

**THAILAND AND VIET-NAM:
SOME THOUGHTS TOWARDS A COMPARATIVE
HISTORICAL ANALYSIS**

by
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I

The contrast between Thai and Vietnamese history is readily apparent to all students of the history of South East Asia. In the twentieth century, it is possible to attribute some of the differences to the fact that Thailand was able to avoid complete domination and annexation by a European power, whereas Viet-Nam was conquered by the French. During the period when the Thai were pursuing the gradual modernisation of their political and economic institutions within a monarchical and bureaucratic framework, the Vietnamese were forced to devote much of their national energy towards the achievement of political and economic independence. But the contrast is equally marked in relation to earlier centuries, and there it cannot be so easily explained. Looking at the respective histories of the two countries between the fifteenth century and the nineteenth, one is struck by the remarkable stability which has characterised the political development of Thailand, and by the frequency of internal conflict and territorial division which have punctuated the history of Viet-Nam. By way of illustration, one need only site the events of the latter part of the eighteenth century. In 1767, Thailand was defeated by the Burmese and seemed on the verge of total disintegration; yet in less than a decade, by 1775, the kingdom had been united by Phya Taksin and was strong enough to resist all further Burmese invasions. In Viet-Nam, which was virtually divided into two states during most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Tay-Son rebellion of 1771-5 set off a chain of inter-regional conflicts which ended in the final unification of the country only after thirty years of war.

Part of the explanation for this contrast lies no doubt in differences of geography. Both countries have seen a gradual process of political expansion over many centuries, and both the Thailand and the Viet-Nam

of the mid-nineteenth century were much larger political entities than had existed under Thai or Vietnamese control in say the thirteenth or fourteenth century. But the geographical contexts of their expansion were very different. In Thailand, the Menam Chao Phraya and its tributaries provided a natural framework for political unity with easy river communications between north and south, which can be extended by land or by sea to include also the peninsula in the south. It was not difficult for a powerful state developing on the central plain of Thailand gradually to absorb first its near neighbours and later those that lay farther afield. Population growth could take place within a continuous lowland area which had plenty of uncleared land.

Viet-Nam on the other hand is geographically fragmented, with a series of river basins leading to the coast, often separated by hills and even by high mountains. The population of the Tongking delta region became sufficiently dense at an early period to force the Vietnamese to move beyond it: first into Thanh-Hoa and An-Tinh, which were already Vietnamese, and then into the smaller valleys of what is now Central Viet-Nam, which had previously been Cham, eventually they reached the lower Mekong delta, which they conquered from Cambodia during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In addition to migration, the Vietnamese also had recourse to double-cropping of rice in those parts of the northern and central provinces where it was feasible. Thus the geography of Viet-Nam gave rise to both land-scarcity and problems of communication between different regions: two important factors which go some way towards explaining the tendency to political instability and conflict.

Geography alone however does not amount to a complete explanation of the contrast. It is necessary to consider the institutional frameworks of the two countries, and also the religious beliefs and cosmological notions which helped to shape them. It is easy enough to remark that Thailand was one of the 'Indian-influenced' countries of South East Asia, whilst Viet-Nam was more deeply influenced by China. But what this meant in practice can only be understood by comparing their institutions

and beliefs in some detail. Recent writings on Vietnamese history have paid some attention to the question whether that country can truly be called 'Chinese', and how far it should be regarded as 'South East Asian'.¹ The contrast between Thailand and Viet-Nam leads one to raise the question whether there is any uniformly 'South East Asian' type of polity and culture at all.

1) A notable example is A.B. Woodside : *Vietnam and the Chinese Model, a Comparative Study of Nguyen and Ch'ing Civil Government in the first half of the nineteenth century* (Harvard, 1971).

II

During the period between the thirteenth and the fifteenth centuries, Viet-Nam came gradually to accept Chinese neo-Confucianism as its predominant political orthodoxy, whilst Thailand (that is, Sukhothai and early Ayuthya) became deeply imbued with the Sinhalese form of Theravada Buddhism. The institutional character of these two forms of orthodoxy must figure prominently in any search for an explanation of the contrast between the two countries.

