of the past: history, they began to insist, moves from one moment to the next in a pattern of evolutionary unfolding. In this evolutionary progression, they agreed, each stage supercedes what came before. Approached in an evolutionary framework, the past could be divided into meaningful segments and written into a broader, more overarching framework as well. While the idea of new history held unmistakable appeal, the process of establishing it was fraught with disputes: official historians simply could not agree on how the past should be periodized. In addition to being developmental, new history also privileged the objective (especially economic) conditions of social change. In other words, causal explanations based on prophecy, omens, or the mandate of heaven were

abolished in favor of materialist explanations. But historical materialism, like Marxism or Marxism-Leninism, is famously opaque; even though official historians were eager to innovate, they were often uncertain about how to read the national past according to Marxist structures and categories. Moreover, despite their explicit appeals to a materialist conception of history, official historians often refused to see class conflict or other forms of internal divisions as the motor of history.

In a limited sense, the commitment to new history was purely political. Simply put, official historians were obliged (by party and government decrees) to produce a Marxist history of Vietnam. After all, the interlocutors who mattered at that time were mostly from the Soviet Union and China. But more substantively, Marxist paradigms (or Marxist paradigms as they were codified by Stalin) were also truly alluring because they provided the analytical basis for saying that the history of Vietnam was “normal” and, like the history of any other country, it had predictably moved through a specific set of stages. Marxist historiography made it possible, in other words, to demythologize the history of France and to overcome colonial claims that the history of Vietnam was abnormal and deficient.

It should be noted that although official historians were drawn to normalizing paradigms, they were, at times, also repelled by them; their impulse to insist that Asia (generally) or Vietnam (specifically) truly differed from Europe or France was probably as strong as their inclination to claim they were the same. Reacting against the universalizing models, official historians sometimes presented the Vietnamese past as transcendent and essential, as having escaped the surface contingencies of social life and as standing outside the world of mere events. When they translated the past into pure essence, official historians tended to dwell on what they regarded as the distinctly Vietnamese tradition of resistance to foreign aggression. Or, still rejecting the linear view of history, they conceived of history as a process—but a process of repetition, not development, in which exemplary moments from the past were periodically restaged. It is from this pointillistic sense of history that the flood of postcolonial commemorative texts emerged. Other anomalies soon arose; for instance, official historians often alluded to Marxism as a method for including mythohistories in “scientific” renditions of the past.

To comment on the tension between nationalism and Marxism is nothing new, but in the case of Vietnam this tension was especially dramatic. Although Marx, Lenin, and Stalin had viewed nationalism as a negative

force that could only undermine proletarian solidarity, Vietnamese Marxists were unmistakably nationalistic, and, in an aggressive misappropriation of Stalin, they cited his *Marxism and the National Question* to support their own hypernationalistic endeavors. Moreover, Vietnamese Marxists transformed Marxism from a theory of revolution into a theory of state power and a method for maintaining the status quo. The populist interpretation of Marxism suggests that a revolutionary movement centered on peasants can reconcile this tension. Peasants, in this instance substituting for the missing proletariat, are obviously anticolonial, and therefore nationalistic, and they are socialist to the extent that they oppose colonial oppression.

Not surprisingly, official historians were determined to write “histories of producers” and “histories of the people.” But again, there was a tremendous gap between the desire to reconceptualize the past and the kinds of historical representations that were actually offered. In this case, the gap stemmed from conflicting attitudes toward “the people” (*dân tộc*). On some occasions, official historians were inclined to praise “the people” as ardent and pure, but on other occasions they looked at “the people” with skepticism and suspicion: too often, they believed, “the people” were reactionary and swayed by superstition more than science or reason. Moreover, when official historians valorized popular as opposed to elite experiences of history, they had to privilege popular culture as well, and this endeavor was complicated by the fact that popular culture often stood in opposition to constituted authority—whether that authority was in the form of a feudal dynast, a colonial official, or a revolutionary cadre. The attention to popular or vernacular culture also threatened to eclipse the layer of Sinitic culture to which many educated Vietnamese still felt emotionally as well as intellectually attached. Conflicting attitudes toward popular as opposed to elite culture were resolved, in part, by the appeal to national character, national spirit, and national essence. Whereas popular culture was presented as a rejection of elite culture, and therefore highlighted the problem of internal divisions, crystallizations such as the “tradition of resistance against foreign aggression,” the “indomitable spirit of the Vietnamese,” the “fighting spirit of the Vietnamese,” and (later), the “peace-loving spirit of the Vietnamese” allowed internal divisions to recede. Thus, the ideas of popular history and popular culture were often absorbed into the quest for a homogeneous national culture that served the interests of the state. The main purpose of Marxism in Vietnam, especially after 1956, was to consolidate the state—which is not, according to most readings, a revolutionary plan. Even

