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INTRODUCTION TO VIET-NAMESE CULTURE

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In implementation of the East-West Major Project, Mr. Nguyen-Khac-Kham, Secretary-General of the Viet-Nameese National Commission for Unesco, has prepared in Viet-Nameese an outline of the main characteristics and historical evolution of the culture of Viet-Nam. The English translation of this essay was first published in Việt-Mỹ, vol. IV n° 4 (December 1959), the Journal of the Viet-Nameese - American Association.

INTRODUCTION TO VIETNAMESE CULTURE

Unabridged English version

by Nguyen-Khac-Kham,

The story of Vietnamese culture points out characteristics which at first glance seem to be contradictory, but which actually complement each other to present a unified over-all picture. Vietnamese culture, in the last analysis, emerges as diversified in origin but as basically homogeneous.

Diversified in origin, because Vietnamese culture has developed through different ages: the Mesolithic, the Neolithic, the Dongsonian. It has been moulded by Chinese culture with the impact of Confucianism and Taoism; by Hindu culture with its Buddhist diffusion; and influenced by the West with the coming of Christianity and the acceptance of Western thought.

Diversified in origin but basically a single culture, because its various constitutive elements, far from proving mutually exclusive, have jelled smoothly to form an eminently original Vietnamese civilization.

DIVERSE MANIFESTATIONS OF VIETNAMESE CULTURE

The two-fold characteristics of Vietnamese culture we have just mentioned (diversity; unity) are widely reflected. They can be seen very clearly in such important cultural manifestations as speech, writing, literature and art. Let us consider these, briefly.

1. Vietnamese Speech and Writing

I. Speech: the language

The Vietnamese language is probably Austro-Asiatic in origin. True, it has been enriched by numberless Chinese words and expressions, but it is not recognized by Orientalists as having its origins in the Chinese language. German linguists like Kunt and Himly lean to the opinion that the Vietnamese language belongs to the Pegouan, Thai or Mon-Khmer group. Henri Maspero maintained that it is of Thai origin, and the Reverend Father Souvignet traced it to the Indo-Malay group. A.G. Haudricourt has recently refuted the thesis of Maspero and concluded that Vietnamese is properly placed in the Austro-Asiatic family. None of these theories quite explain the origin of the Vietnamese language. One thing, however, remains certain: Vietnamese is not a pure language. It seems to be a blend of several languages, ancient and modern, encountered throughout history following successive contacts between foreign peoples and the people of Vietnam.

Comparative linguistics has uncovered a quite regular correspondence between certain phonemes of the Vietnamese language and of the Austro-Asiatic language group. But this evidence does not allow us to conclude that Vietnamese, and vocables of the Austro-Asiatic group are to be placed in the same family. To begin with, most words of the Austro-Asiatic family are polysyllables with prefix and suffix adjuncts. Next, only morphological study can establish clearly the relationship between the two groups: but unfortunately Austro-Asian morphology has not yet reached its full development. Under such conditions, it is not now possible to make a substantial and effective comparison between Vietnamese and the Austro-Asiatic languages. Nevertheless, lexicologists have maintained that the Austro-Asiatic element has certainly played an important rôle in the formation of Vietnamese words. In the domain of ethnology, archaeology and sociology, irrefutable evidence has been discovered that the Vietnamese people made contact with Austro-Asiatic races (Negroids, Melanesians and Indonesians) in antiquity. It is quite natural that these contacts would manifest themselves in the Vietnamese language. In prehistoric times, Vietnam must have been inhabited by an autochthonous race whose blood undoubtedly mingled with that of other races who immigrated there. The first of such races were the Melanesians. They were followed in the second century B.C. by the Indonesians. Vietnam was enriched with new words from each successive wave of immigrants. The greater part of the words which these newcomers gave our language were words pertaining to mountains, flowers, animals and the like.

Such was the character of the Vietnamese language before its contact with Chinese culture.