Confucianism was always an elitist philosophy, or religion, in the sense that its adoption was limited to those few scholars who could study and master its classical texts. They were a sort of priesthood in relation to the Confucian cult; but also they were the guardians of moral orthodoxy and of social harmony, in administrative practice as well as in theory. Although their actual political power at court might vary from one period to another, from the fifteenth century onwards they always had a prominent part in government at least in Tongking.²

But this elite was not selected merely by the intervention in human affairs of some supernatural power, or by the working out of some cosmological moral force. Its members had, in theory, to prove their individual right to enter the elite by passing through an elaborate process of examination, based on the Confucian classics. Indeed one might take the growth of the examination system, and subsequent fluctuations in its importance, as a measure of the relative strength and weakness of the Confucian scholars in Vietnamese political life at different periods. Although there are references to examinations to select scholars for royal favour as early as 1075 and 1086, the continuous history of the examination system as a regular feature of the Vietnamese administrative framework seems to begin in the Tran period. In 1232 the chronicle indicates the selection of five laureates by examination, without suggesting that the event was an innovation of that year. By the end of the Tran period (especially by the 1390s), the examination laureates had become quite prominent. In the 1460s they became the dominant element in

2) The process by which Confucianism attained this position of predominance in the Vietnamese system of government during the fifteenth century has been analysed by J.K. Whitmore: *The Development of Le Government in Fifteenth Century Viet-Nam* (Ph.D. thesis, Cornell University, 1968).

government, and the period from 1463 to 1514 represents the first peak in Vietnamese 'Confucianisation', when as many as 816 laureates were chosen in the course of 18 successive triennial examinations.³ The division of the kingdom between 1527 and 1592 led to a decline in the importance of examinations outside Tongking, and with the triumph of the Trinh clan in the 1590s that decline also affected the north itself. Although there was some reversal of this trend in the North in the century or so after 1660, and although the beginnings of an examination system are found in the Nguyen provinces of what is now Central Viet-Nam in the eighteenth century, it was necessary for the emperors of the Nguyen dynasty to undertake the process of 'Confucianisation' once again, after the unification of the country in 1802. Thus we find that the examination system and the strength of the scholar-officials reached its second peak, in the period 1820-60 on the eve of French colonisation.

Whilst the power of the scholars obviously had important effects on the nature of Vietnamese bureaucracy, and on the role of the monarch, the fact that they were selected in this way also had significance for the character of Vietnamese society and institutions outside the court and government. In the first place, it meant that the Confucian classics and the characters in which they were written became the basis of an educational system, within which young men prepared themselves for the examinations. It was both possible and necessary to acquire a knowledge of the sacred texts of the tradition before entering (indeed in order to enter) the select body of the elite. Many of those who prepared themselves for examination inevitably were rejected, so that there were always in Vietnamese society a substantial number of failed scholars who had acquired a greater or lesser degree of learning without achieving the position of status and power to which they had aspired. Although we know very little about such people, since they barely appear in the official chronicles and records and only occasionally became important literary figures, it is reasonable to assume that their presence in the country was a factor making for political instability. They may well have been active in village government, and in the formation of secret

3) *Dai-Viet Lich-Trieu Dang Khoa Luc* (Saigon, 1963), passim; cf. R.B. Smith: 'The Cycle of Confucianisation in Viet-Nam', to be published by the University of Hawaii.

associations at the 'grass roots' level of society where, in certain circumstances, their influence might sometimes be greater than that of the court officials of their locality.

A second effect of the elitist nature of Confucianism was that the growth of the examination system left intact other kinds of elite, or other forms of priesthood. Confucianism was sometimes inimical towards Buddhism and Taoism (and later towards Christianity), and in the periods when it was strongest we find references to decrees intended to limit the numbers of Buddhist monks and other priests of various kinds. In the fourteenth century there were examinations to distinguish genuine Buddhist and Taoist priests from those who had merely entered temples and monasteries to escape the burden of taxation; and in the 1460s a decree explicitly forbade the building of new Buddhist temples.⁴ But on the whole such measures were unusual. In any case, Confucianism was by its very nature not capable of absorbing the mass of the populace into its fold. Its tendency was to make it difficult for an aspiring young man to become a full member of the elite, whereas the tendency of other religions was to proselytise as widely as possible. The Confucian moral values which lay at the heart of such measures as the edict of 1662 for the 'reform of customs' were essentially an attempt by the elite to impose its own standards on society at large, rather than an attempt to force everyone to subscribe to a formal Confucian creed. Consequently, outside the Confucian hierarchy other religions continued to flourish. They were essentially sectarian, often related to the beliefs of a particular leader or patriarch, and often highly eclectic in their patterns of belief. To call them 'Buddhist' or 'Taoist' is not necessarily to define their beliefs in any rigorous way; orthodoxy of belief was maintained only within the sect, and not always even there. Outside Confucianism, therefore, one finds a great diversity of religious activity and belief in Vietnamese history: a diversity within which it was possible for Christianity to find a place from the seventeenth century onwards.

