

In Jamieson, Neil. 1993. Understanding Vietnam.
University of California Press, 1-41.

1 How the Vietnamese See the World

It is not actions but opinions about actions that disturb
men.

Epictetus

Throughout the twentieth century the Vietnamese have been in upheaval, wracked by conflicting images of the past, the present, and the future. For more than six decades now, the emphasis has been on change, even revolution. During the 1930s many debates in Vietnam were expressed in terms of "the old" versus "the new." Modes of social interaction, claims to status, dress styles, marriage customs, literature, religious practices, medical treatment, even haircuts, were polarized around this dichotomy. A Western-educated, urban middle class had developed, producing a vital new publishing industry to voice its aspirations and to serve as an arena where conflicting visions of the future would compete for influence. Many young writers argued that a sentimental attachment to traditional culture was a major obstacle to progress.

The Communists, a tiny minority in the 1930s, had, of course, a blueprint that purported to provide them with insight into the future. But most young intellectuals in Vietnam before World War II simply knew they were dissatisfied with the way things were and that Vietnam had to discover, or create, a viable modern identity. As Nhat Linh, the editor of a popular Vietnamese-language newspaper, argued in 1932: "When the old civilization is brought out and put into practice before our very eyes, we are dissatisfied with the results. We can only continue to hope in Western civilization. Where that civilization will lead us to we not know, but our destiny is to travel into the unknown, to keep changing and to progress" (*Mores* [Phong Hoa], 20 October). But change to what? To become what kind of people? What kind of society? This is what the subsequent decades of fighting were fundamentally about. Competing

ideologies concerned with the issue of modernization abounded. People were divided in their opinions, even within families. To complicate things further, there was considerable regional variation in Vietnam, dating back to earlier times.

Both regional variation and debates between advocates of competing ideologies in Vietnam are best understood, I believe, as specific outgrowths of, or reactions to, the dominant traditional culture. All major changes and variations are responses to particular circumstances (environmental, political, social) with which the old culture was not designed to cope. Despite all the variability and all the change, the culture of nineteenth-century Vietnam is within—and often constitutes an important part of—the various twentieth-century innovations, just as in its fullest development it contained all of its predecessors. Memories of the past remain an important part of all contemporary Vietnamese sociocultural systems—from the politburo in Hanoi to Little Saigon in Los Angeles to Saigon-sur-Seine in Paris.

"Traditional Vietnam" in the following pages refers to this generalized picture of what has existed in the minds of more recent generations. It is a broad portrait gleaned mainly from widely known literature, commonly used school textbooks, popularized historical and biographical writings, thousands of conversations with Vietnamese of diverse backgrounds, reminiscences exchanged over teacups or beer, in a village home or in the back of a jeep, in a temple, a church, or a Saigon nightspot, in offices and classrooms and refugee camps.

We must learn what people had in mind when they spoke of "the old" before we can understand their debates over "the new" that would replace it. All Vietnamese people are today still, as they were fifty years ago, interacting with that past in the process of shaping their future. And so, in a sense, are we.

Our experience in Vietnam is now part of us; and we are part of Vietnam. We cannot forget Vietnam, but neither can we fit what we "know" about it into our sense of self and country. A grinding tension persists, generated by the discrepancy between our memories and our views of who we are and our proper place in the world. We have tried to resolve this tension by revising our views of ourselves, our society, and the larger world, or by suppressing these memories or denying their importance. But the dissonance remains, and our functioning as individuals and as a people is still impaired.

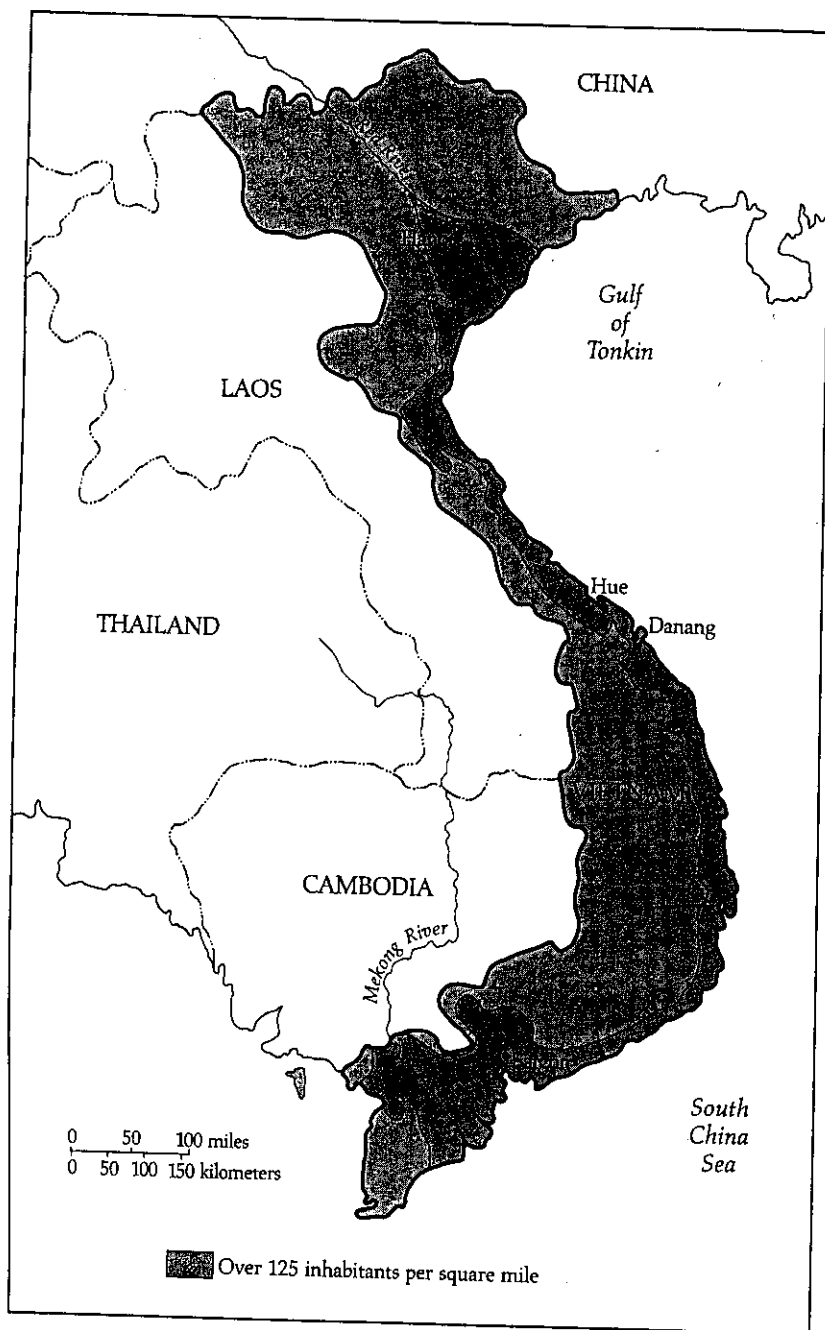
By putting our old and partial perceptions into a new and broader context, we may transform them. By working to understand the competing Vietnamese paradigms, we may clarify the muddled debates about our involvement in Vietnam, and perhaps in the process transform the lingering pain and doubt into more positive insights. In trying to understand the Vietnamese, we may learn something important about ourselves.

The Land of Vietnam: Ecology as History

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam is the twelfth most populous nation in the world. Although it has one of the world's largest and most battle-hardened armies, it is also one of the poorest nations in the world. The territory of Vietnam is slightly smaller than the state of California, but its population, about seventy million, is more than a quarter as large as that of the United States. Vietnam is elongated along a north-south axis that extends from China to the Gulf of Siam. It is evident that Vietnam is a crowded country, and the population is stretched along a fairly narrow band of land. But the topography of Vietnam exaggerates this phenomenon. Most of the people live in a relatively small portion of the land area (see map on p. 4).

Only about a quarter of Vietnamese territory is good farmland (i.e., suitable for wet rice cultivation), and that is where most of the ethnic Vietnamese, who make up roughly 85 percent of the population, live. Wet ricefields, people, and political power have always been associated and concentrated in relatively small core areas. Even today, most of the paddy fields, most of the people, most of the wealth, most of the industry, and most of the economic, political, and cultural activity are in one of two core areas. One core area consists of the Red River delta and the City of Hanoi in the north; the other consists of the Mekong River delta and Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon) in the south. These two concentrations of people are joined by a long thin band of coastal plains along the South China Sea. The bulk of the central portion of Vietnam is mountainous and has been traditionally inhabited by ethnic minorities, tribal peoples who have been seen by almost all Vietnamese as "backward."

Ecological and historical factors have combined to produce very significant regional differences between the two core areas that dominate the country.¹ The Red River is subject to rapid and extreme variation in water level, and both flood and drought have



Significant Vietnamese settlement areas, early twentieth century

always occurred with ominous regularity. Epidemics and pest infestation have also been common. The Red River delta has simultaneously been one of the most densely populated and least safe regions in the world. In an uncertain and dangerous environment, hunger and social unrest have been constant threats. As a result, the local culture has emphasized the subordination of the individual to collective discipline of family and village. Both the family and the village have been relatively closed, corporate entities, self-reliant, and responsible for the action of their individual members.

In the south, the flow of the Mekong River is regulated by its link to the Tonle Sap, a large inland lake in Cambodia, which absorbs any excess flow of water and supplements a reduction in flow from its large reserve storage. The Mekong environment is more predictable and more benign than that of the Red River. These ecological differences between the Red River and the Mekong delta have been of immense significance in generating differences in cultural emphases and social organization between the two core regions of Vietnam. But historical factors have exacerbated these differences. The Mekong delta has been the recent frontier area. Not until the seventeenth century did Vietnamese seriously begin to settle the southern delta region, and the lower Mekong delta was not heavily settled until the nineteenth century.

