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## Vietnam's Love-Hate Relationship with China-A Historical Explanation

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By V. Suryanarayan

China had always been and would continue to be a key point of reference to the foreign policy makers of Southeast Asian countries, especially for Vietnam. Sharing land and maritime boundaries with China, Vietnam, from very early times, had been profoundly influenced by its giant neighbor in the north. It has shared cultural traditions; in fact, Prof. Arnold Toynbee, in his monumental book, *Half the World – The History and Culture of China and Japan*, includes Vietnam, along with Japan and Korea, in the East Asian world. At the same time, the proud and heroic Vietnamese had been intensely nationalist; they had always resisted China's hegemonistic designs. According to perceptive Southeast Asia watchers, Vietnam will be the bulwark against Chinese expansionism in Southeast Asia.

Vietnam, as we know it today, came into existence on the eve Asia's European age. Historically this country had several independent kingdoms. The first was the Indianised kingdom of Funan. We do not know its real name, Funan is the name given by Chinese historians. It continued to exist from the first century AD to the Sixth century AD. It was located in the Mekong delta of Vietnam and Cambodia.

The second, which was also an Indianised kingdom, was Champa, the Chinese name for it was *Lin Yi*. It existed between 2<sup>nd</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century AD. It extended over the southern and central coastal regions of Vietnam. The people of Champa, known as the Chams, were highly Hinduised. There are still 200,000 Hindus in Vietnam. The Author had the good fortune to meet a Hindu Cham delegation in the World Hindu Conference held in New Delhi few years ago. They were very keen to establish contacts with Hindu religious organizations in India to foster and promote their Hindu identity.

The Vietnamese originally lived in the Red River delta in the northern part of Vietnam. They developed their agricultural skills and became

prosperous. Their rulers developed a good administrative system. But their curse was China, the northern neighbor. The expansionist Chinese rulers sent military expeditions to the South and brought *Nam Viet* under Chinese control. What is more they imposed Chinese culture on them and sinicised them.

The Chinese conquest of Nam Viet took place in the second century BC and it continued till 967 AD. The thousand years of Chinese domination was characterised by frequent uprisings by the Vietnamese and brutal military reprisals by the Chinese army. The important elements of Chinese culture- the Mandate from Heaven, Chinese script, Confucian values and the institution of Mandarinate - were introduced in Vietnam. But it was not blind imitation; the Vietnamese retained some of the indigenous characteristics. Unlike other Southeast Asian countries, which followed *Theravada* form of Buddhism, Vietnam followed the *Mahayana* form. It got mingled with Confucianism and Taoism and a syncretic religion known as *Tan Giao* came into existence. As far as script is concerned, till the Vietnamese script was romanised in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Vietnamese adopted the Chinese characters. The Vietnamese also copied the centralized system of administration and gradually extended their sway over the whole country. In that process the people of the country were Vietnamised.

Suspicion of Chinese designs is a recurrent theme in Vietnamese history. While adapting the Chinese culture the Vietnamese, with extraordinary courage, resisted the Chinese army. Andrew Forbes quotes a Vietnamese martial song sung by the Vietnamese guerrillas: "Fight to keep our hair long, fight to keep our teeth black, fight to show that the heroic southern country can never be defeated".

Nayan Chanda, in his book *Brother Enemy*, mentions an interesting incident. Even during the height of the war against the United States, when China's support was very crucial, the Vietnamese zealously guarded their cultural traits. In October 1972, the American scholar George M. Kahin visited Vietnam. He was very keen to find out the extent of religious freedom. He participated in a well attended mass in a catholic church in Hanoi. Soon after, his Vietnamese host asked Prof. Kahin, "Would you like to see something of our religion?" Kahin accepted the invitation and was taken across a bridge to a temple in an island in Hanoi's Hoan Kiem Lake. In that temple there were three altars, one to Buddha, one to God of Earth and water and a third dedicated to Tran Hung Dao, the General who defeated the Chinese Mongol army in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Upon enquiring Prof. Kahin came to know that there were half a dozen shrines in Hanoi where Vietnamese paid homage to heroes and heroines, such as Le Loi and Trung sisters, who had fought against Chinese invaders.

The Author cannot resist the temptation to narrate the heroism of the Trung sisters who committed suicide after resisting the Chinese invaders in the first century AD. The Trung sisters - Trung Trac and Trung Nhi - were daughters of a powerful Vietnamese landlord, who lived in the first century AD. Vietnam was under the rule of the Han dynasty; the Vietnamese women enjoyed more freedom than their Chinese counterparts. China was governed by Confucian values where women occupied a lower place. Feeling oppressed by the Chinese rule, the Vietnamese were exhorted to revolt and the Trung sisters organized a rebellion and formed an army of 80,000 men and women. They won back the territory conquered by the Chinese. In 42 AD the Chinese forces returned to recapture the territory. The Vietnamese fought hard, but were to be defeated. According to popular belief, the Trung sisters decided to take their own lives in the traditional manner of jumping into the river and drowning. The Trung sisters became symbols of Vietnamese resistance. Temples were later built in their honour

and the people of Vietnam celebrate their memory every year with a national holiday.

Ho Chih Minh was a great friend of China, he was well versed in Chinese history, culture and language; but, at the same time, as a keen student of history, he was also deeply sensitive to the threat posed by China to Vietnamese freedom. After the Second World War when the French colonialists wanted to re-establish their dominance over Vietnam, few Vietnamese nationalists wanted to use the Kuomintang forces as a buffer against the French Army. Ho Chih Minh, according to Andrew Forbes, cautioned his Vietminh colleagues and asked them to draw the right lessons from history. To quote Ho Chih Minh, “The last time the Chinese came, they stayed a thousand years. The French are foreigners. They are weak. Colonialism is dying. The white man is finished in Asia. But if the Chinese stay now, they will never go. As for me, I prefer to sniff the French shit for five years, than to eat Chinese shit for the rest of my life”.

Vietnam’s relations with the outside world, including China since the proclamation of independence on September 2, 1945, has undergone several twists and turns. Since the focus of my paper is on Vietnamese history before the Second World War, I shall not dwell on the important developments that took place during the three Indo- China wars and in subsequent years.

I would like to conclude the essay with a quotation from the well known scholar Andrew Forbes who aptly sums up Sino- Vietnamese relations. Andrew Forbes quotes from a novel, *Fried Gold*, written by the famous Vietnamese novelist Nguyen Huy Thiep. To quote: “The most significant characteristics of this country are its smallness and weakness. She is like a virgin girl raped by Chinese civilization. The girl concurrently enjoys, despises and humiliated by the rape”.

*Dr. V. Suryanarayan was Founding Director and Senior Professor, Centre for South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Madras.*

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