though they rejected traditional historiographical forms, postcolonial historians still operated, in some cases, according to traditional norms. Like the court historians of dynastic times, committee and institute historians viewed historical work as a project of political legitimation.

In seeking to symbolize the nation and state—to make what was abstract and even strange seem familiar—official historians echoed earlier generations of activists, especially those of the 1920s and 1930s. To discourage the Vietnamese from thinking about themselves in purely particularistic terms and to encourage a greater sense of nation, Nguyễn Công Hoan paradoxically likened the nation to a house.⁷ Trying to effect a similar transformation, his contemporary Vũ Như Lâm also relied on domestic idioms, but he appealed more explicitly to the family: every nation, he claimed, takes the family as its base. Conflating the nation and state, he suggested that the Vietnamese should obey the state as they obeyed their fathers and mothers.⁸ Conventional Marxists normally reject nationalism and condemn the reactionary image of the family-state, which naturalizes the idea of hierarchy. In Vietnam, however, after the revolution and the Resistance War, as they sang the praises of the Communist Party, “Marxist” historians depicted the nation and the state as extensions of the family. This predilection cannot be traced exclusively to political designs because vernacular speech as well as Sino-Vietnamese make these figures of speech etymologically correct. The vernacular expression for state—*nhà nước*—is based on the word for “house” (*nhà*) and even “spouse.” *Nước* means “water.” Similarly, embedded in the Sino-Vietnamese term for state (*quốc gia*) is the root for family (*gia*). The language itself, in other words, and not only the gestures of political and intellectual elites, naturalizes hierarchies: the state, like the nation and the family, stems from primordial norms.

In the broadest sense, in this book I am concerned with the rich hybridity of official histories. In the process of unraveling the strands of this hybrid creation, I try to dismantle some of the clichés that have been attached to the history of contemporary Vietnam and to demonstrate how characterizations such as “orthodox,” “communist,” “Marxist,” “Maoist,” and “Marxist-Leninist” have obscured the details and texture of postcolonial times. Similarly, I caution against the inclination to see Vietnam as a product of “pro-Chinese” or “pro-Soviet” affinities (with occasional hints of “neutrality”) because these guideposts have too often functioned as analytical traps. The culture and politics of postcolonial Vietnam obviously re-

sponded to and reflected the limitations of the cold war, but they also exceeded them. Elements of Vietnamese communism that should be traced to Japan, for example, are often linked only to China. We could point out that when Ho Chi Minh lived in Paris he was in contact with Kyo Komatsu, and much of the vocabulary that the Vietnamese appropriated from Chinese sources was based on Japanese translations of German terms. While official historians often spoke in dogmatic and even authoritarian tones, their language was also opaque and coded; even though they were pressured to reach a consensus and to produce a unanimous view of the national past, they contested each other and even revealed the fluidity of their own views.

