History, culture, and problems of post-revolutionary identity in contemporary Vietnam

Robert Cribb, The Australian National University
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Editors
COLIN MACKERRAS
ROBERT CRIBB
ALLAN HEALY

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FOREWORD

This collection of papers results from a two-day Conference organized in July 1985 by the Wollongong branch of the Australia-Vietnam Society, of which I was chairman. The main aim of the Conference was to consider developments in or affecting Vietnam in the ten years following reunification in 1975. In pre-Conference publicity we made it clear that the intention was to seek analyses from a range of academic specialists. We trust that the Conference papers will stimulate further informed discussion and will be of use in programmes of Southeast Asian studies, there being a dearth of material on social and economic developments in Vietnam since 1975.

For the published volume, two introductory chapters have been added. The editors have also written introductions to each of the chapters to bring out the major issues more clearly. The general intention has been to integrate the book better and make it more useful to students and the interested reading public.

Allan Healy
Editors' Introduction

This paper raises four main issues. One is the validity or otherwise of the comparative approach. Another is the integration of two parts of a single country reunited after decades of separation and war. A third is the locus and nature of national identity, especially as seen through history and culture. Lying not far below the surface of all of these is the difficult issue of leadership. Most of the chapters of this book examine Vietnam’s revolution in its own terms. Where the experiences of other countries are mentioned, it is to show how they have impinged on Vietnam, not to draw comparisons or contrasts. But this chapter seeks to find understanding of Vietnam through comparison with Indonesia. It is a legitimate and useful approach.

Like the previous chapter, this one draws sharp attention to the immense differences between the northern and southern parts of Vietnam. From 1954 to 1975 the two were under mutually hostile governments, one socialist, the other violently anti-communist. Ten years of a single government have only just begun the gigantic task of reintegrating the Vietnamese people into a united nation.

Very few have doubted the intense nationalism of the Vietnamese as a whole. It was certainly one of their chief strengths against the Americans, and probably the main reason for their victory. Nationalism would seem to imply a clear national identity. Yet to identify precisely what that national identity meant, and its characteristics, is by no means easy. The author of this chapter sees the expressions of Vietnamese national identity in their history and culture, but is impressed again by the contrasts between north and south of this single people and the implications they carry for ‘national identity’. He criticizes the lack of certain forms of cultural activity in the north by comparison with the south.

One of the expressions of any national identity is heroic images, which are usually encapsulated in leaders. Among modern Vietnamese leaders Ho Chi Minh stands out. The author criticizes the renaming of Saigon, the south’s largest city, after Ho Chi Minh, rather than a traditional southern leader. It is a contentious, but interesting point.

Despite the evident status of Ho Chi Minh as a revolutionary leader, the cult around his personality in Vietnam is very moderate by comparison with that accorded to revolutionaries in several other countries. In introducing a chapter on the comparative approach it is reasonable and appropriate to contrast the cult of the dead Ho with that of the far more extravagant living Kim Il Sung in North Korea or with that of Mao Zedong at the height of the Cultural Revolution in China of the late 1960s. Ho never exercised exclusive power to the extent of quite a few other Marxist-Leninist leaders and since his death Vietnam’s leadership has been genuinely collective. There was no cult of the Party Secretary-general, Le Duan, in Vietnam, even when he was at the height of his power. He was not continually quoted, public pictures of him were not particularly common. Compared even with the cult of Deng Xiaoping in China of the 1980s, itself rather moderate, that of Le Duan was definitely restrained.

The death of Le Duan in July 1986 opens the way for the emergence of a new leader or leaders in Vietnam and a potential new set of heroic images. It remains to be seen how the new group will react towards the notion of collectivity and whether it will believe a cult necessary to give itself legitimacy.