Decrees against sectarian activity should be related to the fact that the non-Confucian sects were not only quite often secret esoteric organisations, but also liable to become involved in politics. In 1516 we find

4) See Tran Van Giap: 'Le Bouddhisme en Annam des Origines au XIIIe Siecle', *BEFEO*, xxxii (1932), pp. 264-66.

the rebel leader Tran Cao, who claimed to be a descendent of the Tran dynasty, organising his followers under the cover of a religious sect in Hai-Duong province. In the Tay-Son rebellion which began in Qui-Nhon province in 1771, we find that one of the three brothers belonged to some kind of religious sect. Religious sects can thus be added to failed scholars as a factor making for instability in Viet-Nam. It is not impossible that the two were sometimes related, and that some people who played an active part in non-Confucian sects had originally been educated as candidates for the examinations. This relationship between politics and sectarian activity, and between sectarian leadership and education for the bureaucracy, can be seen even in the twentieth century in a movement like that of the Caodaists of southern Vietnam in the 1920s.⁵

When we turn to Thai history and the nature of the Thai religious tradition we find a very different pattern of beliefs and institutions. Theravada Buddhism, in the form which developed in Ceylon and Burma during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, was already an important feature of the life of Sukhothai and Si Sachanalai, as it was reflected in the famous inscription of Ram Khamheng of 1292. During the fourteenth century it became even more important, both at Sukhothai and in the newly emerging kingdom of Ayuthya. Amongst the most important pieces of historical evidence relating to that period are inscriptions recording the foundation of Buddhist temples and the honouring of important *theras* by the kings of Sukhothai. Although Hindu elements also figure in the inscriptions and in some of the ceremonials of that and succeeding periods, it is clear that Theravada Buddhism was already the principal religion of the Thai at that early period. By the nineteenth century, it had become even more predominant.

Theravada Buddhism, like Confucianism, has its elite. But it is a spiritual elite, not an elite of scholar-administrators, and it is deemed to be selected by the impersonal process of the operation of *kamma*, not by anything so human and imperfect as a system of examinations. It is impossible within this tradition for a man to succeed in the spiritual discipline of the *sangha* unless his position is based on merit accumulated

5) Cf. R.B. Smith: 'Introduction to Caodaism', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, xxxiii (1970).

over many previous existences. Whilst it is normal for boys and young men to be educated at the wat, and to be admitted to the *sangha* for a brief period at the end of youth, those who become monks for a longer period do so for spiritual reasons rather than out of political ambition. Indeed on more than one occasion the *sangha* has been a safe retreat for princes anxious to avoid political conflict. Thus the Thai monks were (and are) very different as guardians of orthodoxy from the Confucian scholars of Viet-Nam. They have never been responsible for government and administration, outside the affairs of their own order. But they have played an important part in spreading their religion amongst the community at large. Theravada Buddhism, unlike Confucianism, was capable of becoming a 'popular' religion of the kind that would hold society together on all levels, from the royal court down to the ordinary village. By allowing for gradations of spiritual attainment, based on the principles of *kamma* and merit, it enabled every Thai to see himself as a Buddhist: It was possible for 'Thai' and 'Buddhist' to become synonymous terms, in a way that one could never regard being Vietnamese as being Confucian. Within this context it was possible for the king and his officials, though not a spiritual elite like the Vietnamese scholars, to justify their superior status by reference to their good *kamma* accumulated over many previous existences.

The universality of Buddhism for the Thai explains why there was little scope in Thailand for the development of non-Buddhist or unorthodox religious sects, of the kind that flourished in Viet-Nam. There was, too, little scope for intrusion by Christian missionaries: despite the willingness of the kings of Ayuthya and Bangkok to tolerate European missionaries, they had little success in converting the Thai to Christianity. This is a point of significant contrast between Thailand and Viet-Nam. With occasional exceptions, such as the revolt of the phu-mi-bun Khuang at the end of the seventeenth century, Thai history has not been disturbed by revolts arising from the ambitions of unorthodox sects or from the use of religious associations as a cover for political conspiracy.

The importance of orthodoxy can be seen in the history of the *sangha* itself. Whilst it lacks the Christian notions of spiritual law and obedience to God, that tradition places great emphasis on orthodoxy of

ritual in such matters as ordination, the correct wearing of robes, and the performance of the ten precepts. In this respect, Thai Buddhism differs greatly from the sectarian forms of Mahayana Buddhism in Viet-Nam. Theravada Buddhism offers no opportunity for eclecticism based on the inspired teachings of a new patriarch seeking to establish his own sect. On the contrary, the tendency in the Thai tradition is for the *sangha* to seek to purify its rules and rituals by eliminating any developments which on careful examination do not seem to have the sanction of the Buddha's own teaching. Thai Buddhism, although its monkhood was for long divided into the *Arannavasi* and the *Gamavasi* schools which had emerged by the fourteenth century, has known nothing of the kind of sectarianism characteristic of Buddhism and the other non-Confucian religions of Viet-Nam. It has not even experienced the kind of disputes over orthodoxy which sometimes characterised the development of Buddhism in Burma.⁶