Then came the period of Chinese domination, of the dynasties of the T'chaos, the Hans, the Wous, the T'sins, the Leangs, the T'angs, and of the Mings. Chinese culture had a golden opportunity to spread among the Vietnamese people and a large quantity of Chinese words, generally in the fields of philosophy and morals, were introduced into our language. But the words borrowed from the Chinese, exactly like those of Austro-Asiatic origin, have become Vietnamese. For example, Chinese written symbols remained as they had been written but they received a Vietnamese pronunciation. To speak Nho (Chinese characters pronounced in the Vietnamese manner) or to speak the literary language, is to speak Vietnamese. Once Vietnamized, with its foreign accent removed, the Chinese language would be listened to with pleasure: the people of Vietnam would find no trace of cacophony in it.

As for other linguistic contributions, Vietnamese has been enriched with words from French and from English. Initially, these words represented new objects or new functions previously unfamiliar to the people of Vietnam. Later, technical and scientific words were added. Like the earlier words from other languages, these new French and English words were Vietnamized in their turn.

II. Writing

Did Vietnamese possess its own system of writing before the Chinese cultural contact? This is a question which archaeology has so far been unable to answer. Vietnam did not recognize Chinese characters as its official writing system until the 9th century. But once the Nho was chosen as the official language vehicle, Sino-Vietnamese literature enjoyed the same prosperity as national Vietnamese literature.

From the Dinh and the Ly dynasties to about the middle of the Tran dynasty, there existed a sharp difference between Sino-Vietnamese literature and popular literature. The former was reserved exclusively for writing, while the latter was utilized especially for popular oral literature: folk songs, proverbs and sayings. But these ^{two} forms of literature - oral and written - lived compatibly together instead of engendering mutual opposition, because they had a common ground: the Vietnamese spoken language. However wide might be the range of popular oral literature, however refined might be the written Sino-Vietnamese literature, there remained always the Vietnamese tongue as the unifying and regulating element.

With Han Thuyen, pioneer in the literary use of demotic characters, writers began to use common Vietnamese terms for literary works, and local characters and writing began to play an ever-larger rôle in Sino-Vietnamese literature.

During the course of the 17th century, European missionaries arrived to preach Christianity in Vietnam and the Far East. Up to that time, apart from the Sino-Vietnamese characters utilized by the bourgeoisie and the nobility, there was in use only the involuted and quite complicated demotic script. The latter was devoid of rules and consequently could not serve as a language vehicle for reaching the people. It was therefore necessary to find some other sort of writing if the missionaries were to succeed in their purpose. After quite considerable study of European phonetic transcription, the missionaries invented a new type of writing. It was at first thought that this writing would be restricted to Catholic missionary activity. There was little reason to believe that it would break ecclesiastical boundaries and spread rapidly among the population at large. But naturally, the demotic script, involuted and indecipherable, had to yield, finally, to the new type of writing.

Furthermore, one could explain the decline of the demotic script by the suppression of the triennial examination system (1915 in North Vietnam, 1918 in the Center), by the reorganization of the communal (village) education with its certificate of elementary studies based on the romanized language, by the creation of the Association for the Propagation of the Romanized Language, and by other causes, both political and social. And finally, the adoption of the Romanized script could be interpreted as a spontaneous choice of the people in favor of a writing system which more adequately fitted the expression of Vietnamese thought and facilitated the

historic mission of the country.

A phonetic language par excellence, the romanized system of writing provided for the transcription not only of all the borrowed words but even of all the original Vietnamese words. Thanks to the romanized script, the traditional values of our national literature, both those which were expressed in demotic characters and those which were written in Chinese characters, were able to be preserved to our own times. But the effective contribution of the romanized script is not limited to the past. It is oriented also to the future, where it will help to create a literature truly worthy of a people with a history of more than 4,000 years.

The double characteristic of Vietnamese culture (diversity, unity) is apparent, finally, in the literature and arts of Vietnam.

B. Literature

Two main streams of foreign influence upon Vietnamese literature can be discerned. Chinese cultural influence was predominant from the second century B.C. to the 19th century, at which time Western civilization began to assume the dominant influence.

I. Influence of Chinese Culture

The Vietnamese people felt the influence of China from antiquity. From the second century B.C. to the tenth century of our era, Vietnam was several times under the domination of China, and enjoyed only brief periods of independence. For a thousand years, Chinese thought and literature were spread among the Vietnamese population.