In the 1970s it was common amongst Indonesians to compare the Vietnamese and Indonesian revolutions. It was a comparison generally to Vietnam’s credit: Vietnam was portrayed as a country which had seized the opportunity offered by the end of World War II to win for itself not only national independence but also a fundamental change in its social structure, while Indonesia appeared to have lost itself somewhere in the shoals of what Sukarno himself described as an unfinished revolution. I suspect that this comparison enlightened Indonesian studies more than it did those of Vietnam, and as an Indonesianist I certainly benefited from it. Such comparisons, however, are not often made, largely because those who have specialized in one complex Southeast Asian country seldom wish to risk demonstrating ignorance of another. Nevertheless, I believe that there is a place for attempts at comparison, and in 1985, ten years after the end of Vietnam’s revolution, thirty-six years after the end of Indonesia’s, the post-revolutionary experiences of Indonesia may shed some light on those of Vietnam.

There are numerous similarities between Vietnam of the mid-1980s and Indonesia of the mid-1950s. Both had experienced a prolonged period of war and revolution which severely damaged the economic fabric of the country and disrupted its society. Both bore the continuing burden of a large standing army, necessary in each country for maintaining internal order and for defending
national sovereignty against what were seen as serious challenges, from the Dutch in West New Guinea on the one hand and from the Chinese and the Khmer Rouge on the other. Both, moreover, faced a problem of national unity brought about by the incorporation for the first time into the national state of territories which had been ruled until then by what were in the respective national governments’ views no more than puppet administrations. Vietnam, of course, had been divided between the DRV in the north and the RVN in the south, while Indonesia had been partitioned first into separately ruled zones of Japanese military administration and then into Republican and Netherlands Indies territory.

It is this last common characteristic which I would like to address more closely, because it has presented both countries with a significant problem of national identity in the post-revolutionary era. This problem springs directly from the sense of identity which sustained the national struggles of the two countries. In both Indonesia and Vietnam, anti-colonialism became a major political force only when it developed a sense of history. As colonial rule changed the fabric of both societies, the case for going back to a precolonial order became less and less attractive, as well as less and less possible. In developing a sense of history, Vietnamese and Indonesians anti-colonialists became aware not simply of the fact that the present was different from the past but also of the possibility that the future might be different from either. They began to see that a noncolonial future did not necessarily mean a return to the precolonial past, and through a variety of nationalist movements they set about shaping that future. This gave to anti-colonialism in both countries not just a degree of independence from traditional culture but even a degree of iconoclasm, because the very destruction of the past could be a sign that one was moving into the future.

In both colonies, therefore, national identity came to be defined increasingly in terms of shared historical experience, especially the shared historical experience of colonialism, rather than in terms of culture. This historical identity became in fact better established in Indonesia than in Vietnam, partly because social change under the much longer period of Dutch colonialism had destroyed even the memory of traditional society in many areas of the Netherlands Indies, partly because the diversity of indigenous culture within that region made a cultural focus for identity very difficult to conceive. Almost the entire nationalist movement, therefore, shared this historical definition of national identity. In Vietnam there was a strong revitalization stream, exemplified by Phan Boi Chau, a nationalist political thinker who admired, and wished Vietnam to emulate, the resurgence of Japan under the Meiji restoration. This stream sought to strengthen Vietnam by re-emphasizing and developing what was good in traditional Vietnamese culture. It was left, therefore, to Vietnamese Marxists to articulate the nationalist historical consciousness most effectively, for Marxism is of course above all an ideology of historical consciousness. The ability of Marxism to exemplify historical consciousness in Vietnam was probably one of its major advantages over its rivals in the nationalist movement, because historical consciousness is a profoundly democratizing force; all Vietnamese could share in a national history in a way in which they could not share in a national culture which was at least partly the prerogative of the old mandarin ruling class of Vietnam.