Life has been easier and more secure in the southern third of Vietnam, and the harsh discipline found in the north has always been considerably moderated there. Southern villages have always been more open, less corporate, more tolerant of individual initiative and cultural heterodoxy. Then, under the French, who began colonizing Vietnam in 1859, the southern third of Vietnam, known as Cochinchina, was the first part to be colonized, and it was directly administered by the French authorities as a colony. The south thus experienced relatively greater Western influence and more political freedom than did the rest of the country, which was administered as "protectorates" (Annam in central Vietnam and Tonkin in the north). The protectorates came under French rule later and were administered indirectly, through local Vietnamese administrators.

There are, then, two common ways of talking about Vietnamese geography. We think of the north and the south, divided by the seventeenth parallel. This makes sense in recent political terms. It also makes sense historically, because Vietnam was divided not too differently for most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

But Vietnamese have more commonly spoken of their country in terms of three sections: north, central, and south. And this makes some sense culturally and linguistically, although all Vietnamese share a core culture, have a common historical heritage, and speak mutually understandable dialects of the same language.

The point to be emphasized here is that "traditional" Vietnam refers primarily to the Red River delta and the central coastal plains regions, mainly as they existed in the nineteenth century. The discussion does not always apply directly to the villages of the Mekong delta. In fact, when the French arrived only a small percentage of the Vietnamese population lived in the Mekong delta. The French opened much of the Mekong delta for settlement with massive engineering projects that drained swampland to make it arable. The later chapters of the book will examine southern Vietnam as a variant development of Vietnamese culture.

The People of Vietnam

The story of the Vietnamese—of all Vietnamese—began in the north.² Many millennia ago Austronesians, remote relatives of the peoples of the islands of Southeast Asia and the Pacific, were an important part of the population of this area. Then, some four or five thousand years ago, people, languages, and cultures flowed out of what is now southern China into Southeast Asia, where they interacted with indigenous peoples and cultures. The Vietnamese people, southern and northern, their culture and their language, are a rich mixture of these and other influences. The Vietnamese language is basically Mon-Khmer, related to Cambodian. But Tai influence (which produced the Thai and Laotian languages of today) is reflected in the tonal quality of Vietnamese and in many vocabulary items.³

Early Vietnamese shared many traits with their Southeast Asian neighbors. Chinese influence has been extremely important, but more recent. When genes and languages and cultures began interacting and intermixing and developing intensively in what is now northern Indochina, some five thousand years ago, much of what is now the Red River delta was still under water; the elevated sea level that had covered it for millennia had not yet receded completely.⁴ And as the sea withdrew much of the newly exposed plain was swampy. It was in the midlands, on the foothills and surrounding valleys of the Red River delta, about three or four

thousand years ago, that a distinctive culture began to emerge that can be traced to the people who now call themselves Vietnamese. Vietnamese archeologists have come a long way in tracing the descent of these people down onto the emerging plain and into historical time.

Sometime in about the seventh century B.C. in and around the area where the Red River descends from the mountains and enters the plain, the kingdom of Van Lang came into being, ruled by the Hung kings.⁵ This tiny kingdom that existed over 2,500 years ago is an important part of contemporary Vietnam's living past. The ancient site from which the Hung kings ruled, only recently discovered by Vietnamese archeologists (the French dismissed Van Lang as a fairy tale), is now a national park, like our Independence Hall or Valley Forge, but more than two thousand years older in significance.

According to ancient myth the Vietnamese are descended from dragons and fairies. When the Dragon Lord of the Lac fathered a hundred children by a mountain princess of fairy blood named Au Co, he returned to the sea with half their offspring while she settled in the midlands of the Red River with the other half. One of these children became the first king of the Vietnamese people, the first of the eighteen Hung kings featured in so many myths and legends and venerated in village shrines into the twentieth century.⁶ The last Hung king is said to have committed suicide in 257 B.C. after being defeated by a neighboring chieftain to the north; this led to the creation of the new kingdom of Au Lac. With the aid of a Golden Turtle spirit, the new king, An Duong, built a magnificent citadel at Co Loa, near present-day Hanoi.

Early Vietnamese rulers were often powerful mediators with the spirit world, high priests whose claim to office was based on a privileged relationship with a powerful spirit who could be persuaded to serve a supernatural protector of the realm. The Dragon Lord of the Lac served as protector of the kingdom under the Hung kings, as the Golden Turtle spirit guarded the realm of Au Lac. As these potent leaders and other major cultural heroes joined the spirit world after death, they too became powerful spirits whose aid and sympathy could be evoked by subsequent generations in time of need. The historical memory of the Hung kings and King An Duong was transmitted over centuries not only in myth and legend but through the physical presence of hundreds of village shrines

and altars. Before these visible emblems of ancient glory, rituals periodically bound the people to their shared past and to each other.

In 208 B.C. a new kingdom appeared in south coastal China, Nan Yueh in Chinese, Nam Viet in Vietnamese. Au Lac was soon conquered by Nam Viet, and the Red River delta and northern coastal plain of what is now Vietnam was incorporated into Nam Viet. Then the great Han dynasty unified China, and in 111 B.C. Nam Viet fell under its control. The plains of northern Vietnam became a colonial province of China, although indigenous cultural patterns remained essentially intact and local leadership was little disturbed.

In the first century A.D. this indigenous authority structure came into sharp conflict with more rigid demands for conformity as Chinese administrators from the north became more numerous and more assertive. One dauntless young woman sparked the leap from protest to revolt. Trung Trach was a member of the indigenous elite class through both birth and marriage. Her father and her husband were Lac Lords, hereditary district chiefs. With her sister, Trung Nhi, Trung Trach prayed at a shrine on Hung Mountain, where her ancestors once ruled in the name of the Dragon Lord, invoking their blessing upon rebellion. In A.D. 40 Trung Trach was proclaimed queen after her rebel army forced the Chinese officials to flee to Canton. As an expeditionary force recaptured the Red River delta for the Han dynasty in A.D. 43 the Trung sisters are said to have committed suicide. They became immortalized in song and story and today are still held up as exemplars of traditional Vietnamese values.

In the decades and centuries that followed, the population of the Red River delta and northern coastal plain was gradually Sinicized in many ways; ethnic Chinese in the region were also heavily influenced by local custom and regional perspectives. Genes and cultures mingled to produce a new Sino-Vietnamese elite. For seven hundred years this region would be Giao Chau, a province of China. But a distinctive local identity was retained.

Revolts broke out periodically, producing new culture heroes, more shrines, and more legends. During the ninth century rebellions grew more frequent and a renaissance in local cultural traditions emerged. With China plunged into weakness and disorder under the crumbling Tang dynasty, the Vietnamese gained independence in A.D. 939. During the early years of independence, no

monarch could integrate the land firmly. Leadership in Vietnam rested ambiguously on two separate concepts of political legitimacy: indigenous tradition and a heavily Sinicized system of politics and administration that had been assimilated during a thousand years of Chinese rule. Most early monarchs were soldiers whose leadership was based largely on personal prowess. In this milieu, Buddhism played a vital role in stabilizing Vietnamese society.

Not until the Ly dynasty (1009–1225) did the development of what we now think of as traditional Vietnam begin to take shape. Shortly after taking the throne, the first Ly king moved the capital to what is now Hanoi, which he named Rising Dragon (Thang Long). In 1048 an agrarian cult was established, with the construction of a temple to the gods of soil and grain, formalizing the role of the king as a national high priest of agriculture. The Ly kings bore a dragon tattoo, signifying spiritual succession from the illustrious Dragon Lord of the Lac and the Hung kings. In fact, the greatness of the Ly dynasty rested to no small degree on a foundation of unprecedented moral force that was built by calling forth these spirits of past culture heroes to bolster the efficacy and legitimacy of their rule;⁷ this same kind of moral force has been significant in the rise to power of many Vietnamese leaders up to the present day.

Buddhism flourished. Many Ly kings spent part of their lives in a monastery, and one was leader of a major sect. The ideological viewpoint of the Ly court, as revealed in the extant poetry of the time, was strongly Buddhist in tone and content, with a marked Zen influence emphasizing insight and awakening rather than scriptures or good works. Noninvolvement, detachment, and paradoxical mysticism were pervasive values.⁸

But a modest rejuvenation of Confucian studies was also encouraged after a century of relative neglect. In 1070 a Temple of Literature dedicated to Confucius was constructed in Rising Dragon (its remains can be viewed today in Hanoi). In 1075 national examinations were held for the first time under independent Vietnamese rule, and in 1076 a national university was created. Confucianism began to revive under the Ly.

The Ly dynasty was succeeded by another great dynasty, the Tran (1225–1400). Vietnam slowly continued to expand in population and territory. The army, the bureaucracy, and the examination system were further developed. But the early Tran kings spent

much of their energy in foreign affairs and national defense, fighting off threats from the north. In 1284 Vietnam seemed doomed to fall to Chinese forces, but under the inspired leadership of Tran Hung Dao, the invaders were driven from the land.