In the 10th century, under the Dinh dynasty — the first independent national dynasty — Chinese literature was widespread. Most of the prose and poetry of this period was written by Buddhist monks. The reason was that Buddhism had been introduced into Vietnam towards the period of the Souei of China, in the 7th century. Such highly esteemed monks as Vo-Ngai, Phung-Dinh, Duy-Biam of the Dinh dynasty and of the later Le dynasty (968-1009), exchanged their verse with the great poets of China such as Tham-Thuyen-Ky, Truong-Tich, etc. Other monks such as Truong-Ma-Ni, Dang-Huyen-Quang and, in particular, Ngo-Chan-Luu and Su-Thuan, composed poetic works which, about a century later, aroused the admiration of Le-Quy-Don, who was forced to recognize that even the writings of the Songs paled before the poetic genius of Su-Thuan and of Chan-Luu.

From the time of Ly to that of Nguyen, Sino-Vietnamese literature was marked by distinguished writers. A large amount of poetry and prose flourished during this time. Among these were "The Fisherwoman", a gracious poem by Trinh-Hoai-Duc, an outstanding writer of the reign of Gia-Long; patriotic poetry by Pham-Ngu-Lao; the proclamation of peace by Nguyen-Trai, and many other admirable pieces of Mac-Dinh-Chi, Truong-Han-Sieu, Pham-Su-Manh, Nguyen-Phi-Khanh, Nguyen-Binh-Khiem, Le-Quy-Don, Ngo-Thoi-Si, etc.

Among those literary works cited as representative, some were completely Chinese in inspiration or imitation. A further, quite eloquent proof of the people's wish for independence from the Chinese even in the field of literature was the treasuring of all the poetic productions in the vernacular, which existed long before Le, and which were handed down by successive generations of poets both known and unknown.

Lacking documents, we have few samples of Vietnamese popular literature before the Ly dynasty. But in compensation, sufficient documents remain from later dynasties to enable us to form a satisfactory critical judgment. To begin with, there are admirable popular songs whose leading themes were drawn from the agricultural life or from the exemplary lives of women writers who lavished advice on their husbands and exhorted them to study. Outside of these songs, we ought to mention the "Gia Huan Ca" of Nguyen-Trai, the numerous poems of King Le-Thanh-Ton, of Nguyen-Binh-Khiem, of Nguyen-Pham-Tran, of Do-Uong, of Le-Quy-Don and of many other remarkable poets like Nguyen-Ba-Lan, author of "Truong Luu Hau Phu", and Dang-Tran-Con, author of "Chinh Phy Ngam", which the poetess Doan-Thi-Diem later translated into Nom verse. Special mention must be given equally to Nguyen-Dinh-To, author of "Bai Tan Ong Tien Si", and Nguyen-Huu-Chinh, author of "Cung Oan", and of "Quach Tu Nghi Phu".

In spite of the remarkable abundance of poetical works which characterize the dynasty of Le, one must turn to the dynasty of Nguyen to find the true masterpieces. This dynasty has been made illustrious by the great poets who wrote in Nom characters. The most formidable of these has been without doubt Nguyen-Du, the immortal author of "Kim Van Kieu", of which a contemporary critic has made this enthusiastic statement: "After the amending of Kinh-Thi (The Book of Verse) by the Master, Confucius, there have not been any other poems to equal it. We could say the same thing about Nguyen-Du, who left us a poem unsurpassed and unsurpassable: "Kim Van Kieu".

This historic summary of our Sino-Vietnamese literature and of our demotic literature attests to the originality of our old poetic productions which knew how to preserve intact the best qualities of the Vietnamese race in spite of the overpowering influence of Chinese forms.

2. Influence of Western Thought and Culture

The first indications of Occidental influence on Vietnamese culture can be traced back to the invention of the national language (Quoc Ngu) in the 17th century by the Catholic missionaries. This new system of writing officially adopted since the beginning of the 19th century for use in literature and education has greatly contributed to the spread of Occidental thought and culture.

Under the influence of European masterpieces, translated for the first time by famous writers such as Truong-vinh-Ky, Huynh-Tinh-Cua, Nguyen-Van-Vinh and Pham-Quynh, Vietnamese prose became richer, expressing its ideas in novel ways, and grew in fame with the production of varied and important literary works (novels, theatrical pieces, criticism, etc.). Poetry kept pace with this Occidental trend in Vietnamese prose, a trend which enables us to see the strength of the Vietnamese people and the productive vitality of their literature. Throughout the centuries, far from being absorbed

by Chinese culture, Vietnam had known how to turn it to her own account, to derive from it new strength and energy for the preservation of her own talent. In much the same way, we have selected and assimilated the best of Occidental culture to forge a new culture which, according to Duong-Quang-Ham, has met the needs of modern times while remaining faithful to the noble spiritual traditions of our people.