This desire for a single orthodoxy throughout the religion, moreover, explains to some extent the relationship between Buddhism in Thailand and in Ceylon. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries parties of monks went from South East Asia to Ceylon on a number of occasions, and returned with a more orthodox form of ordination or more reliable versions of the scriptures. But they did not do so because Ceylon was in any sense the fountain-head of spiritual authority: it was merely the place where at that time the religion was held to exist in its purest form. In the mid-eighteenth century, it was the Sinhalese monks who came to Ayuthya to obtain orthodox texts.⁷ Thus the relationship of Thailand to Ceylon was quite different from that of the countries of Europe to the medieval papacy, which claimed a spiritual authority that transcended the temporal authority of kings.

The relevance of Buddhism to government in Thailand was not that it laid down precise rules which kings and lay officials must obey, but that it provided an overall framework of ideals within which everything must be done. Where the Vietnamese scholars would produce a

6) Cf. N.R. Ray: *Introduction to Theravada Buddhism in Burma* (Calcutta, 1946).

7) S. Paranavitana: 'Religious Intercourse between Ceylon and Siam in the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries', *Journal of Ceylon Branch, Royal Asiatic Society*, xxxii.

detailed code of behaviour and would work out a pattern of government, Thai Buddhism manifested itself in the *Dhammathat* which was essentially a set of general principles. And where the Confucian scholars were active in administration, as well as in formulating royal decrees, the Theravada monks left matters of that kind to lay officials appointed by the king. There was no question of those lay officials having to pass examinations, either in Buddhism or in any other kind of philosophical tradition. It was merely demanded of them that they live as good Buddhists. The king himself was expected to fulfil Buddhist ideals as well, by his patronage of monks, and sometimes by himself becoming learned in the *dhamma* and by occasionally withdrawing to the *sangha*. Among Thai kings who achieved great reputations as Buddhists may be mentioned Lu Tai Dhammajara of Sukhothai (1347?-c. 1370) and Boromakot of Ayuthya (1733-58).

There was however one feature of Thai political life which does not quite fit into the picture so far suggested: that is, the influence of Hindu beliefs and rituals, which were very important at certain periods, notably in the seventeenth century. They can be traced to Khmer influence from Angkor (coming especially by way of Lopburi), and they manifested themselves in certain royal rituals and in the presence at Ayuthya of a small number of brahmins. The significance of Hinduism in these respects should not be underestimated, but on the other hand its strength or weakness at any period would seem to have been essentially a matter of royal preference. There is nothing to suggest that the Thai court—and still less the country at large—was ever disturbed by conflicts between Buddhism and Hinduism.

To sum up the religious aspect of the contrast between Thailand and Viet-Nam, we might say that it involved three principal differences. First, Vietnamese Confucianism was the religion and philosophy of an educated elite, and could not be anything else, whereas Theravada Buddhism was to a far greater extent a 'popular' religion. Second, Confucianism was the orthodoxy of an elite who had administrative functions as well as a religious role, whereas the Thai *sangha* stood completely outside government and court politics. Finally, whereas Theravada Buddhism embraced virtually the whole population, leaving

little scope or need for other religions, Viet-Nam always had room for a number of non-Confucian sectarian religions and consequently presents a picture of great religious diversity. Although the various sects were on the whole tolerant towards one another, and certainly did not involve themselves in religious wars of a European kind, none of them was able to embrace more than a minority of the Vietnamese population.

These differences between Confucianism and Buddhism represent an important dimension in any explanation of the contrast between the two countries. They do not however amount to a complete explanation in themselves. Equally significant are the differences to be found when one looks at some of the fundamental institutions of the two societies at the 'grass-roots' level, that of the family and the village.

III

It is impossible to understand the Vietnamese tradition without reference to the central role played in it by the cult of ancestral spirits, in 'popular' and in 'court' religion alike. Confucianism, with its emphasis on filial piety, gave support to that cult; but it was not ultimately dependent on Confucian orthodoxy, and certainly was unaffected by the relative strength or weakness of the scholar elite at different periods. At the lower levels of society, in fact, one finds a significant Buddhist element in the ancestor cult and in funeral rites.⁸