During the Tran dynasty the Confucian element in official ideology continued to develop while Buddhism remained important. Then, late in the fourteenth century, in the midst of economic crisis and peasant revolts, a powerful court councillor seized the throne. Under this unpopular new ruler, Vietnam once again fell under Chinese rule in 1407. For a time Ming dynasty administrators from China vigorously regulated village government, religious ceremonies, hair styles, modes of dress, the writing and distribution of literature, and virtually everything else of cultural, economic, or political significance. Both the Ming and the Vietnamese ruler they displaced encouraged the spread of Neo-Confucian doctrines.⁹

Under Le Loi, the Chinese invaders were expelled and the Le dynasty was established in 1428. Neo-Confucianism, based on Chu Hsi's reinterpretation of the classics in eleventh-century China, became a vital influence on Vietnamese thought. During the thirty-seven-year reign (1460–1497) of the great king Le Thanh Tong, Neo-Confucianism became a dominant element in Vietnamese ideology. But the Le dynasty then quickly fell into decline. For nearly three centuries internal conflict sapped the wealth and energy of the Vietnamese. Few heroes, little great literature, and only modest cultural innovations emerged until the second half of the eighteenth century, when cultural ferment was expressed in a lively body of literature in the Vietnamese language. One important element in this resurgence was the expansion and standardization of the writing system employed for transcribing Vietnamese (*nom*).¹⁰

The later decades of the eighteenth century were dominated by the Tay Son rebellion, which began as a peasant uprising against what were perceived to be unsatisfactory conditions. By 1786 rebel leaders controlled all of Vietnam. The Tay Son era is controversial and poorly understood. This revolutionary movement expressed deep-rooted discontent in rural Vietnamese society; but it also involved new commercial interests, overseas Chinese intrigues, religious heterodoxies, and a resurgence of indigenous tradition at the expense of borrowed elements in Vietnamese culture, especially Neo-Confucianism. *Nom*, the demotic Vietnamese script, replaced Chinese as the official writing system. The Trung sisters were revitalized as culture heroes of the first order.

But by 1802 the Nguyen dynasty held power, declaring the Tay Son reforms null and void. Perceiving recent Vietnamese history as characterized by decadence and disorganization, the Nguyen rulers strenuously sought to make Neo-Confucianism the foundation of the national culture. Under the Nguyen, traditional Vietnamese culture assumed its final form, the one that would persist into the twentieth century to interact with Western influences.¹¹

The Traditional Vietnamese View of the World

Over many centuries, Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism had become intertwined, simplified, and Vietnamized to constitute—along with vestiges of earlier animistic beliefs—a Vietnamese folk religion shared to some extent by all Vietnamese.¹² But over time, beginning in the late fifteenth century and becoming most extreme in the nineteenth century, Neo-Confucianism came to be a dominant influence.¹³ Neo-Confucianism focused on proper social relationships, but ideas about the proper form of social relationships were based on a wider set of ideas regarding the nature of reality.

The traditional Vietnamese worldview constituted an all-encompassing cosmological scheme based on *yin* and *yang*, conceived as two primordial forces from which everything else in the universe was created. This root paradigm, through which one of the oldest and most fundamental elements of Sinitic influence eventually became a basic part of the way Vietnamese viewed the world, ran right through the entire system, from the family to the state. It suffused the entire world with a coherent system of meaning. Everything was a model, an icon, of everything else.¹⁴ Based on the assumption of a unified and orderly universe, this model provided Vietnamese with a sense of insight into—and a means of dealing with—the intrinsic structure of the universe.

In all things, when a proper balance was maintained between *yin* and *yang*, harmony was maintained and beneficent outcomes were assured. This was equally true in the individual human body, in families, in villages, and in nations. For example, the treatment of illness consisted primarily of restoring the balance between *yin* and *yang*, both within a person and between the person and the external world. According to traditional folk thought, all foods were believed to have an "essential nature," to be hot, warm, cool, or cold. "Hot" and "warm" foods were *yang*, "cool" and "cold" foods were *yin*. Diet could thus disrupt or restore harmony between *yin* and *yang*.¹⁵

Exactly as the human body was perceived to be a microcosm of the natural world, so too was the family viewed as a microcosm of the social world. And just as the proper balance between *yin* and *yang* in the human body—and between the human being and his or her environment—produced good health in people, so would proper relationships between categories and groups of people produce social harmony, creating happy and prosperous families, villages, and nations. Both formal education and family socialization emphasized teaching children proper behavior within this framework, which formed the basis of a social system that served Vietnamese society well for hundreds of years.

The ancient paradigm of *yin* and *yang* can readily be interpreted as a metaphorical expression of cybernetic theory.¹⁶ Modern cybernetics, or systems theory, has provided us with considerable insight into how such a dynamic equilibrium system must work.¹⁷ Society is neither an organism nor a machine; it is—like organisms and machines—a system. It is composed of components that are related in such a way that the whole is greater than, and essentially different from, the sum of the parts. This is so because relations between the parts are maintained by mechanisms of communication and control that depend on the flow of information, on “feedback,” for effective operation.

Cybernetic theory informs social analysis in a variety of ways: by focusing attention on system properties such as entropy and redundancy and on the values that function as operating rules; by emphasizing the extent to which the meaning and function of any part of the system is determined by context; and so on. Above all else, it reminds us that *it is the context*—a set of relationships, rather than any single component in isolation—that *evolves*.¹⁸ The focus of this book is on the evolving context of ideas in twentieth-century Vietnam.

Vietnamese Society as a System of Yin and Yang

In traditional Vietnamese culture we can find, in every domain of society, two different sets of operating principles, or values. These two sets can be used as the basis for a model of society and culture. One set can be seen as *yang* in nature; the other, as *yin*. *Yang* is defined by a tendency toward male dominance, high redundancy, low entropy, complex and rigid hierarchy, competition, and strict orthodoxy focused on rules for behavior based on social roles. *Yin* is defined by a tendency toward greater egalitarianism and flexibil-

ity, more female participation, mechanisms to dampen competition and conflict, high entropy, low redundancy, and more emphasis on feeling, empathy, and spontaneity.

Much of traditional Vietnamese culture, social organization, and behavior expressed the balanced opposition between *yin* and *yang* as interlocking sets of ideas (including values, conceptual categories, operating rules, etc.). At a high level of abstraction, a great deal of persistence may be detected in the system over time. At the level of specific cultural content, much change has taken place. The dozens of anecdotes and literary and ethnographic examples embedded in this narrative will serve to make these abstractions meaningful. Suffice it to say here that *yin* and *yang* coexist, that *yang* is normally dominant, but that when the *yang* system becomes too extremely dominant the stage is set for a *yin* reaction in the social system, and social change takes place.

The relationship between actual social systems and systems of ideas is real and important, but it is essentially metaphorical. The observable world of behavior and artifacts and the imagined or culturally construed world of concepts and categories continue to reproduce and reshape each other, maintaining the essential integrity of their relationships, more or less imperfectly, throughout a process of change. As these two worlds coevolve over time, each is built into the other. Thus the particular form and content of either category or both may change considerably over time while the symbiotic relationship persists at the abstract level of functional complementarity through logical opposition.

There is, I believe, great heuristic value in looking at Vietnamese history, into the twentieth century, as a case of patterned oscillation around a point of balance between *yin* and *yang*. The sages of antiquity asserted this to be the nature of reality, a universal process, the Tao. The *yin* and *yang* components of traditional Vietnamese society—from the family through literature to religion to economic structures to political systems—contained within themselves logically opposed but functionally complementary components that had a characteristic structure to them. These may be thought of as being separate subsystems at work within any given part of the total social system. When one or the other became disproportionately strong, the imbalance generated stress and strain in the social system, and a reaction set in as discomfited individuals and institutions sought a more comfortable social milieu. Gregory Bateson has likened this process to the setting of a

thermostat.¹⁹ He suggested that the most significant points in history are "the moments when attitudes are changed. These are moments when people are hurt because of their former values." What is truly important, for individuals and entire peoples, he insisted, is a change in the "bias" or "setting" of the "thermostat" that regulates social behavior.²⁰

Because human attempts to maximize values entail choice under conditions of uncertainty and competition, they give rise to a certain amount of conflict and tension, not only within groups, but sometimes within individuals. In men and women, and in societies, there are thresholds of tolerance for tension which, when approached, lead to some sort of remedial action. The result may be cultural or social change, including revolution. Twentieth-century Vietnam represents an extreme case of social conflict over the setting of the social thermostat. It has been a time and a place when new attitudes have arisen and millions of people have been badly hurt because of their former values.

The true social analogy to Bateson's metaphor of the social thermostat is the entire ensemble of values held and acted upon by individuals who interact and communicate with one another as they include the results of their own action and that of others in the new information by which they modify their subsequent behaviors. Sometimes, as in twentieth-century Vietnam, this process leads people to seek to change the codes of behavior by which they and others are expected to generate future interaction, to change the social thermostat by achieving patterned change in the distribution of values of the entire society. It seems to me that this process is readily amenable to description and analysis in terms of the conceptual categories of *yin* and *yang*.

For convenience, *yin* and *yang* and their associated values will often be referred to as "systems" or "domains" throughout the book. The social organization of traditional Vietnam can be seen as being achieved and maintained through the interaction of these two conceptually distinct systems. Going beyond normal Vietnamese usage, I have extended the domains by applying the abstract principles in what the Vietnamese thought of as *yin* and *yang* to situations and events in ways they never dreamed of doing. In other words, in this book I use *yin* and *yang* as metaphors.

The following section describes the state of the Vietnamese sociocultural system as it existed when French colonial influences began to exert pressure on it, in the nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries—the point at which the part of the Vietnamese story told in this book begins.

Traditional Vietnamese Values and Institutions

Traditional Vietnamese culture was much more complex, and much more widely shared in all its richness, than many recent commentators would lead one to believe. In the brief survey that follows, I necessarily present an oversimplified, somewhat idealized, and highly selective portrait of traditional Vietnam, even allowing for the qualifications that it applies primarily to northern and central lowland villages in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, that it focuses on culture rather than behavior, and that it emphasizes the norm while skipping over much variability. The actual nature of traditional Vietnamese society is controversial. Again somewhat oversimplifying, let me say that two main schools of thought may be discerned.