It has become a commonplace to remark that the Vietnamese shared an extraordinary sense of unity in the period between 1945 and 1975. I am more interested in internal divisions and the kinds of tensions that the history of unity has neglected and suppressed. Writers who point to the “like-mindedness” of the Vietnamese have confounded the difference between normative and descriptive discourse. When official historians spoke of the “tradition of unity against foreign aggression,” they did so *prescriptively*: the Vietnamese *should* have been united when they were, in fact, cataclysmically divided.⁹ These prescriptions, this pattern of urging, however, have too often been interpreted as mere description. It is also “normal” to assume that the Vietnamese shared a common vision of their collective past. Rather than trace that historical consciousness (if that is what it should be called) to specific circumstances, there is a tendency among historians to describe it in transcendent and even mystical terms. To the extent that there is or was a shared sense of the past, it emerged, I believe, from the didacticism of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, when official historians tried to cultivate it by exploiting the pedagogical power of commemorative texts and events.

The immediate goal of anticolonialism in Vietnam was to get rid of the French. But the vaster process of decolonization—reauthenticating the nation—was as much about China as it was about France. At the same time, decolonization also implied a simultaneous process of recolonization, as the DRV set out to contain the non-Việt parts of Vietnam through education, military service, and massive relocations, often to New Economic Zones. Decolonization has also been based on the denial of the South and the propagation of a Hanoi-centered vision of history. Still, there has never been a monolithic view. Official histories presented conflicted images of authority, variously identifying “the people,” the government, the party, or

“Uncle Ho” as the focal point of political allegiance and the object of affective ties.

In writing this book, I have been cognizant of the many paths I might have followed and the number of ways in which postcolonial culture (and especially historical narrative) could be approached. For instance, I rarely go beyond the official texts at the center of my study, even though in some cases they are simply wrong and in others they are grossly misleading. Indeed, these texts are tendentious and combative, and they often skew well-known evidence to satisfy their particular needs—as did the French, the Chinese, and the Americans. The appeal and even necessity of challenging them and offering a corrective is clear, but this is not the project I have in mind. Instead of ascertaining truth, I am more interested in how postcolonial historians responded to the often false and tendentious claims made about Vietnamese.

I could have approached postcolonial historiography by taking a more comprehensive view and analyzing the major works produced by the Research Committee, the Institute of History, the Department of History at the University of Hanoi, as well as the works of individual authors, including Trần Huy Liệu, Minh Tranh, Văn Tân, Đào Duy Anh, Trần Quốc Vượng, Hà Văn Tấn, and Phan Huy Lê. The possibilities of this sort of approach are unlimited, but two come immediately to mind: a comparison based on institutional affiliations (the committee and the institute in contrast to the Department of History) or a more inclusive and diachronic reading focused on issues rather than specific texts or sets of texts. Or, to transcend political and ideological limitations, a reading of postcolonial historiography could and at some point obviously should include, if not focus on, the works of southern historians. Postcolonial culture could also be approached thematically: one could comb through various narratives to see how critical issues arise and how key problems are handled. Again, the possibilities are limitless, but some likely ones are national origins, feudalism, centralized government, relations between majority and minority populations, Nam Tiến (the Southern Advance, or Vietnamese colonialization of what are now the country’s central and southern sections), and national reunification.

Although my own approach develops some of these possibilities, its point of departure and general trajectory are not the same. I am most interested in process—the process through which historiographical issues were constituted, how problems of interpretation and narration were resolved, and how

various elements of the national narrative became fixed and conventionalized. To engage this process I focus on the conversation that began in 1954 among historians in the North, specifically those allied with the Research Committee and the Institute of History. This dialogue, which was published on a monthly or bimonthly basis, was always aimed in the same direction — toward a new canonical history of Vietnam — but there were frequent detours and pauses and many occasions when the steps were retraced.¹⁰ Like the postcolonial project I examine, my own work is also crisscrossed by a variety of impulses, some easier to define than others, and it draws its inspiration from many sources. In addition to the official histories produced by the committee and the institute, my research incorporates other kinds of official literature: government directives, census reports, statistics, poetry that was officially promoted, civic rituals, ethnographies, and museum displays. This combination of sources may seem indiscriminate, but it has contributed to my sense of how intellectual productions, especially official histories, resonated in a wider social setting. In some cases, in order to gain a fuller understanding of postcolonial conversations, I juxtapose the sources, in their heterogeneous splendor, with colonial texts, dynastic histories, or the work of “reactionary” Vietnamese.