The division of Vietnam in 1954 left the country not just with rival governments but with rival definitions of national identity. In the south, culture, particularly high culture, was emphasized, and the presidents adopted the dragon emblems of their imperial predecessors. In the north, history, or rather the passing of history, was emphasized and a rather austere society developed. There was, it is true, a flourishing folk culture, especially one of music and drama, which received Party encouragement but this was not reflected in the display of symbols and designs meant to evoke an unchanging Vietnamese-ness. In late 1984 I was deeply struck by the absence in the north of visible signs of a distinctive Vietnamese decorative or material culture. (As I do not speak or read Vietnamese I was not able to make any observation on Vietnamese literary culture and, given the relative brevity of my visit, it is hard to make any valid comment on performing arts.) This contrasted strongly with the south, where elements of Vietnamese material culture such as lacquerware, embroidery and a wide range of other artistry were strongly apparent as was traditional drama and music. It is tempting to argue that these things were just a matter of priorities; a country facing war and economic hardship cannot afford luxuries. Yet it is precisely at such times of travail that symbols become important. One thinks of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra playing as the bombs dropped in 1944. In a sense it is precisely because the arts are non-essential that they are an important key to understanding the values current in society.

A similar division took place in Indonesia during its national
revolution. The administrative partition of the Netherlands Indies by the Japanese and subsequent military and diplomatic divisions of the archipelago between the Indonesian Republic and the Dutch were as arbitrary as the line drawn at the 17th parallel in Vietnam, and the same contrast emerged between the identities which developed on either side of the border. Within the Republic, historical identity was the orthodoxy and one of the features of the Indonesian revolution was the way in which a common sense of historical struggle united ethnically and culturally disparate groups. On the Dutch side of the demarcation line, there was a brief attempt at cultivating a historical sense of identity based on the civilizing experience of Dutch rule, but this was not really plausible enough to succeed and it was quickly replaced by an emphasis on the creative arts. Given the cultural diversity of Dutch-controlled regions this led to a degree of fragmentation within a federal structure.

The problem for the Indonesian Republic, when it obtained control of these outer regions at the conclusion of the revolution, was partly that the regional sense of cultural identity had been strengthened. More serious, however, was the fact that the common thread of shared historical experience had been broken. Indonesia as defined by the victorious nationalist movement had no real difficulties in accepting cultural diversity; it had, however, a great deal of difficulty in accepting as legitimate the historical experience of the outer regions during the years 1942 to 1949. With few exceptions, it avoided accepting into its ruling elite those leaders in the outer islands who had not been unambiguously Republican, and the official historical interpretation of the revolution studiously ignored the separate experience of those regions. No adjustment was made to the historical identity of Indonesia in order to cope with the experience of partition and reunification. This has been, incidentally, even more the case with West New Guinea, now Irian Jaya, whose experiences of Japanese occupation and revolution were different again from those of other regions. West New Guinea, moreover, was then detached rather artificially by the Dutch in 1949 as a separate colony and was restored to Indonesia only in 1963. The separate historical experience of West New Guinea encompassed thus an entire generation, yet because it had participated up to 1942 in the historical experience which defined Indonesia, the Republic could not allow it to be lost. The serious problems of integrating Irian Jaya into Indonesia are partly problems of cultural difference, partly problems of government heavy-handedness, but most of all they are problems of identity. Indonesia's historical identity has not been varied in the slightest to incorporate the separate experience of the people of Irian Jaya in the years 1942-63. Indeed, it is difficult to see how it could be varied, but the result nonetheless has been that many of the indigenous inhabitants of Irian Jaya feel aliens in their own land.

It is a problem of this order which the Vietnamese government faces in reintegrating the south. While it is true that substantial cultural differences persist between north and south, there is a sufficient basis of a common shared culture to support a single national sentiment. (This does not apply of course to the ethnic minorities of the south; their integration is a separate challenge and is one which the former government of the south was distinctively incapable of meeting.) The government, however, cannot recognize that anyone who was not with it during the long civil war could have been acting in any way for the Vietnamese people. A large part of the population of southern Vietnam, therefore, is effectively denationalized, denied a share in Vietnamese history because they were on the wrong side.