To many observers, especially to many early French scholars who began studying Vietnam after acquiring a thorough grounding in Chinese studies, what I call the *yang* subsystem, especially that which was Neo-Confucian, "was" the traditional cultural system. Much of what I call the *yin* subsystem, although well known to them, was perceived to be (in the terms of cybernetic theory) "noise" in the system, "flaws" or "irregularities" that led to tension, confusion, and malfunction in "the system" as they understood it.²¹

Another view, more recent and currently more fashionable, essentially sees what I call the *yin* subsystem, especially Buddhism and the more egalitarian village institutions, as the "real" Vietnam, as somehow more authentically Vietnamese and representative of the "actual culture" of the majority of the people. From this perspective, what I call the *yang* subsystem and categorize as "dominant" is perceived as an elitist view, historically recent and culturally superficial. This model, it is argued, is something which the "ruling class" attempted, generally unsuccessfully, to impose upon "the people" as a tool of exploitation, which has been popularized by self-serving writings of that elite class and foreign scholars who have identified with the elite minority instead of with "the people."²²

My own view differs sharply from both these perspectives, as I understand them. I believe that the *yin* and the *yang* were complementary dimensions of a single cultural system that was essen-

tially shared by all Vietnamese. The Neo-Confucian *yang* and the Buddhist, Taoist, and animist *yin* elements coevolved to constitute a single system, best thought of as Vietnamese folk religion, that pervaded all aspects of Vietnamese life. There were *yin* elements and *yang* elements in families, in villages, in religion and economics, and so on.²³

Neither was more "authentic" or "legitimate" than the other. Without either, Vietnamese culture, and Vietnamese social organization, would have been something altogether different. Individuals, families, society itself, oscillated between these two ideological poles I have labeled *yin* and *yang*. Within this framework and in response to history and circumstances, there developed a core of values that formed the heart of traditional Vietnamese culture, the "window" through which Vietnamese viewed the world and interpreted what they experienced. The related ways of thinking and doing were inculcated into children from birth and were reaffirmed and reinforced in myriad ways through life and dominated Vietnamese beliefs of what the world was like and what correct behavior should be. In the story that follows this portrait, the story of "what happened" when the culture of Vietnam and Western cultures encountered each other, many of the events make no sense without frequent reference to these values, which are described briefly here (and are included in the glossary for convenience of reference).

REASON (LY) The world, and everything in it, was perceived to have a characteristic structure. Based on this natural order, rationality, or "reason" (*ly*), consisted of conformity to the structural principles that governed the universe. *Ly* came to mean "the nature of things." It was an overarching principle, based on observation and experience, intended to provide harmony in the system by specifying the proper form of all relationships. The concept of *ly* rationalized and legitimated the hierarchical order of society and of nations, making hierarchy itself part of the intrinsic structure of the universe, a state of affairs that was both "natural" and unalterable.

FILIAL PIETY (HIEU) and moral debt (ON) Family relationships were models for social organization. Both child-rearing practices and formal education emphasized learning to behave properly toward other family members. First and foremost, children were taught filial piety (*hieu*), to obey and respect and honor their par-

ents. Children were made to feel keenly that they owed parents a moral debt (*on*) so immense as to be unpayable. A child was supposed to try to please his or her parents all the time and in every way, to increase their comfort, to accede to all their wishes, to fulfill their aspirations, to lighten their burden of work and of worry, and to comply with their wishes in all matters, great and small. From everyday life and from several thousand years of history, youngsters were bombarded with exemplars of children who "knew *hieu*." The parent-child relationship was at the very core of Vietnamese culture, dominating everything else.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BROTHERS (DE): A MODEL FOR SOCIETAL ROLES Next in importance was the relationship between brothers. An older brother was supposed to teach, nurture, and protect his younger brother. Younger brothers were supposed to respect, obey, and support older brothers. The proper relationship between older and younger brothers (*de*) is elaborated in hundreds of maxims and folktales. Fraternal ties are often sharply opposed to conjugal ties in these stories, with unambiguous advocacy of the former. Brothers, this corpus of literature asserts, should never let anything or anyone, especially women, come between them. Many well-known stories reinforce the ideological primacy of blood ties, implicitly illustrating that going against family obligations was contrary to a natural order in the world. And to oppose the natural order was futile and dangerous.

Unlike most Western children, children growing up in traditional Vietnamese families learned dependence and nurturance, not independence. They learned the importance of hierarchy, not equality. They learned the rewards of submission to those of senior status, not assertiveness. The paradigmatic example for extending this basic family model to society was *de*. One was supposed to behave toward those senior to one, or of higher rank, or older, as if they were older brothers.

Younger brothers were supposed to be self-denying and docile in their relationships with older brothers. Yet in Vietnamese folktales younger brothers prosper despite their meekness. They triumph precisely because they are true to the prescribed role behavior appropriate to their situation. They were supposed to be meek and compliant toward older brothers, as toward parents, despite all provocation. In submitting even to unreasonable demands from an older brother, they were earning merit. Never does a

younger brother triumph because of boldness or cleverness or assertiveness. The ideal role model provided by school and family and folklore is one of compliance with the wishes of superordinate figures in a social hierarchy: child to parents, younger brother to older brother, and wife to husband.

GENDER ROLES Women came in for a large share of ideological pressure to perform their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers in a nondisruptive manner. The role of women was a source of tension in society. There was often a grating disjuncture between ideological ideals and sociological reality. Vietnamese myth, legend, and history are filled with stories of strong, intelligent, and decisive women. In all but the uppermost strata of society, men and women often worked side by side. Women performed many arduous physical tasks, ran small businesses, and were skilled artisans.

Yet ideologically men were *yang*; women, *yin*. Women were subordinate to men in the nature of things. Like children and younger brothers, they were supposed to be submissive, supportive, compliant toward their husbands. Husbands were supposed to teach and control their wives as they did their younger brothers and their children.

There was a persistent tendency, rooted in the pervasive *yin-yang* notion of hierarchy, to denigrate the status of females and subjugate them to at least nominal male dominance. A woman was supposed to be submissive to her father when young, to her husband when married, and to her oldest son when widowed. The notion of intrinsic male superiority was incessantly reinforced. "One boy, that's something; ten girls, that's nothing."²⁴ "A hundred girls aren't worth a single testicle."²⁵ Little girls were loved and nurtured, but boys were obviously preferred.

Boys also received more attention, got their own way more frequently, and were permitted to roam more freely. Girls were kept closer to home, supervised more closely, and given more responsibilities for helping with chores. If money was tight, all of it went to the boy's education while the girl stayed at home. If a girl ever asked "Why can brother do that but I can't?" she would simply be told "Because he is a boy!" No further explanation was felt to be necessary.²⁶

After marriage, a wife typically went to live with, or at least near, her husband's family. So a family had to groom girls for

export, so to speak, and to bind boys emotionally to the family in which they would remain for the rest of their life. The boys' mothers in particular were getting a headstart in competing with their future daughters-in-law for their sons' primary allegiance in coming decades.

THE RIGHTEOUS PATH (NGHIA) These role-based behavioral ideals, with *hieu* and *de* at the core and combined with the concept of *on*, instilled in Vietnamese a rigid code of conduct and a strong sense of duty, often laced with no small amount of guilt. Other values functioned in support of these core *yang* values. Wisdom, or learning (*tri*), propriety (*le*), and sincerity or truthfulness (*tin*), along with courage (*dung*) and perseverance (*chi*), were all primarily valued as they served to support and implement the primary social obligations inherent in *hieu* and *de*, extended to guide one's relations within wider social groups. Loyalty (*trung*) was an extension of *hieu* to the relationship of a subject to his lord.

The primacy of social obligation was summarized by the value of *nghia*, perhaps best translated as "righteousness." *Nghia* implies duty, justice, and obligation. It inculcates the willingness to do what one must do to fulfill one's social obligations, to repay *on*, to meet the demands of *hieu* and *de*. *Nghia* demands calm rationality within the structure of *ly*, the nature of things, and that one live scrupulously by an unbending set of rules, regardless of circumstances, regardless of individual preferences, regardless of the apparent consequences. The concept of *nghia* was based entirely on behavior in key social roles. It dictated, for example, how a son should behave to a father, how a younger brother should behave toward an older brother, how a subject should behave toward a king, and so on. It ignored relationships and behaviors that did not pertain to strategic social roles.

SPONTANEITY AND FEELING (TINH AND NHAN) At the core of the rigid *yang* framework were the value-laden and emotionally charged concepts of *ly*, *hieu*, *de*, and *on*. This social framework was strongly Neo-Confucian, male-oriented, focused on roles rather than on people, concerned with the welfare of the collectivity (family, village, nation) rather than with the feelings, desires, or problems of the individual. While it achieved a position of structural dominance, especially among the elite, and was most powerful in the northern and central portions of Vietnam, its very strength and its narrowness put it in dynamic opposition to a wide

range of alternative values and concepts. *Yin* and *yang* were logically contradictory but functionally complementary domains. When one became too strong vis-à-vis the other, certain functions became impaired.

The *yang* domain, with its rigid insistence on orthodoxy and its denigration of that which was heterodox or female, and with its emphasis on role behavior at the expense of the whole person and on the group at the expense of the individual, was a constraining influence that often failed to meet individual needs. Some critics have called it a "straitjacket" and concluded that it led to "maladjustments."²⁷ Buddhism, Taoism, indigenous tradition, and elements of earlier Confucian thought provided a broad array of values, institutions, and practices that constituted a *yin* counterbalance to the *yang* superstructure of society. One of the broadest and most fundamental oppositions in Vietnamese culture—indeed, in Vietnamese life—has long been that between *nghĩa* and *tinh*. While *nghĩa* is about morality, ethics, and duty, *tinh* is about feelings. *Tinh* is spontaneous, subjective, intuitive, unpredictable, emotional. *Tinh* is often used to refer to "love," but it is also used to signify passion, sentimentality, desire, or emotionalism, what we might call the dictates of the heart. *Tinh* was always subordinated to *nghĩa*, however, in folklore and in literature; and families and school primers both asserted that this was as it should be.