The Vietnamese have a rich historiographical tradition that can be traced to the thirteenth century. Court historians during the Trần and Lê dynasties (1225–1788) devoted significant resources to historiographical works. Once a new dynasty claimed the throne, it was obliged to write the history of the previous dynasty and to contribute scholarly works, including biographies of exemplary figures, geographical data, and compilations of folklore, reflective of the new era. Before the French occupation (1862–1945), historians of the Nguyễn dynasty (1802–1945) were extremely prolific. The distinguished scholar Phan Huy Chú composed two renowned works: *Annal of Imperial Orders through the Ages* and *Account of Things Seen Abroad*. By the 1860s, as the French were converting six southern provinces into the colony of Cochinchina, Nguyễn historians had finished more than half of the monumental *Veritable Records of Đại Nam*, which ultimately consisted of over five hundred books. As the French transformed the northern provinces of Vietnam into the protectorate of Tonkin, and as they created the protectorate of Annam out of the central provinces, Nguyễn historians continued working, and in 1890 concluded the final sections. Modeled on earlier historiographical patterns, the *Veritable Records* covered the period of the Nguyễn lords (1558–1777) and the Nguyễn dynasty from its origins in 1802 to the end of Đồng Khánh's reign in 1889. Some years earlier, in 1884, Nguyễn historians published *The Comprehensive Mirror of Việt History*. This widely cited chronicle covers the entire pre-Nguyễn span of Vietnamese history, from the prehistoric kingdom of Văn Lang to the collapse of the Lê dynasty. During the reign of the Nguyễn emperor Tự Đức, court historians also completed *The Geography of United Đại Nam*. This gazetteer, which devotes one

book to each of twenty-eight provinces, is divided into three sections, each of which represents the major regions: North, Center, and South. Because of its description of provincial resources and historical sites, as well as its attention to demography, this source is invaluable for research on nineteenth-century topics.¹

Nguyễn scholarship is now considered indispensable, and even during Nguyễn times its importance was clear. And yet, because the Nguyễn emperors presided over Vietnam's loss of independence, postcolonial historians often viewed their accomplishments as compensatory devices that masked a state of disgrace; in other words, there appeared to be no correspondence between the Nguyễn court's intellectual interest in history and its political resignation vis-à-vis the French.

Like the Nguyễn historians, those associated with the occupation forces—including adventurers, administrators, merchants, scholars, and missionaries—were also enormously productive. Far more than their Nguyễn contemporaries, however, colonial authors spoke from a position of power. In addition to the scholars Léonard Aourousseau, Gustave Dumoutier, Maurice Durand, Pierre Huard, and Henri Maspero, a number of writers with missionary backgrounds (Léopold Cadière), commercial interests (Alfred Schreiner), or in military positions (Charles Gosselin) also presumed to speak authoritatively about the Vietnamese past. Institutions such as the French School of the Far East (*École française d'Extrême-Orient*) issued innumerable works that because of their distinguished imprimatur enjoyed quasi-official status.

Finally, a number of Vietnamese who allied themselves with the occupation also published extensively. Although some of these writers can be linked to specific institutions, such as schools, others were associated with journals or publishing houses in Hanoi, Haiphong, Hue, or Saigon. These writers probably had the greatest impact on how the Vietnamese thought about—or were supposed to think about—the past. In the 1870s, for example, the Catholic convert Trương Vĩnh Ký (a.k.a. Petrus Jean-Baptiste), a man characterized by postcolonial writers as the “exemplary lackey,” published (in French) a two-volume history of Vietnam.² Colonial administrators promoted the use of his work in public schools, first in the colony of Cochinchina, then in the protectorates of Annam and Tonkin. Trương Vĩnh Ký's quasi-canonical status was further enhanced by colonial scholars who based much of their own research on what he had already written. Decades later, new pedagogical texts, such as those written by Trần Văn