The cult of ancestors in many ways corresponds more closely than Confucianism to the role of popular Buddhism in the Thai tradition. But whereas we find that Buddhism tends to draw the Thai together into a national community, dominated by a single monarchy and a single *sangha*⁹, the effect of the ancestor cult in Viet-Nam is quite the opposite. A man can choose to be Buddhist, and can accept a place in a Buddhist community of almost any size; he cannot choose his own ancestors or join anyone else's family at will. Consequently the kinship group or clan, which is the only possible religious community in the cult of ancestors, is bound to be exclusive and inward-looking. For the Vietnamese the clan is perhaps the most fundamental element of the social framework; anyone who belongs to his own kin-group is somehow on a different level from the rest of the community at large. This is undoubtedly a factor tending towards the fragmentation of Vietnamese society. There is of course no necessary conflict between loyalty to the clan and other loyalties or aspirations, and Confucian texts emphasise the need for harmony between all levels of piety. But in practice conflicts of loyalty were bound to arise in the context of political rivalry, and the clan usually counted for more than loyalty to the king. The importance of the clan is reflected also in the tendency for religious sects and secret associations to imitate kinship structures in their own hierarchies and patterns of mutual obligation. A Vietnamese Buddhist patriarch filled

8) This is indicated by G. Dumoutier: *Le Rituel Funeraire des Annamites* (Hanoi, 1904).

9) This generalisation is not seriously affected by the growth of a second order within the monkhood, the Dhammayutikanikaya, during the nineteenth century.

a role not entirely different from an ancestor in a clan, and a secret society was a sworn brotherhood in which the leader and followers had mutual obligations comparable to those between father and son.

A further aspect of the ancestral cult is significant in the present argument. It included the practice of inhumation (as against cremation), and attached great importance to the tomb as a family shrine. Whilst an ancestral tablet was in some circumstances moveable from one place to another, the tomb could not be moved once established on a satisfactory site. Consequently every Vietnamese had (and has) an attachment to the home village and province where the tombs of his ancestors lay. This is perhaps the most important factor in what is usually referred to as 'regionalism' in Viet-Nam.

It would be wrong to suppose that a sense of ancestry does not figure at all in the Thai tradition. In the Sukhothai period at least there are references to royal ancestors, including a remarkable inscription of 1393 in which the ancestors of Sukhothai and Nan are named and called upon to witness a treaty between the two states.¹⁰ But the cult of ancestors is not a regular part of Thai religious belief and practice, and the kin-group is not so important a social institution in Thailand. The practice of cremation, moreover, means that neither tomb nor attachment to an ancestral locality play a part in the pattern of Thai society. Only in relation to major centres which were once distant dependencies of Ayuthya or Bangkok—such as Chiang Mai or Nakorn Si Thammarat—does regional attachment count for a great deal amongst the Thai. Here too, the tendency is towards the evolution of a national community in which men's attentions are focussed upon national institutions.

In relation to the village too, the Vietnamese tendency is towards local separateness rather than towards national identity. One of the most important non-Chinese (and therefore 'South East Asian') features of traditional society in Viet-Nam is the cult of the local protective spirit, enshrined in the village temple or *dinh*. The belief that every locality has its own spirits and that each community has a special

10) A.B. Griswold and Prasert na Nagara: 'The Pact between Sukhodaya and Nan: Epigraphical and Historical Studies, no. 3', *JSS*, lvii, pt. 1 (January, 1969), pp. 80 ff.

association with a certain spirit is common to both Thailand and Viet-Nam. Ram Kanheng's inscription refers to the great spirit Phra Khaphung, dwelling in the hill to the south and protecting the city if properly revered.¹¹ All the major Thai cities have, or had, *lak muang* shrines in honour of the local spirit of the town, and many villages have their *chao ban* and other spirit shrines. But in Viet-Nam this belief has become institutionalised and occupies a dominant place in the village structure.

The problem of the origins and significance of the *dinh* has exercised the minds of a number of historians and anthropologists, without anyone so far reaching a definitive conclusion about it.¹² The character and identity of the spirit who was (and is) honoured there might vary a great deal from one village to another. He was often a local hero, sometimes an ancestor and founder of the village; but the fact that the village community is known as the *xa* (Chinese *she*) suggests that he might also have originally embraced a local spirit of the soil. What is quite clear is that the cult of the village spirit lies completely outside the framework of either Confucian orthodoxy or the non-Confucian sects, as well as outside the cult of ancestors. It tends to bind the villagers together into a community that is religious as well as functional, and to separate them from their neighbours. In this respect, the *dinh*, rather than any local Buddhist or Taoist temple, serves as the same kind of focus for local community life as the Buddhist *wat* in Thailand. But whereas Thai Buddhism is united by a single spiritual focus, each Vietnamese village has its own cult. The insistence of Vietnamese kings that village spirits must be formally appointed, by royal edict, reflected a desire to bring all villages within a national framework. It has something in common with the policy of the Mon king Dhammaceti, in fifteenth century Pegu, who used the cult of the *dewatau sotapan* as a means of drawing together the provinces and localities of his kingdom.¹³ But in

11) G. Coedes: *Recueil des Inscriptions du Siam: i, Inscriptions de Sukhodaya* (Bangkok, 1924).