There are many ways in which this disenfranchisement is expressed. The struggles of the 1945-54 and 1954-75 are referred to as the wars with the French and Americans respectively, not as civil wars. The Vietnamese who participated on the other side are not portrayed as people who had a different but wrong view of how Vietnamese society should develop. They are, if mentioned at all, portrayed as no more than lackeys of foreign imperialists. This interpretation at once devalues whatever independence of thought the south may have had and avoids the real need for reconciliation. The decision to rename Saigon as Ho Chi Minh City is also significant. Saigon was the only major town in Vietnam to have a Chinese name and in 1946, at the start of the revolution, it was renamed Ho Chi Minh City by the parliament of the DRV. This was an eminently appropriate decision at the time, for Ho was undoubtedly the foremost Vietnamese nationalist leader of his age. The decision to revive this long-neglected renaming in 1976, however, was a clear indication of the way in which the government chose to ignore the intervening thirty years of Saigon's history. For all that Ho had been the symbol of Vietnamese nationalism up to 1945, the years which followed separated him from the south. His authority never extended to Saigon and he headed a government which did not rule the south. The decision to apply his name once more to Saigon—rather than the name of some hero of the southern
resistance or some shared Vietnamese historical figure such as Le Loi, who had led one of the wars of national independence against China—was a clear indication of the North's conviction that it alone was the bearer of Vietnamese history during those thirty years.

The consequence of this alienation of the south is likely to be continued discontent, sporadic resistance and widespread uncooperativeness. All of these things are inimical to the broader interests of the Vietnamese government in general and to its policies in the south in particular. It is possible to see in the response of the Indonesian government to similar problems paths which the Vietnamese government might also follow in seeking a solution.

One possibility is simply to tough it out. Dissent can be quelled, lack of co-operation can be chastised and the government can wait for the passing of time to restore the shared bond of history. In another ten years there will be a generation of young adults who will not remember a divided Vietnam. This strategy, however, is not quite as easy as it may seem, for although the country is formally unified, there are major differences in style and policy between north and south, and the repression needed to tough things out will tend to preserve, not eliminate, the south's sense of separateness. In Irian Jaya, the fact that they have known nothing but Indonesian rule has not stopped some young Irianese from joining the Free Papua Movement.

A more rapid reintegration of the south will depend on a redefinition of Vietnam's identity so as to include the south. This might take place by rewriting the history of the war years to give a greater role to the south. In Indonesia there has been a determined programme of searching out national heroes from every major region and ethnic group of the archipelago in order to demonstrate, sometimes on rather flimsy grounds, that the entire archipelago did participate in the three great phases of the nationalist historiography: the initial resistance to colonial penetration, the national awakening under colonialism, and the national revolution which finally secured independence. For Vietnam, this would involve treating the people of the south, historiographically at least, as heroes who suffered longer than any other group under the colonial yoke, rather than as traitors who attempted to prolong colonialism. This kind of historical revision is difficult, partly because it runs counter to the grain of what people still remember, partly because it somewhat devalues and diminishes the status of the north as the crucible of revolution. It could potentially be turned into the wholly unacceptable argument that the south, having experienced revolution directly for a much longer period than the north, was in fact more revolutionary. For these reasons, historical revision is unlikely to be significant until the bitter memories and sensitivities of the war have subsided appreciably.

What is possible, however, is a more radical redefinition of Vietnamese identity so as to take account of culture. One of the steps by which the Indonesian government has attempted to assuage regional resentments since the late 1950s has been to assert that there is an Indonesian nature or identity rooted in the soil and people of Indonesia which transcends the diverse historical experiences and cultural dissimilarities of the archipelago. There is still a significant historical element in Indonesian national identity as officially defined. But the Pancasila, the central element of that official identity, is explicitly timeless, a concept allegedly not created but dug out of the Indonesian soil by nationalist leaders. There is in fact much in Pancasila which is very Javaneese in tone and as a state ideology it may be primarily to limit the terms of political debate. It nonetheless provides an ideological cover for national integration in a way in which a purely historical identity cannot. A similar path is open to Vietnam, perhaps more easily, since a Vietnamese culture does not need to be constructed artificially in the way that Pancasila in fact was. It would be a major contribution towards reintegrating the south, since southern self-identity seems to be based on the culture fostered by the old RVN. Yet it would not imply any subordination of the north to the south, for the north remains the cultural cradle of the nation. China has been able to accept the high culture of its feudal past by redefining it as a product of the labour of the masses, so this approach presents no serious problem in terms of Marxist theory.