Thước, Ngô Văn Minh, and Dương Quảng Hàm, were widely circulated in colonial schools.³ In addition to viewing the occupation in a favorable light, some of these writers even thanked the French for having sparked their own interest in the history of Vietnam. In his preface to *Lessons in the History of Annam*, which was adopted by the Textbook Commission in 1930, high school teacher Dương Quảng Hàm declared:

No one doubts the educational value of instruction in history, and national history must be considered among the most important of subjects taught in primary school. *This pedagogical truth, so evident all on its own, was nevertheless unknown to Annamites before the arrival of the French.* In the traditional Annamite curriculum, in fact, pupils only studied the Chinese chronicles: the history of Annam was not mentioned, neither in the program of study nor in the meetings at which the various programs were determined.⁴

For postcolonial writers, Dương Quảng Hàm's declaration was disturbing because of its essential truth. In precolonial times, the Vietnamese did indeed equate historical literacy to a knowledge of Chinese texts: the *Five Classics*, the *Four Books*, and chronicles of the Han, Tang, Song, Ming, and Qing dynasties. During the French occupation, when popular narratives of Vietnamese history were composed, the most influential ones were written by Trần Trọng Kim, whom postcolonial writers condemned as "feudal," "colonial," "petit bourgeois," "reactionary," "antinational," and "ahistorical," and Phạm Quỳnh, for whom they reserved still greater contempt.

In sum, one can justifiably state that during the French colonial period, histories of Vietnam were issued from three principal arenas: the Nguyễn court, the occupation forces, and Vietnamese who basically accepted the colonial mission. The published works of the latter group were often in French. After Vietnam's declaration of independence in 1945 and, more spectacularly, after 1954, historians in the DRV continued on the Việt-centric (as opposed to Sino-centric) path promoted by their "reactionary" predecessors. Similarly, they also sought to disseminate a basic understanding of the national past among "the people." To construct new interpretations, postcolonial writers relied on new kinds of evidence, used familiar data in unfamiliar ways, and approached the past according to new paradigms, even though traditional motifs often reemerged. Refining the techniques of their colonial predecessors, they also saturated public life with depictions of canonical figures and fragments of official narratives. Because the attempt to

“build” or “construct” history (*xây dựng lịch sử*) constituted a key component of postcolonial recovery, this chapter examines how historians in the DRV gave voice to new visions of the past.

HISTORY AND THE PEOPLE, HISTORY AND THE STATE

In December 1953, with the Viet Minh victory over France nearly assured, the Communist Party’s Central Committee issued a decree that formally established the Research Committee. Within this committee were three separate groups, one for each of the disciplinary divisions: history, geography, and literature. To historians appointed to the Research Committee—most of whom were still in the combat zone of Viet Bac—fell the task of composing a new general history of Vietnam. In June 1954, having returned to Hanoi, they began to publish the first issues of the *Journal of Literary Historical and Geographical Research*. In this journal, which appeared every month or so (until 1959), postcolonial scholars advanced tentative and experimental versions of “new history” (*lịch sử mới*). When the Research Committee was reorganized as the Institute of History (Viện Sử học) in 1959, official historians debated evidence, methods, and models in a new forum, the *Journal of Historical Research*.⁵ Many of the scholars at the Institute of History had been affiliated with the original Research Committee, and they continued to work on its assignment: to compose a new, general history of Vietnam.

It should be noted here that committee and institute historians did not monopolize historical discourse. Historians in the Department of History at the University of Hanoi, the textbook division of the Ministry of Education, the Committee for Party History, the Museum of History, the Museum of the Revolution, the Ministry of Culture, and so forth all published extensively on a wide range of topics. And yet, even though a great number of scholars devoted themselves to the task of constructing history in the aftermath of colonial rule, because of their direct (or occasionally indirect) link to the party, the work of committee and institute historians was more clearly accorded canonical status. For this reason, they also played an essential role in establishing a new collective memory of the past; more critically, their research provided the foundation for new rituals of state.