Another overlapping but somewhat more restricted value standing in opposition to *nghĩa* was *nhân*, the Confucian virtue of compassion, charity, benevolence, humanity, love for one's fellow human beings. *Nhân*, like *tinh*, involves spontaneity and feeling. It entails going beyond the rules to do good because one has empathy and compassion in one's heart. In practice, *nhân* merged with Buddhist teachings to remind people to be nice to one another, to be kind, to be generous. *Tinh* and *nhân* provided an emotional balance to the rationality of righteousness embodied in *nghĩa*.

RELATIVE VERSUS ABSOLUTE HARMONY: LY AND DIEU Another source of dynamic tension between *yin* and *yang* values entailed two different ways of viewing harmony, two different ways of being "reasonable." Harmony was a core concept, valued in both the *yin* and the *yang* sphere. And in both, being reasonable was a prerequisite for achieving harmony. But the harmony of the *yang* domain always referred back to the concept of *ly*, that pervasive

notion of a natural order that included the physical, social, and natural worlds. *Ly* was a constant, a given to which individuals and societies had to conform. This cosmological belief buttressed the entire *yang* domain. There was one right answer, one right way of doing things, and harmony resulted from conformity to what was "right," what was in accord with *ly*.

But there is another sense of the English word "reasonable" that functioned in the *yin* domain. In Vietnam this was the value of *dieu*. This word is used in compounds that refer to mixing colors, to harmonizing in music, to reconciling diverse opinions, to arbitration in a dispute. *Dieu* always refers to interaction and dictates a willingness to adapt or modify one's position or actions to fit a concrete situation, to "get in tune," so to speak, to moderate one's stance in the interest of social harmony. *Ly* implies an absolute standard or frame of reference, while relativism is the essence of *dieu*. *Dieu* as a value means "reasonable" in the sense of being moderate, of not being excessive. People who do not know moderation—who are too greedy or too rigid or too assertive—bring about their own downfall. Finding the proper balance between *yin* and *yang*, between duty and feeling, made the constructing of a proper life a form of art, entailing conflict and judgment.

ABSTENTION VERSUS PARTICIPATION Another major dimension of this tension was the opposition between active participation in society and abstention or withdrawal from society. In Chinese Buddhist thought "participation in worldly affairs" and "abstention from worldly affairs" were separate, irreconcilable categories. But many Vietnamese strove for a dynamic combination of these two modes in their lives and in society.²⁸ Neo-Confucianism, the entire *yang* domain, encouraged activism and tended to generate competition. Public service especially was portrayed as both an honor and a duty. Buddhist and Taoist elements, however, glorified meditation and passivity while denigrating or even ridiculing the futile struggle to impose one's will upon a reality that is indifferent to it.

The concept of *on* made this dichotomy between participation and abstention extraordinarily dynamic and often poignant in Vietnam. A cultivated man properly longed to retreat from the polluting and disturbing turmoil of the world, hoped to withdraw from social competition to pursue detachment, tranquillity, and self-cultivation. But one did not always have the right to do this.

Debts had to be repaid, obligations fulfilled; when duty called, an honorable person had to respond to the dictates of *nghĩa*.

On the other hand, sometimes, when the world was out of joint, when that which was right and proper was unattainable under prevailing conditions, an honorable man or woman withdrew from the world as a means of reaffirming higher values, rather than perverting them by participating in a context that distorted them. Such people, in withdrawal, waited to "meet their time." With a view of time as cyclical, they were awaiting the inevitable return of a properly constituted social order in which they might participate with dignity and honor.

THE POWER OF THE NATURAL ORDER The return of a "proper" state of affairs was guaranteed by a process of moral justice that operated in the universe. Virtually all Vietnamese believed that time was cyclical, that deviation from the natural order of things could not long survive. The natural and proper order would inevitably reassert itself. Family teachings, primary education, folktales and proverbs, and popular literature instilled in children an implicit belief in the workings of this principle of order. Children absorbed a cosmological view that posited a cause-and-effect relationship between virtuous behavior and good luck. People and institutions that were "reasonable," in accord with the natural order of things, were rewarded; those who violated the natural order invited disaster. Significantly, they invited disaster not just upon themselves but also upon their families; and to harm one's family was the ultimate sin.

THE FAMILY: THE NATURAL ORDER IN MICROCOSM The Vietnamese family was a small world unto itself. What Westerners consider "nuclear families" were embedded in extended families and patrilineages, and the sense of family included the deceased and those not yet born in a single fabric of spiritual unity and material well-being.²⁹

First and foremost, children were taught *hiếu*, the cardinal virtue of society. Anxiety over repayment of *ơn* to parents and ancestors was a powerful force for both virtue and achievement. Through their efforts and their sacrifices, and through their virtue, one's ancestors had accumulated merit—a veritable account with the gods—that was part of the family heritage.

You were, simply by being alive, in debt to your family—no matter how much you might have accomplished, no matter how

wretched you might be. You still had to thank them for the food you ate, the house you lived in, your spouse, your land, your membership in the village, most of all for life itself. You benefited from the merit accumulated by other family members over time, and from the family reputation. Success only increased the debt; it could never serve to repay it fully. Every family had to work hard constantly to maintain its relationship with the neighborhood, the lane, the rest of the village. This network of relationships, too, you held in trust for your family. Obligations extended in both directions, to those not yet born as well as to those who had passed away. The primary obligation was to the family itself as an eternal corporation.

The cultural ideal was an extended family household functioning as a single, well-integrated unit, hierarchically structured. Full authority and ownership of all property rested with the parents, whose wishes had to be obeyed. Any blatant breach of filial piety was, in fact, illegal and would be severely punished by the authorities should it come to their attention. Even worse, to be found guilty of such behavior in the court of public opinion would give one a heavy burden of shame to be borne the rest of one's life.

Ancestor worship tended to reinforce and transmit the potency of this body of precepts, perpetually reproducing a powerful sense of family solidarity. It was at the very heart of the familism that was so dominant a characteristic of traditional Vietnamese society. One's membership and position in one's family was the primary element in one's personal and social identity. Ritual life in the households of traditional Vietnam was rich and varied, but to a singular degree ancestor worship periodically generated important and solemn rituals in which many people participated with deep emotional involvement. Each year on the death anniversary of each departed ancestor within a certain degree of genealogical proximity, a formal offering was made. Depending on the relative closeness and status of the ancestor and the size and wealth of a patrilineage, a moderate to large crowd would participate in such events. In the words of Le Thi Que:

One has to attend one of these family gatherings to understand the intense emotional attachment the Vietnamese feel for their families. In this atmosphere composed of memories, traditions, and habits, of common points of reference, family hierarchy is strictly observed. A member, whatever his social status, finds his place in front of the ancestral altar and at the

feasting table determined on the one hand by the place he occupies in order of generation, and on the other by the order number he holds in his own family. In this ambience, the individual loses himself and feels at ease and is really at ease there only. It is also there, in this community of life and thought, that he finds the strength of the group to which he belongs. The person would not exchange his place in this group for any other, however exalted the new one might be.³⁰

A large and well-to-do patrilineage might have at least several dozen such get-togethers a year, and almost every family would have at least several. But the number of people involved, the elaborateness of the ritual, and the amount and quality of food and drink consumed would vary greatly. Ideally, each family had a special category of land set aside to subsidize such events. Known as "incense and fire land," the sanctity of such property was protected both by law and by custom. These rituals were part of a powerful socialization process, intended to induce certain moods and attitudes in the minds of all participants. Bringing families together and reminding them of their shared roots, death anniversary celebrations built family unity and helped to create a family mentality. Within such families the living, the dead, and those not yet born were joined in an intimate relationship of mutual dependence.

Ancestors remained active participants in family life, sharing in joy and sorrow, admonishing wickedness, chiding deviation from propriety. They worked from the nether world to contribute to the well-being of the family, watching over and assisting their descendants. When faced with a momentous decision, some Vietnamese would talk with deceased family members, often reporting flashes of insight or clarity of thought arising from such discussions. Ancestors could assist, advise, and sometimes punish their descendants, always for the good of the family.

Although ideally a family was as self-sufficient as possible, social competition rather than isolation was expected. Competition between families took place within an open, consensus-based "class system" that arrayed families along a prestige hierarchy in which public opinion was the final arbiter. Villagers placed their own subjective judgments into the formal status equations and modified a family's standing according to the behavior of its members. Wealth, education, status, and prestige were correlated, but in no deterministic fashion.

People noticed shortcomings, and they talked about them. People feared ridicule and gossip. High status was both constraining and expensive. In particular, the many ritual interactions between a family and the village community were occasions on which conspicuous public generosity was expected to match claims to status, somewhat taking family resources into account.

When a boy's name was placed upon the village rolls, ceremonies had to be performed, and gifts given. Deaths were even more expensive. Elaborate mourning ceremonies and funeral extravaganzas were expected of the well-to-do. Marriages were complex and expensive affairs. A close look at marriage reveals much about traditional culture and the way Vietnamese society worked, especially for the elite and the socially ambitious:

MARRIAGE Marriage was seen primarily as a transaction between two families, so spouses were chosen not by individuals but by parents, often with the active participation of other senior family members.³¹ The bride, often living with or at least near her husband's parents, was expected to honor them even above her own parents. She would often enter her husband's home as a virtual stranger and would have to please not just her husband but his entire family, especially his mother.

For all parties, a direct approach was difficult. The important thing was to avoid exposing the family to a humiliating loss of face through direct public rejection, so intermediaries were often used. Shrewd estimates would be made of economic resources, moral character, reputation, influence, and future financial expectations of the prospective spouses and their families.

Local tradition tended to simplify the selection phases of this process (dropping or simplifying a more complex Sinitic tradition) while emphasizing the engagement phase. Here transactions shifted to the public realm, becoming more distinctively Vietnamese, and more expensive. The engagement ceremony was built on a formal presentation, acceptance, and redistribution of gifts from the groom's family to the girl's family.