12) E.g. Nguyen Van Khoan: *Essai sur le Dinh et le Culte du Genie, Tutelaire des Villages au Tonkin*, BEFEO, xxx (1930); Le Van Hao: 'Introduction a l'Ethnologie du Dinh', *Bulletin de la Soc. des Etudes Indochinoises*, n.s., xxxvii (1962).

13) H.L. Shorto: 'The *dewatau sotapan*, a Mon Prototype of the 37 Nats', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, xxx (1967).

the end the Vietnamese *xa* retained a great deal of independence from the king and his officials: one more feature making for the strength of local loyalties as against loyalty to king and country.

The religious aspect of the Vietnamese village can be related to its position within the system of government. Each village had its own council, its own taxation register and its own communal land. These features all derived ultimately from the fact that it was the village, rather than the individual or a personal patron, who was responsible for the fulfilment of the ordinary people's obligations to the state. The obligations were partly personal, in that each family had to provide an appropriate number of able-bodied men for royal service when required, and partly in the form of taxation of land. Before the eighteenth century, the only land which contributed produce or taxes to the king was the *cong-dien*, or communal riceland. This was supposed to exist in each village, and was held in common by the community as a whole. Successive kings laid down regulations about its inalienability and about its regular repartition amongst the inhabitants of the *xa*, although in practice probably each locality had its own customs. The need for this material property of the village to be managed by a council of notables made the Vietnamese *xa* a far more elaborately formal community than was the Thai *ban*.

In the traditional Thai system of government, responsibility for the performance of services lay with the *nai*, whose role was that of a patron of men rather than a territorial lord. The village community was clearly very important indeed, although the relationship between the hierarchy of patrons (*nai*) and the *phu-yai-ban* has not yet been fully explained. But there was no Thai equivalent to either the *dinh* or the *cong-dien*, and the Thai village has probably never had quite the same sense of corporate independence as one finds in Viet-Nam.

IV

In the light of these various differences between the social institutions and cultures of Thailand and Viet-Nam in the centuries before about 1850, it is possible to make some attempt to answer the question about political stability and instability with which we began. Actual political events in both countries must be examined in terms of the nature of court conflict and of the relationship between the court and bureaucracy and the country at large. Both countries experienced conflicts within ruling circles, in almost every generation; but in Viet-Nam these conflicts showed a regular tendency to become territorialised, whereas in Thailand they were usually kept within the confines of the capital.

Two situations from the history of Viet-Nam will serve to illustrate the ways in which this territorialisation of conflict could take place. Perhaps the first occasion on which we can observe the development of a court conflict in that direction occurred in 1369.¹⁴ During the Tran period, down to 1357, the kings had made a habit of abdicating in the prime of life in order to ensure that by the time they died their sons would be securely established on the throne; the abdicated king was known as the *thoung-hoang* and in that capacity was usually able to continue to direct the affairs of the realm. But in 1357 the *thoung-hoang* died whilst his son, the king, was still not yet powerful enough to abdicate in his turn. In 1369, still having failed to abdicate, that king (Tran Du-Tong) died; moreover, he left no son of his own, and a succession conflict was almost inevitable. Shortly before his death he nominated as his successor the illegitimate son of a Tran prince, known as Nhat-Le; he was illegitimate because his mother, Duong Khuong, was a court actress. This nomination meant that two other princes were passed over: Trac and Phu, who were the sons of the former king Tran Minh-Tong by his marriage to a woman of the Le clan of Thanh-Hoa province. Nhat-Le, on taking the throne, gave these two princes high positions, but inevitably they plotted against him. One of them was killed as a result of a plot in 1370. Thereupon prince Phu and his sister withdrew to Thanh-Hoa province, raised an army, and marched on the capital. Nhat-Le was deposed, and Phu became king as Tran Nghe-Tong.

14) The account of the events which follow is based on *Dai-Viet Su Ky Toan Thu*, vol ii (Hanoi, 1967).

The most interesting feature of this conflict is that it involved rivalry between the sons of two mothers who came from outside the imperial clan. The Tran had earlier managed to keep the succession within their own clan, by allowing only Tran princesses to take positions as consorts of kings and high-ranking princes. But now the pattern of court conflict included the relatives and factions of outsider-clans: the Le of Thanh-Hoa and the followers of Duong Khuong. One of these clans had territorial links—understandable in view of what has been said above—and used them in order to force its will upon the capital. But although Tran Phu gained the throne, he had to allow some of the former Tran power to pass to the Le clan. His mother's nephew, Le Quy Ly, became head of the *khu-mat-vien* in 1371: the first step in a slow rise to power which culminated in 1400 in his seizure of the throne. His emergence was complicated, perhaps facilitated, by the sequel to the events of 1369-71. The mother of Nhat-Le, the actress Duong Khuong, fled to the court of the Cham king Che Bong Nga under whom Champa was stronger than at any time in the previous century. The result was that Cham forces attacked the Vietnamese kingdom, and sacked its capital on three occasions between 1371 and 1383. It was in the conflict with Champa that Le Quy Ly was able to prove his superiority over any possible rival for power, and by the 1390s he was master of the kingdom.