At any given moment, the mechanisms of state involvement in historiographical projects were more or less opaque, and they also varied over time. Nevertheless, certain dynamics are clear. When the Central Commit-

tee founded the Research Committee in 1953, official historians were supposed to answer directly to the party. Committee historians acknowledged this hierarchy in a number of ways. Trần Huy Liệu, the leading figure in the postcolonial historiographical project, summarized the relationship this way: “The Research Committee, belonging to the Central Committee, has the good fortune to be guided, criticized, and assisted in essential ways by the Central Committee.” Expressing a positive view of this arrangement, he used the form of the passive voice (*được*) that suggests good fortune (as opposed to *bị*, which hints at misfortune). Historians also addressed their self-criticisms to the Central Committee.⁶ In a curious aside that alludes to a more open conception of historical work, Trần Huy Liệu also mentioned that the Research Committee consisted of historians who were members of the Labor Party and of nonparty members as well. At the same time, however, that he tried to minimize the party’s control over intellectual life, he also noted that the composition of the Research Committee was itself a result of a Central Committee decree.⁷ At the end of 1956, when the Research Committee was redefined as a part of the government (the Ministry of Education to be precise), a similar strategy seemed to be in place because the political structure of the DRV was doubled. Next to, and ultimately above, the institutions of government were the institutions of the party (identified in more recent sources as the state). Thus, as the party appeared to loosen its grip over historiographical production in 1956, it actually maintained it, but through a different bureaucratic web. Control over the Research Committee, which was never really removed from the party, officially reverted to it in 1958, just as plans were announced to dissolve the Research Committee and create in its place a number of successor institutes. At this point, the new Institute of History was classified as a component of the State Committee for Science and Technology, which was redefined in the following year as the State Science Committee.

Although the Institute of History has functioned continuously since 1959, the wider institutional context has been revised a number of times: subsequent restructurations resulted in the Institute of Social Sciences in 1965, the Committee for Social Sciences in 1967, and the Academy of Sciences in later years.⁸ Whether they were institutionally linked to the government as opposed to the party, most committee and institute historians viewed themselves as faithful executors of the state’s will. Year after year, they compiled month-by-month progress reports that they forwarded to the Central Committee, directly or indirectly (through the Ministry of Education), de-

pending on the institutional structure in place at that point. Underscoring their proximity and obligations to the center of state power, committee and institute historians often lauded the “wise leadership” of the government, the party, and Chairman Ho Chi Minh. Other historians, Phan Khôi most notably, claimed greater autonomy for themselves and played more adversarial roles.

Overall, though, the state-centered ethos of the Research Committee was evident in the many connections it had to other state institutions, both domestic and foreign. A survey of its activities in 1955, for example, reveals collaborative projects with the Ministry of the Interior, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Office of Foreign News and Propaganda, the Association of Vietnamese Writers and Artists, and Teachers for Popular Education.⁹ In 1959 and 1960, while they prepared to commemorate the 950th anniversary of the founding of the national capital at Hanoi, institute historians worked with the city’s Administrative Council and the Ministry of Culture.¹⁰ The journals published by the committee and the institute were peppered with excerpts from official decrees, accounts of national gatherings, and references to annual reports submitted to the government or party. Moreover, the specific projects to which committee and institute historians devoted their attention were not determined by the historians themselves; instead, triennial (in 1958) and quinquennial (beginning in 1961) plans established the research agendas, which were also subject to revision by party and government decree. Committee and institute historians attended study retreats at state-sponsored regional schools (*khu học xá trung ương*). At national congresses, Trần Huy Liệu and other luminaries were advised how to organize their research and urged to stress particular themes. At the congress held in 1955, for example, historians were formally instructed to emphasize “the fighting spirit” of the Vietnamese.¹¹

Committee historians, responding to official cues, initially rejected what they viewed as the elitism of dynastic texts and proposed in their place more populist and inclusive renditions of the past. And yet, like the court historians of earlier times, committee historians tried to construct histories that promoted the interests of the state. Although the “new” historians in many ways shared the state-centered vision of their dynastic predecessors, they tended to present the state as a popular entity: thus, they reasoned, in serving the state they necessarily served the people. While they reaffirmed the pedagogical importance of their work, they also remarked that their reports, when issued in a timely manner, enabled the state to set plans for