It also presents a practical, though double-edged, political advantage for the government in both north and south. The end of the war has left in Vietnam an atmosphere which appears to an outsider as one of malaise. The sense of national purpose engendered by revolution and war appears in part to have dissipated, making it more difficult for the government to achieve its proclaimed goals. The promotion of campaigns of various kinds is one way of restoring a sense of purpose and it is one which the Vietnamese have used in the past. Nonetheless, there appears likely to be a cumulative slowing down of progress in many fields. This in turn causes problems for the government which still has to live with the sense of the unfolding march of history which it has been so successful in imparting to its people. A retreat into a more static,
cultural identity may be an admission of, and an excuse for, the fact that not everything can be done at once.

NOTES

I should like to thank David Marr for his comments on an earlier version of this paper but to emphasize that he is in no way responsible for the ideas expressed here.


2. One recent comparative study which sidesteps this problem by focussing on evolving interpretations of the two countries’ revolution is Bill O’Malley, ‘The Vietnamese and Indonesian revolutions after four decades’ in Coral Bell, ed., *Forty Years On: Studies of World Change in the Four Decades after 1945*, Australian National University, Department of International Relations, Canberra, 1985, pp131-62.

3. I should emphasize that I use the terms ‘south’ and ‘north’ in this paper exclusively to refer to the territories of the former RVN and DRV respectively. This is a division which cuts across the older regional distinction between north, centre and south.

10 THE MOTIVES TO PEACE: CHINA, VIETNAM AND THE CONFLICT OVER KAMPUCHEA

KELVIN ROWLEY

Editors’ Introduction

This is the only chapter which focusses all its attention on setting Vietnam in its regional and international context. Its perspective is thus that of international relations. The author’s assumptions are basically twofold. Firstly, nationalism is the root of Asian communist revolutions against foreign domination and largely shapes the relations of the new states after independence. Second, it is power politics which imposes the basic rules of statecraft in both communist and non-communist nations, and certainly in the Indochina region.

It is this chapter which most fully addresses the Kampuchea issue around which so much controversy has raged over the last few years. The background facts can be stated simply. In March 1970 the pro-Chinese neutralist Norodom Sihanouk was overthrown by a right-wing pro-American coup led by Lon Nol. Immediately the hitherto peaceful Cambodia was drawn into the war raging in Vietnam. The communist forces of the three countries of Indochina agreed to help each other to victory, and succeeded in winning it in 1975.

The government led by the Khmer Rouge, that is the Communists of Cambodia, now renamed Kampuchea, turned out to be brutal and harsh beyond imagination. Their policies led to devastating famine. A radical ‘communism’ caused them to eliminate all classes inimical to them, especially supporters of the Lon Nol regime, intellectuals or experts of any sort. The extremity of their behaviour resulted in massacres which killed very large numbers of people. Some serious estimates of the numbers who died through famine, disease and outright slaughter range well over 2 million or about one-third the national population.

At the end of 1977 a border war between Vietnam and Kampuchea became public and simmered throughout 1978. Vietnam arguing that Kampuchea was trying to seize some of its territory, Kampuchea that Vietnam was aiming to absorb it into an ‘Indochina Federation’. The Khmer Rouge and their leader Pol Pot greatly strengthened their alliance with China in 1977. Vietnam and China began to quarrel openly from May 1978 and on 3 November 1978 Vietnam signed a treaty with the Soviet Union.

Late in December 1978 Vietnam invaded Kampuchea and overthrown the Khmer Rouge regime replacing it with one sympathetic to itself led by Heng Samrin. The country was renamed the People’s Republic of Kampuchea.