The wedding ceremony itself was commonly called *ruoc dau*. *Ruoc* means "to welcome," "to greet," or "to escort." *Dau* has the double meaning of "bride" and "daughter-in-law." Vietnamese speak of "taking a wife" or "establishing a family," but never in conjunction with the wedding ceremony. Nor does one ever hear the wedding procession referred to as "welcoming a wife." It is

always called "welcoming a daughter-in-law." The bride's role as daughter-in-law is given social and cultural emphasis, linguistically expressed, equal to or greater than her new role as wife. By far the most significant element in the transaction is her movement from membership in one family to membership in another. It is her integration into her new family that is of cardinal importance.

The wedding ceremony involved the symbolic and physical transfer of the bride from her home to the groom's home. The groom, accompanied by his family and friends, would march in procession to the bride's house to claim her and escort her home. This sometimes involved travel between villages. Girls especially liked to marry within the village, but an appropriate spouse could not always be found there. Many villages, hamlets, lanes, and even some lineages exacted a fee from anyone who took a bride from their midst, stretching a string across the road to block the procession until the fee was paid. When the groom finally reached the bride's home, he might find his progress blocked yet again, with the bride's younger siblings requesting money to "open the gate." These various "gate-blocking" encounters expressed the strong sense of corporate identity that typified these groups. At the bride's house the groom prostrated himself before the family altars, replicating a set of rituals he had performed for his own ancestors before leaving home. Finally refreshments would be served, and soon the procession would depart.

The bride, surrounded by her own helpers and other relatives and friends, was also symbolically protected by various devices to ward off evil spirits along the road, especially if travel was between villages. Family and village were the culturally constituted enclaves in which one was a meaningful part of ordered society. The bride was no longer a daughter, nor was she yet a daughter-in-law or a wife. Passing between families, perhaps between villages, the bride was outside of culture, exposed to the dangerous natural world as an isolated and therefore an impotent and vulnerable individual.

At the groom's house she would perform a series of rituals that were a mirror image of those the groom had performed at her house. Only then would bride and groom perform a brief ritual that would make them man and wife. Next would come a wedding feast, the best the family could afford. After the guests had departed, the couple would retire to a nuptial chamber. Often this was their first chance to get acquainted. It would often be difficult

for the new bride to partake fully of the rich emotional life that bound her husband, his parents and siblings, and perhaps grandparents, aunts, and uncles, into a tightly knit household. The house would often be very crowded, and she and her husband would have little privacy in which to build intimacy.

Only gradually would she be affectively integrated into her new family. Only over the years—as she bore and raised children, nursed the sick, earned money, which she contributed to the common treasury, and demonstrated her total loyalty and devotion to her new family—might she begin to regain some measure of emotional support. Like children to parents and younger brothers to older brothers, wives/daughters-in-law were expected to be supportive and compliant.

Vietnamese folklore often dramatizes the ideal of a wife's total devotion to her husband. However, if a wife deceives or betrays or disobeys her husband in folktales, retribution and disaster often follow, and many tales stress that a headstrong woman causes problems. But women are seldom portrayed as incompetent, gullible, or easily manipulated. In some tales, in fact, a shrewd and forbearing wife supports a bumbling husband.

Bound by a behavioral code and internalized values that stress the maintenance of face, public generosity, and a preoccupation with lofty affairs, in folklore and in daily life Vietnamese men often appear to be less adept than their womenfolk in practical economic matters. Each family is like a small nation. The husband is nominal head of state and in charge of foreign relations; the wife is minister of the interior and controls the treasury. There is a formal division of labor, and somewhat different sets of values are inherent in the different roles.

A "good" woman was self-sacrificing, frugal, industrious, chaste, and totally devoted to her husband. She was "bad" if she so much as looked at another man. Vietnamese were second to none in having a double standard for judging the sexual conduct of men and women. But this entire constellation of beliefs, values, attitudes, and norms regarding sexual behavior was intimately related to their overriding concept of family and was reinforced by the value of *hieu*.

A primary obligation of *hieu* was to provide male descendants to perpetuate the cult of the ancestors. Less than total certainty as to the actual paternity of one's children was a source of intolerable anxiety. Motherhood, of course, could not be in question. The sex-

ual double standard arose ineluctably from structural differences between a man and his family and a woman and her two families, one by birth and the other by marriage. The needs of the family bent both men and women to serve as required, but the requirements were quite different for the two sexes. Few questioned the axiomatic basis of social life that firmly placed the welfare of the family above individual wishes and desires.

TET: THE ANNUAL FAMILY RITUAL OF RENEWAL The coming of the new year produced abundant symbols of integration. People planned for the new year well in advance with an air of pleasurable anticipation. The ancestors were coming for a visit, and the entire family would be reunited. The new year had to be greeted with one's family in front of the ancestral altar. This was the quintessential celebration of the family as a living entity. It is difficult for Americans to grasp how important Tet was, and is, to Vietnamese. Tet was Christmas, Easter, New Year's Eve, Thanksgiving, and the Fourth of July all rolled into one celebration. Celebrating Tet with one's family was an essential part of what it meant to be Vietnamese, to be a complete human being. As the new year arrived a crescendo of firecrackers and pealing bells washed over the land. The entire nation cried out joyfully—to one another and to the ancestors and the gods, with resounding voices of communion and hope—uniting the Vietnamese as one people around the very core of their culture.

THE TRADITIONAL VIETNAMESE VILLAGE The village and the nation were in a sense larger families—as the family itself was a small nation or village. In northern and central Vietnam (but not in the more recently settled and less densely populated southern region) villages were closed and corporate communities with a relatively high degree of autonomy.³² Not only were most villages separated from others by an expanse of paddy land, village houses tended to be tightly clustered together within a dense bamboo hedge that totally surrounded them, physically and symbolically setting the community apart from the adjacent countryside as well as from other communities. The residential portion of the village could be entered only through an ornate, well-guarded, and highly symbolic gate, which was closed and locked at night. This gate was the face the village presented to the world, an outward sign of identity and emblem of corporate self-respect. Inside was the *dinh*, the heart of the village. The *dinh* was at once ritual center

and town hall. Here the fusion of politics and religion in village life was evident.

Ritual life at the *dinh* revolved around veneration of the guardian spirit of the village, a powerful spirit appointed by the king as a symbol that this community had attained the formal status of a village, a semiautonomous administrative unit. The cult of the guardian spirit provided a focal point for village identity and symbolized "the history, customs, ethics, legal code, and common aspirations of the entire village."³³ The *dinh* was also a place for feasting, for public and private worship, for all public ceremonies, both secular and sacred.

Each year the village held several major rituals to offer special sacrifices to the guardian spirit with an air of great solemnity. These ceremonies were performed by the community, as a community, for the community, making manifest the shared values, needs, and concerns of the group as a whole in meaningful symbols. Focused on the cult of the guardian spirit, village ceremonial activity at the *dinh* served to symbolize the dependence of all members of the village not just upon one another but upon powerful external forces—natural, supernatural, and social—which could be adequately manipulated and controlled only by the corporate group, not by its individual members. The cult of the guardian spirit replicated for the village as a whole the functions performed by the cult of the ancestors for Vietnamese families.

Not all who lived in a village were members of the village as a legal corporate entity nor members of the "congregation" of the cult of the guardian spirit. Both privileges and obligations were associated with village membership, and membership was not to be had by anyone for the asking. The most basic distinction in the village was between members and nonmembers. Membership was formally restricted to males, with a strong tendency to limit eligibility to men born and raised within the village.

As a legal corporate entity, the village itself was an important landowner. While the proportion of land that was corporately owned varied, such communal ownership was an important characteristic of the traditional Vietnamese closed corporate village. Village land was reallocated every three years, providing subsistence for the very poor and reimbursement to those who rendered service to the village. Some land was rented to other villagers at a substantial fee, generating revenue. This land tenure system supported village solidarity. No one outside the village either owned

or worked village land. Villagers might quarrel among themselves, but they stuck together against outsiders. The village was corporately responsible for payment of taxes to higher authority, to provide military conscripts and corvée labor. So long as it met its obligations, the village was left alone. Outsiders, even the central government, dealt with the village, not with individual members. Only through the village could one be a fully participating member of society.

THE VILLAGE STATUS HIERARCHY: SOLIDARITY AND COMPETITION Village members were ranked in a strict hierarchy corresponding to named social statuses. The upper strata of this hierarchy were known collectively as the Council of Notables. Although the particular status and the criteria for recruitment varied, all villages had a status hierarchy and a body of notables at the top. Directly beneath the notables were the village elders, and beneath the elders came other adult members of the village. Within these broad categories were many finer distinctions. These statuses were explicitly rank-ordered positions, and all affairs of the *dinh* involved an elaborate protocol in which this rank order was scrupulously observed and symbolically expressed. On formal occasions no two men could be completely equal.

It was precisely within the explicit context of symbolic relationships at the *dinh* that village solidarity was most profoundly and forcefully expressed and competition became most fierce. The shared hierarchy and the ritual activity associated with it promoted solidarity and provided a sense of identity in the village as in the family. But in the village, unlike the family, status was achieved rather than ascribed by birth.

The village status hierarchy was not an administrative body. The notables dominated village affairs, but not as an executive body. Village functionaries executed the will of the council. To become a village official often meant hard work and heavy responsibility with little real power and little pay. But it permitted one to rise in the status hierarchy, providing entrée to the council of notables where real power and prestige lay.

STATUS HIERARCHY AND THE "PRESTIGE" ECONOMY A "prestige" economy was deeply embedded in the status hierarchy expressed in the cult of the guardian spirit. This was a very competitive and rigidly structured domain. Relative position within this status hierarchy was very important to villagers. They ardently

competed to "eat above" and "sit before" each other at village feasts in the *dinh*. After all important sacrifices a high feast would be organized at the *dinh* for all village members. These feasts located one in village society, as the feasts associated with the cult of the ancestors located one in one's family and patrilineage. Seating arrangements and the distribution of portions at such feasts were prescribed down to the smallest detail in accord with relative position in the hierarchy. Status was manifested by who sat at which table, how many men would share a tray of food, who received which cut of meat. Details varied, but all villages had some such distinctions.