The events of the second half of the fourteenth century had the effect of giving Viet-Nam two political centres of gravity in place of one. Thanh-Hao was a region to be reckoned with in all subsequent periods, and indeed it was a native of that province (Le Loi) who drove out the Chinese army of occupation from Tongking in 1427 and founded the Le dynasty. Professor Whitmore has shown how the subsequent conflict between the clansmen of Thanh-Hoa and the scholars of Tongking dominated the politics of the Le dynasty until it was settled by Le Thanh-Tong—largely in favour of the scholars—after 1460. But a second period of political turmoil came in the first half of the sixteenth century, beginning with the death of Le Hien-Tong in 1504.¹⁵ The reign of his effective successor Le Uy-Muc (1505-9) was dominated by two clans from Tongking who had married into the royal family, and had forced

15) This account is based on Phan Huy Le: *Lich Su Che Do Phong Kien Viet-Nam*, ii (Hanoi, 1962).

out the Thanh-Hoa faction. In 1509-10 they, together with Uy-Muc, were overthrown by the prince Le Oanh after he had raised an army in Thanh-Hoa. The parallel with events in 1370 is striking. Here too, the effect was to permit the rise to power of two Thanh-Hoa clans outside the Le family: those of the Nguyen and the Trinh. But on this occasion the Thanh-Hoa men were not able to prevent further opposition in Tongking. A rebellion in Tongking led by the priest-pretender Tran Cao developed into a serious threat to the capital in 1516. The Trinh and the Nguyen, after successive (and abortive) attempts to place their own Le nominees on the throne, had to unite in the face of the rebellion. Tran Cao briefly seized Hanoi and made himself king, but was soon driven out by his opponents. The situation during the next few years was one of growing chaos, in which no single faction was powerful enough to dominate the capital or the country. Eventually, as in the 1370s, one strong man emerged: the Tongkingese general Mac Dang Dung, and in 1527 he followed the example of Le Quy Ly by seizing the throne for himself. But where Le Quy Ly failed to reckon with the Chinese, Mac Dang Dung found himself insufficiently powerful to deal with the Thanh-Hoa clans. During the 1530s the latter were able to 'restore' the Le dynasty in Thanh-Hoa province; and in 1541 the Chinese—to whom they had appealed—virtually permitted the division of the kingdom into two parts. That division continued until the complete 'restoration' of the Le in 1592, only to be followed almost immediately by the division of North and Centre between the Trinh and the Nguyen *chua*.

It is unfortunate that we lack the kind of historical evidence that would make it possible to explore the social roots of these various conflicts. We cannot reconstruct the actual process by which prince Phu and his followers in 1370, or prince Le Oanh and the Trinh-Nguyen in 1509, were able to raise armies to march on Hanoi. But it is clear that the king in his capital was helpless to prevent such events from happening, and in general terms it is reasonable to suggest that part of the explanation lies in the factors making for local independence which were discussed earlier on. What is very noticeable is that between the Tran period and the seventeenth century there occurred a remarkable decline in the effective power and political importance of the monarchy in Vietnam. By keeping royal marriages within the clan, and by adopting the

thuong-hoang policy of regular abdication, the Tran had been able to ensure that power rested with themselves. They encouraged some development of Confucianism, but were more deeply imbued with Buddhism, and indeed one *thuong-hoang* retired to a monastery and became a patriarch of the sect known as the Truc-Lam ('Bamboo Forest'). Above all, they kept control over the country, although probably more loosely than in the kind of control achieved for a while under Le Thanh-tong. With the decline of the Tran, beginning in 1369, monarchical supremacy also began to decline. From the fifteenth century onwards, kings of the stature of a Le Thanh-Tong or a Minh-Mang were rare: that is, strong kings who had inherited rather than merely seized the throne. Power lay more often than not with military leaders and their clans, or sometimes with scholar-officials. In either case, the power of those who dominated the court rested on something other than the mystique of monarchy. From 1592 until 1789, the Le monarchy had hardly any political role at all: like the emperor of Japan before 1868, he did no more than perform the ritual acts upon which the cosmological stability of the kingdom was deemed to depend.