The characteristics which we have just seen in Vietnamese literature are found also in Vietnamese art. Despite the manifold influences of Chinese, Cham and French art, it is perceived to be as strongly original in its inspiration as it is in its expression.

C. Vietnamese Arts

1. Architecture

While betraying foreign influences, Vietnamese art reveals itself as authentically original. Apropos here is the testimony of Louis Bezacier, author of The Art of Vietnam. Bezacier writes: "Frequently, Vietnamese art has been confused with Chinese art. Some have taken it for granted that it was a bad copy of the latter, a sort of colonial art. So grave an error will disappear as soon as people take a close look at various Tonkinese monuments".

Where does the originality of Vietnamese architecture lie? According to Luong-duc-Thiep, author of Vietnamese Society, it lies in its reflection of the way of living and the conception of life of the Vietnamese people. Thiep writes:

The Vietnamese, by choice, live in the delta. Not very fortunate and not having a large enough breathing space available in which to live, they are reduced to building pagodas, temples, sanctuaries, and their own shelters from the materials they can find around them. Since wood and bamboo are the construction materials most commonly available, all edifices, whatever they may be, are essentially a system of columns and rafters upon which the roof rests, strengthening the whole with its weight. One of the many characteristics of Vietnamese architecture is precisely the rôle of the columns which serve as support for the roof. On the other hand, the tropical climate explains why there are few walls or partitions separating the interior apartments and it explains the frequent absence of a door: one sees the entrance wide open or perhaps shaded with a blind. The most ancient type of shelter consists of four roofs, two principal and two accessory roofs, leaning on a wooden frame system which in turn supported by a system of columns. The imperial palaces, the residences of the mandarins, the pagodas and the temples are modelled after the houses of the people, although they differ from these in their more spacious dimensions, in additional stories and by their shape which more frequently imitates that of the Chinese character Cong or Mon and by their roof suggesting the image of a dragon or a phoenix.

Buildings constructed for military purposes have their own architecture. The antiquity of the latter is borne out by such historical monuments as the citadel in Co-Loa, which is in spiral form; the fortifications of Dai-La constructed by the Chinese governor Cao-Bien on the left bank of the river To-Lich (867); the citadel of Hoa-Lu erected by King Dinh-tien-Hoang at Ninh-Binh (990); that of Long-Tranh, begun by King Ly-thai-To: this had occupied the ancient site of the Dai-La fortifications; the ramparts of Tay-Do in Tranh Hoa: this dates back to the time of the Hô dynasty, etc.

These varying structures reveal an influence, more or less, of Chinese architecture; while a certain number of other structures, dating from the dynasty of Nguyen (like the Imperial City, Hoang-Thanh) and certain fortifications in the Vauban manner built with the cooperation of French officers give evidence of French influence. But whatever may be its origin or influences, Vietnamese architecture still preserves its own total originality.

2. Sculpture

Vietnamese sculpture shows the same dualism we have seen in the rest of Vietnamese art: while welcoming foreign influences, it remains faithful to the national spirit. Of all foreign influences that have contributed to its enrichment, that of China has been the most important. Chinese influence is revealed in the choice of subjects as well as in the motifs of sculpture. Like Chinese sculpture, Vietnamese sculpture centers readily on the statues in pagodas and in the objects of private or public worship. As far as motifs are concerned, it has likewise borrowed from the Chinese, showing a marked predilection for the Tu-Linh (the four fabulous animals) and the Tu-Quy (the four seasons).

The second foreign influence on Vietnamese sculpture is that of Cham art. During the excavations of the Phat Tich pagoda, archaeologists uncovered the statues of women having wings and large breasts; the remains of plinths on which were carved low-reliefs representing flute-players; pieces of porcelain ornated with garlands; and other motifs quite different from those in current use by the Vietnamese. As an explanation for the existence of Cham art side by side with Vietnamese art, it is postulated that Cham artists were forced to contribute to the construction of this pagoda, which dates from the time of the Ly dynasty.