Nguyen Khac Vien tells us that in his village: "After the ceremonies honoring the village guardian spirit, the head, beak and crown of the sacrificial rooster had to be set aside for the highest ranking notables. Heaven help anyone else who took a piece for himself! Notables were known to commit crimes just to get the crown of a rooster." No gastronomic considerations impelled men to such competitive extremes. "Each notable competed with the others to bring home the head of the sacrificial chicken from the ceremony because in the eyes of his wife, children, and neighbors this would be irrefutable proof that he was the most honored man in the village."³⁴

Traditional Vietnamese accepted the principle of social hierarchy and cared passionately about face and relative status. Any claims to elevated status were met by one's fellow villagers with elevated expectations about behavior. A serious breach of propriety could send a family's reputation plummeting. In effect, the village population exacted a "tax" on prestige, consisting of persistent social and economic demands. The price of status, prestige, and respect was constant vigilance, conformity to village norms, and conspicuous generosity. If people did not act in accord with their status pretensions, respect behavior would be withdrawn.

Every family had periodic expenses, such as the placing of children on the village rolls, funerals, marriages. One could organize such events either cheaply or lavishly, but each public transaction was a statement about relative status and prestige. In aggregate such behavior summarized the prestige of individuals, and especially of families. For those with a reputation and a social position to protect, or for those trying to rise in the status hierarchy, there was little choice.

Although these rank-ordered positions were achieved statuses,

village custom still insisted upon public validation. To rise significantly in the hierarchy required sponsoring a series of feasts, "celebration offerings" (*le khao vong*). Whenever a member met the criteria for an elevation in status, he had to organize an offering at the *dinh* and a subsequent feast. This could mean hosting a party for the entire village membership at his own—that is, his family's—expense. If the status were a high one, these could be costly affairs.

This concern with face, status, and prestige expressed in celebration offerings, rites of passage, and other such semipublic occasions reflected a more general ethic that infused village life, one that enjoined villagers to lead lives of public generosity and private frugality. Dozens of village customs revealed this ethic in operation. Details varied; the principle did not. It was incumbent upon the more well-to-do, and the socially ambitious, to give more freely than did most other families. Families cared what their fellow villagers thought and said about them. They also believed in luck, and that generosity would bring good luck. And so, with the eyes of the village upon them, they spent freely when local custom expected it of them.

Concern with face and honor not only operated to impel those who had a surplus to part with some portion of it, it also made those in need reluctant to reveal the true extent of their poverty. People did not accept charity lightly. They lived as frugally as possible and tried to maintain the appearance of normalcy.³⁵ Everyone was expected to be self-reliant and self-sacrificing. Those who were not quickly became aware of the censure of their neighbors. The same principle that guided the conduct of families applied to villages as well. As corporate entities concerned with their own face, entire villages exhibited the same self-reliant, self-sacrificing behavior. Inhabitants of a village would endure considerable hardship rather than lose face by asking for outside assistance.³⁶

The deep-seated concern for face and the desire to gain prestige and to have it publicly acknowledged, combined with the belief that good deeds brought good luck, made village welfare mechanisms self-generating and self-regulating to some significant extent. Those villagers with a surplus were psychologically and sociologically impelled to exchange some portion of it for prestige, while those in need found it difficult to accept charity and did so only when and to the extent that it was absolutely necessary.

The basic principle of redistribution might be summarized as "from each according to his desire for face, to each according to his willingness to lose face." Both need and ability to pay were self-assessed, regulated by powerful psychosocial predispositions. Because they were extremely sensitive to nuances of disapproval or disrespect, many Vietnamese were vulnerable to public opinion as expressed in gossip, ridicule, or satire.

THE SUBSISTENCE ECONOMY Within the village there were many organizations and activities that exhibited a pattern quite different from that discussed above. Traditional Vietnamese were highly social creatures, and villages had a remarkable variety of social groups. There were, for example, clubs for everything from kite flying to raising songbirds, clubs for old soldiers, for people born in the same year, for students of the same teacher.³⁷ Despite their great heterogeneity—and entropy was high in the *yin* system—many different kinds of groups shared certain key characteristics that make them unmistakably *yin* in nature.

In sharp contrast to the well-defined and highly redundant *yang* domain of family and village—marked by high internal differentiation and status competition—*yin* groups were much more loosely structured and egalitarian. All were strictly voluntary and informal groups, all emphasized cooperation and solidarity, and all had mechanisms to reduce competition and dampen potential conflict. Internal differentiation was minimal. Leadership was often rotating or based on seniority. The expenses of membership were prescribed and equal. Also, many of these groups were for females. Finally, while the *yang* domain was the focal point of state attention, including the legal code, these *yin* groups tended to arise spontaneously and were a matter of complete indifference to the state. None were prescribed by law or by culture.

Villagers lived in discrete neighborhoods within the village, and at the entrance to each the gateway marked a sociological boundary. Each neighborhood had its own membership rolls and its own elected chief to serve as intermediary between the neighborhood and village authorities. Some neighborhoods had shrines of their own, built with their own resources, to worship a cult figure of their own choosing. Neighborhoods had no legal status, however, and membership was relatively open. One could, and often did, belong to a neighborhood without qualifying for village membership. Even lanes within a neighborhood sometimes had their

own membership rolls, their own chief, and their own meetings and ritual activities. Lanes, even more than neighborhoods, were face-to-face groups, where everyone knew everyone else well and mutual aid was commonplace and informal. Such informal mutual aid was characteristic of a subsistence economy that paralleled the prestige economy discussed above.

Most villages had a place set aside for an outdoor market, usually located outside the bamboo hedge that defined the village proper. This symbolized the low status of commerce, which was usually reserved for women and foreigners. The bustling markets involved transactions on a very small scale, primarily the redistribution of local goods. Women supplemented the family income by buying oil or sugar in small amounts and reselling them in smaller increments, by making foodstuff for sale, or by selling a temporary surplus from the home garden. Profits were usually miniscule.

Virtually every family was engaged in the exploitation of the ricefields that surrounded most villages. Most occupations, even the growing of most other crops, were things to be done when one could not be profitably engaged in growing rice. Everyone—carpenters, blacksmiths, barbers—tried to farm if it were at all possible. The specter of hunger was familiar and lurked close at hand. There could never be too much rice, and growing rice was never too much work. But many families could not make a living farming, and most villagers were perpetually short of cash. Village industries provided a means of using extra time to earn additional money. These were almost exclusively family enterprises. Labor was not considered to be a cost. An entire family would work hard all day for a very small profit.

There was an extraordinarily high degree of village specialization.³⁸ Instead of each village having its own blacksmith, carpenter, and so on, each village tended to specialize in one task. In some villages many adult males were skilled silversmiths, barbers, masons, tinkers, or herbalists. Other villages were devoted to making paper, parasols, pots, fishnets, or hats. Even greater specialization existed within these categories. The manufacture of a single product often involved the work of several villages, each with a monopoly over some aspect of production, a formula, a technique, or a raw material. This again was both cause and effect of village solidarity. Those artisans or craftsmen engaged in the same kind of work within a village would often organize themselves into a guild. Such groups shared knowledge within the

group, but guarded it from outsiders. They also served as mutual aid societies. When an emergency arose, one could usually count on group assistance.

Guilds were only one form of the mutual aid societies found in traditional Vietnam. There were funeral and burial societies, special groups for almost any occasion that called for a sudden outlay of cash. There were even groups for celebrating the new year. Each household would contribute a small amount of money each month, and at the end of the year various expensive delicacies would be bought and distributed in small portions to the members. A common kind of organization with mutual aid functions was the *giap*.³⁹ A *giap* might have been organized on the basis of a lineage or a common surname, membership in the same neighborhood or hamlet, worship of a particular spirit, or any other common bond. The *giap* was a corporate entity with its own property, its own ritual life, and its own status hierarchy. But rank order in the *giap* was based solely on the order in which names were registered on the village rolls. Regardless of wealth or status, seniority would enable one to sit above and eat before all those who joined the *giap* at a later date. Although there were expenses associated with *giap* membership, these were always shared in prescribed and equal amounts. No gain or loss of prestige was involved; therefore, expensive competition was precluded. This was true of all mutual aid groups. It was true of the subsistence economy as a whole, and of what I call the *yin* domain of village life.

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF YIN AND YANG The prestige economy, associated with the cult of the guardian spirit, exacted a "tax" on status and prestige. This realm was characterized by extreme formality and vigorous competition. The elements of this system were relatively closed and tended to be highly differentiated. Reciprocity was unbalanced. Various mechanisms and local customs exacted a price for status and prestige. This constituted a self-regulating village welfare system, one that kept the "free-rider problem" within reasonable bounds. There was, however, no glorification of shared poverty and no intention to achieve equality. True equality was perceived to be destabilizing, to be contrary to the natural order of the world. Village insurance functions, on the other hand, were provided within the context of a subsistence economy that paralleled and complemented the functioning of the prestige economy. As we have seen, the subsistence economy in-

volved a completely different set of institutions, based on quite different principles.

Working in tandem, the subsistence economy and the prestige economy—like *yin* and *yang*—were integral parts of a single complex system that contributed to the viability of the village in its uncertain and dangerous environment. Logically contradictory principles—competition and cooperation, hierarchy and egalitarianism, conflict and solidarity—were functionally complementary parts of the political economy. This duality of structure characterized the ideology and the society of traditional Vietnam.

THE YIN DIMENSION OF RELIGION IN THE VILLAGE While the cult of the ancestors in the family and the cult of the guardian spirit in the village were *yang*—male dominated, culturally prescribed, hierarchical, formal, and often competitive—the *yin* domain of religion involved a high level of female activity and was culturally optional, more egalitarian, more informal, more cooperative, and much less competitive.