Events in Viet-Nam during the first half of the sixteenth century might significantly be compared with those in Thailand between 1546 and 1569. There too a succession conflict occurred in which the court was divided, following the death of king Phrachai in 1546. His son, Keo Fa, was a child at his accession, and effective power lay with his widow Si Suda Chan. A crisis developed in 1548 when her new husband, known as Worawongse, deposed Keo Fa and seized the throne for himself. This kind of usurpation of the throne by a commoner was to occur again in the history of Ayuthya, and was quickly successful in 1630 and 1688. But on this occasion it did not succeed. The new king was himself deposed by a court revolt in 1549, and replaced by prince Thienraja (king Mahachakrapat), the younger brother of Phrachai. But that was not all. A key role in the restoration of 1549 was played by a young prince of the house of Sukhothai (Khun Phiren), who married the daughter of Mahachakrapat. The eventual effect of this marriage was to unite the ruling houses of Sukhothai and Ayuthya, and to place a Sukhothai

prince on the throne of Ayuthya. But this did not happen without the intervention of an external force. In the conflict which developed between Pegu and Sukhothai during the 1560s, Khun Phiren took the side of Bayinnaung whilst the sons of Mahachakraphat were strongly opposed to Pegu. It was the Burmese forces which eventually made Khun Phiren king at Ayuthya in 1569, where he revived the Sukhothai title of Mahadhammaraja. However, the Burmese domination of the country was less important in the long term than this unification of two kingdoms which had previously been less closely integrated, and had once been completely separate entities. Thus where the events of 1505-41 in Viet-Nam led to a political division of the country, those of 1546-69 in Thailand resulted in a greater degree of unity, which was used to recover full independence from Pegu by 1592.

The unification of Ayuthya and Sukhothai in the sixteenth century was the culmination of events that had begun in the 1370s, about the same time as the first major intervention of Thanh-Hoa clans in the politics of Dai-Viet. If one looks back to that period of Thai history, one can see a pattern of political relationships which can be regarded as a prototype for Thai evolution in much the same way as the conflict of 1369-70 was a prototype for subsequent developments in Viet-Nam. Fourteenth century Thailand—that is, the area which is now Central and northern Thailand—was a land of small kingdoms in perpetual conflict and alliance with one another, within an institutional framework which owed something at least to the influence of the Khmer. Each had the ambition to dominate its neighbours, but not necessarily to absorb them into its own centralised administrative system. The pattern that emerged was one in which a small number of states established positions of supremacy and made their neighbours into dependencies, rather than into directly administered provinces. Thus the tendency was for previously independent entities to be gradually coalesced into larger systems, but without too great an insistence upon centralised control. The irony is that whereas in Viet-Nam unity tended to preceed fragmentation as a result of territorialised conflict, in Thailand it was the other way round: a fragmented political pattern gradually became the basis for stable unity and growing centralisation. In this respect, one might well regard the so-called 'modernisation' of the Thai state undertaken

since about 1890 as no more than the logical next stage in an evolution which stretches back to the fourteenth century and perhaps farther.

At all periods, it is noticeable that Thai cities have tended to dominate the countryside; allowing for changes in scale over the centuries, this is just as true of Sukhothai and early Ayuthya as of later Ayuthya and Bangkok. When the Burmese attacked Ayuthya in 1563-4, in 1569, and in the 1760s, they were able to concentrate on taking the cities, knowing that the country would then be theirs. Conversely, it was only necessary for Phya Taksin to establish an effective new capital at Dhonburi, and the country was soon willing to accept his power and control. In Viet-Nam, almost the exact opposite has been the case. To hold a city alone in Vietnamese history has not given anyone control of the country. Time and again, in 1285, in the early fifteenth century, and in 1788, Hanoi fell to the Chinese: but they were quite unable to follow up that success by establishing permanent and effective control over the whole country. In the war of 1946-54, the French learned that the same is true in the twentieth century. Viet-Nam is a country where what matters politically is the countryside. Men have tended always to be attached to the clans and to their villages. Only the Confucian scholar-elite ever looked primarily to the court and to the towns, and as we have seen they were the dominant element in Vietnamese history only during certain limited periods. Their power, and the influence of their orthodoxy, was always bounded by a society in which the ancestors and the land mattered more than theories of harmony and virtue.

In the twentieth century, quite apart from the effects of the 'impact of the West' on the countries of South East Asia, there are fundamental changes taking place in both Thai and Vietnamese society. Much that is traditional has been swept away, and more will go yet. New styles of government, new patterns of economic life, are gaining ground. Even so, it may well be the case that in the longer perspective of history, the social and political contrasts which have been briefly touched upon in this paper will turn out to have a continuing importance and to make for new contrasts in the future.