The last foreign influence on Vietnamese sculpture has been that of French art, introduced into Vietnam during the last century.

Despite the different influences we have discussed, Vietnamese sculpture has learned how to preserve its own personal stamp. We may learn to prize this from such valuable art-work as the statues of Le-dai-Hanh at Hoa-Lu and the spouses of Ly-ong-Trong at Ke-Trem. The original style of works like these suggests no connection with the other statues of the pagodas.

3. Painting

In the domain of painting, our artists still take their inspiration from Chinese models. In the many art-works we might mention, there are the Tu-Linh, the Tu-Quy, the Ngu-Phuc (the five Felicities), the Tam-Da (the three Abundances), etc. These were motifs dear to the painters of the Central Empire. However, far from limiting themselves to the study and imitation of Chinese models, Vietnamese painting also knew how to absorb for itself that which it found most useful from contact with French models. At the present, serious and praiseworthy efforts are being made by the National School of Fine Arts to reconcile into a harmonious synthesis the diverse Occidental and Oriental influences, and we have every reason to believe that a new era will soon open for Vietnamese art.

Meanwhile, the originality of our national painting has continued to show itself brilliantly in a sphere where it remains matchless: that of popular painting, such as one finds on sale on the occasion of Tet, depicting the beautiful flute players or the pear-shaped mandolin, the familiar animals and the scenes of children playing. Here are some appropriate comments of appreciation by Luong-duc-Thiep: "These popular paintings, while remarkable for their naive simplicity of art, truly reflect the satirical spirit of the Vietnamese people and reveal at the same time a high degree of color-sense by their authors. The soul of our race is manifest in them: young, ingenious, with nothing to hamper its unrestricted blooming".

4. Music

The same foreign influences can be traced in Vietnamese music. The Cham influence dates back to the beginning of the Ly dynasty. Indeed, it was in the latter period that musical tunes of Cham inspiration were composed. Sad and languid, these were known by the names of Nam-Binh, Nam-Thuong, Nam-Ai and Nam-Khach.

Chinese influence on Vietnamese music had been officially recognized during the Hong-Duc dynasty. In 1470, King Le-thanh-Ton ordered Tran-nhan-Trung, Do-Nhuan and Luong-the Vinh to undertake research on Chinese music. He instituted two ministries to facilitate this research: the ministry of Oriental Arts engaged in the production of musical pieces, while the Ministry of the Execution of Music employed singers and trained them in the art of singing. Each of these two ministries was placed under the direction of a Great Minister. Both of them were in charge of rites and ceremonies at the Royal Court under the reign of Quang-Hung, from the year 1578. But later the Court lost interest in music, which became a speciality of private groups.

When the Vietnamese people came in contact with Western civilization, they evinced enthusiasm for European music and their interest in the old traditional music declined. Today, the National Conservatory of Music,

created by the Ministry for National Education, has set itself the task of renovating the national music of Vietnam on the basis of a new synthesis of Occidental and Oriental art.

CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion to this summary study of the characteristics of Vietnamese culture, it may be apropos here to reproduce a passage written by M. Georges Condominas on the panorama of Vietnamese culture, and published in the journal France-Asie:

Thus, the virile originality of Vietnam emerges in all spheres. Certainly, there is no question of minimizing Chinese influence, which is preponderant, but which is not absolute. The main reason it appeared to be absolute was that the majority of works intended for the general public seemed to give the impression that the cultural personality of Vietnam had been suffocated by Chinese culture, of which it was alleged to be nothing more than an integral part.

It is undeniable that there was a Chinese cultural influence on Vietnam, just as there was elsewhere a Hindu influence. But that ancient subsoil of culture common to the people of Southeast Asia (a crossroads for both Indian and Chinese cultures) has survived intact with the remote minority mountain people unused to foreign contacts. And not only among the mountain people: it has profoundly tinged the language customs, manners, social organization, art and beliefs of modern Vietnam. It will absorb all the opposing currents of Occidental art just as it gratuitously absorbed or accepted by force the multiple elements of Chinese culture and made use of these to build its own culture and to maintain its own originality.