Each family elaborated the content and rhythm of its ritual life according to its own preferences, needs, and capacities. Any house might have many altars, or few, or none. One might find in people's homes dozens of different kinds of altars to spirits from the pantheons of Taoism, Buddhism, popular mythology, Vietnamese history, and local legend. Altars were used to beseech support from a particular spirit, often for a specific purpose. The spirits of fierce generals were believed to be potent defenders of the home against evil spirits. The Goddess of Mercy, Quan Am, helped women and children especially and was believed to be of particular assistance against the dangers of childbirth.

Some women felt called to the service of a female patron deity, such as the Dark Maiden of the Ninth Heaven or the Jade Queen of the Immortals. Illness and misfortune befell women who did not respond to such a call. But if worshipped faithfully, the possessing spirit would bring health and good fortune. Shamanistic cults often sprang up around such phenomena. These cults too might combine religious events with social activity, such as an annual banquet.⁴⁰

Buddhism was a conspicuous part of *yin* religion. Pagodas were common in traditional Vietnam, but they had no "congregation" in the strict sense of the term. Attendance was arbitrary and irregular for most "believers." As a systematic body of beliefs and ideas,

Buddhism has long been a pervasive influence in Vietnam, but the institution of Buddhism, especially the role and influence of the Buddhist clergy, has waxed and waned. The monk qua monk had no real place in village social structure and little or no influence in village affairs, although individual monks of talent and virtue could become very influential. The pagoda had its greatest attraction for, and received much of its support from, older women, often widows. A Buddhist women's association existed in most villages, with leadership rotating annually. Many of these groups would organize a ceremony once a year and indulge in a banquet.⁴¹

NATIONAL INTEGRATION The rulers in the Nguyen dynasty that ascended the throne in 1802 had an unusually strong *yang* bias, in reaction to the conditions that preceded their rule. They sought to construct a more orderly, more orthodox, more homogeneous, and more tightly organized society. They mandated the use of Chinese as the official language, adopted a harsher legal code, which placed women in a more subordinate position than ever before, restricted Buddhism, and propagated Neo-Confucian doctrines in dozens of ways that ritually and symbolically socialized both villagers and officials to more orthodox role behavior and greater social solidarity in accord with *ly* and *nhia*.

The Nguyen kings constructed a court in Hue that was carefully modeled upon the Chinese court in Peking. The hierarchical principles of society were expressed in the design of the palace and its grounds. The architecture and landscaping promoted harmony with the natural order by structuring interaction and organizing ritual behavior.⁴² The Vietnamese king was leader of four ritual cults: of Heaven, of his own ancestors, of Confucius, and of agriculture. His kingly role emphasized ritual leadership over executive and legislative functions. His ritual actions combined and integrated his dual role as indigenous king and Sinified emperor.

In 1808 a special edifice was built just outside the new imperial city of Hue for sacrifices to Heaven and Earth. This site, carefully modeled after a similar one in China, consisted of a large circular platform (*yang*) for sacrifices to Heaven and a smaller square one (*yin*) for sacrifices to Earth. Only the king or his official representatives could participate in the cult of Heaven, thus symbolizing his unique role in society as the sole representative to natural and supernatural forces.

The cult of the ancestors was also carefully observed within the

imperial city. The king was extraordinarily scrupulous in his observance of filial piety, both to perfect his own balance of merit and as exemplar and teacher for his people. A national agricultural cult focused on a square outdoor altar (*yin*) at which sacrifices were offered to the gods of soil and grain and the four seasons. The king himself presented a ritual offering here every spring, then commanded a high official to plow a furrow to symbolize the proper beginning of another agricultural cycle. At the same time, this ritual was being performed in each province by a representative of the king.

There was also a temple of Confucius in the capital and in every province. Twice a year, in spring and fall, Confucius was ritually honored. The king presided over these rites in the capital as provincial officials imitated his actions throughout the land. There were similar shrines in many cantons and some villages where local scholars replicated these rites.

The entire nation was meticulously organized in a hierarchically ascending series of replications of the same ritual patterns, these patterns themselves a replication of the natural order of the universe. Homologies of symbolic and ritual action promoted social solidarity within and between levels. The Nguyen kings were keenly aware that dutiful sons made loyal ministers. State laws punished violations of mourning customs and rewarded any family that managed to assemble five generations under a single roof. Family customs were consciously adopted for the bureaucracy to strengthen and integrate it by enhancing the feeling among its members of belonging to one great family.

An intricate network of metaphorical relationships—father to son, and older brother to younger brother—bound the nation and its component elements together in ties of mutual obligation. Each family was like a small nation. The village was the family writ large. The national bureaucracy was organized around the metaphor of family. Each of these structures expressed the root paradigm of *yin* and *yang*, and each took its shape in accord with *ly*, the cultural model of universal natural order. At the apex of these structures the king became, as a fusion of indigenous mythology with Taoist and Neo-Confucian thought, a personification of the moral order in Vietnamese society. His primary responsibility was to exert spiritual leadership through ritual and through personal example.

This same burden of moral leadership fell to some degree upon

the mandarin, upon village elites, and upon family heads. They were all supposed to teach and to lead by virtuous example, like fathers, like older brothers. The head of any administrative unit was supposed to bring harmony and prosperity to his domain by means of the virtue of his life and of his rule. So a district, a prefecture, or a province was also considered to be in some ways like a family.

Beyond the eye-catching pomp and ceremony and imposing symbolic barriers that shielded the scholar-officials and the court from the masses, a relatively simple and inexpensive apparatus stood between the king and his subject. The Vietnamese state achieved this cost-effective operation by governing through "powers of verification and eventual repression, but not of execution."⁴³ This state propagated ideals through many channels, monitored behavior and punished deviation from the orthodox ideological model, and strove to uphold harmony with the natural order through assiduous ritual action. The key ministry of this government was not the Ministry of Justice or of Finance or Defense. It was the Ministry of Rites.⁴⁴

This lean apparatus was possible because the state did not deal directly with individuals, families, lineages, hamlets, or any of the thousands of local organizations. State officialdom dealt with villages; and the village itself directed, coordinated, and controlled the behavior of its inhabitants. And villages themselves dealt with families, not with individuals. The entire family was responsible for the behavior of any of its members.⁴⁵ Individuals were closely controlled, not just by family heads but by all family members, especially by anyone senior to themselves. Misbehavior on the part of an individual hurt everyone, and everyone understood this, just as it was understood that the entire family expected to benefit when any family member enjoyed success.

As families regulated the behavior of their members, families in turn were regulated both by village leaders and public opinion to function in ways that increased the viability and prestige of the village as a whole. Both the family and the village were closed corporate communities in which individual interests were submerged in the interests of the collectivity. In this society, what we in the West think of as personal freedom was thoroughly subjugated to what Pierre Gourou called "the complete supervisory control of public opinion over the private life of the individual." Yet this very trait gave impetus to, and imposed discipline upon, various institu-

tional mechanisms of welfare and redistribution. Little coercion was required to maintain this system. People were socialized to behave in these ways, and life in the family and the village could be immensely meaningful and satisfying. Traditional Vietnamese were not socialized to strive for individual independence. They did learn to handle, and to prize, relationships characterized by nurturance, dependency, and mutual obligation. And they took pride in responding to the dictates of *nhĩa*.

The Success and Failure of the Traditional System

Ultimately it was the widely shared worldview and system of values that made this traditional system workable. Family socialization, formal education, folklore, and the vernacular literature that flourished in the late eighteenth and the nineteenth century and was spread throughout the land by itinerant storytellers and presses that delicately balanced popular taste with government regulations, all converged to reinforce a shared cosmology. The entire social structure rested upon the pervasive notion of natural order.

At the heart of this worldview was the central, unifying proposition that the extent to which conformity to a natural order was maintained in word and deed had profound and inevitable consequences. When serious deviation from proper role behavior occurred, the natural order was violated and compensatory mechanisms—as natural as gravity or moonlight—redressed the balance. Exploitative older brothers, disobedient wives, rapacious priests, and other miscreants brought misfortune upon themselves. But sometimes improper behavior could bring misfortune down upon other members of corporate groups, where blame as well as honor was shared. Conversely, virtuous families, by maintaining the natural order through proper role behavior, by observing *hiếu* and *đức*, by being loyal and generous, prospered and enjoyed good fortune as a well-deserved gift from the gods.

This shared cosmology, combined with a general desire for prestige, a concern for face, and a sensitivity to criticism, provided a powerful moral dimension to life in traditional Vietnam. Public opinion served as a very real, if sometimes inadequate, constraint upon the exercise of political and economic power. Despite many individual instances of greed and lust and egoism, the society retained a capacity for self-correction. It was in this limited but profound sense a value-oriented, self-correcting, and self-integrating system.

Eventually, this system failed, perhaps in part because of the overblown *yang* emphasis of the Nguyen dynasty. There were many peasant rebellions in the first half of the nineteenth century. Corruption, poverty, and injustice blighted the land. And Vietnam was colonized by France. It has long been fashionable to denigrate the traditional Vietnamese cultural system described above as “feudal,” “superstitious,” and a tool by which the elite exploited the lower classes. We should not let the failures, nor the many undoubted shortcomings, of the traditional system blind us to the power of its logic or to the extent to which it penetrated and persisted at the deepest levels of Vietnamese culture.

Even today, one cannot attain a very sophisticated understanding of current Vietnamese behaviors without taking the persistence of traditional Vietnamese culture into account. If we want to understand the drama in which we became engulfed in Vietnam from the 1950s into the 1970s, we must begin by seeing twentieth-century Vietnam as a clash between the old and the new, between diverse reactions to the failure of the traditional cultural system and the continuing grip of this cultural heritage on the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people, including those who called most loudly for its abandonment.