So one has to be careful answering questions in a Vietnamese class. If Bích asks me what my profession is, I must answer *phóng viên*, a journalist. But if Kinh asks, the answer is *ký giả*. Sometimes I am also a *nhà báo*. I guess it is nice to know one can be all of those at the same time.

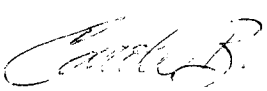
Strangely enough, it is the southerners more than the northerners who cling to Chinese words. I expected the opposite, simply because the northerners were so much closer to China geographically. "The Chinese came later to the South, explains Binh. And there were Chinese schools in the South until 1975. In the North there were no Chinese schools, only Vietnamese."

Most of the time, those differences are mentioned to us in a smooth, matter of fact way. But, sometimes, their sole existence seems to violently shake the apparent unity of our teachers' team. Last Friday, *Thầy* (teacher) Kinh, a sophisticated southerner who speaks fluently five languages, treasures his mother-tongue and can hardly hide his despise for the Hanoi regime, got suddenly angry at the textbook we are using. He said the word in the book for police, actually meant secret police not your average on the beat cop! An hour later, Bich, fuming, said the book was right and Kinh was wrong. I haven't had time yet to sort this one out! If I do, I will let you know.

For now, the last word will go to Lt-colonel Edouard Diguet who wrote in 1904 "Eléments de grammaire annamite".(9) For weeks, since I began studying Vietnamese, I had been looking for a way to spell two vowels of the Vietnamese alphabet: ư and ơ. My fellow students said "u hook". Lt-Colonel Diguet gave me a better word. He called them "barbu", the "bearded u", the "bearded a". Everytime I see one now I have a smile in memory of Lt-Colonel Diguet who loved the language so much he wrote its grammar and chided Europeans for "believing the tones were only graphic ornaments." (10)

I don't beleive the tones are graphic ornaments, Lt Diguet. I certainly don't. But I often wish I was a better singer.

More soon,



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(9). Edouard Diguet, Eléments de grammaire annamite, Imprimerie Nationale, Paris, 1904, foreword.

(10). Diguet, op.cit., foreword.

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Where do these people come from?

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Dear Peter,

Years ago, while fighting in Vietnam, American historian Keith Taylor was impressed by the intelligence and resolve of his "enemy". He kept asking himself: "Where did these people come from?".(1)

Taylor's question caught up with me during a lecture on Vietnamese history given at the University of Washington.

Until then, I had little taste for Vietnam's early history. My interest in Vietnam was born in the 80's, with *doi moi*, the Vietnamese equivalent of the Soviet perestroïka. I watched the crumbling of the Soviet Union, I heard the experts decree the end of Communism and I wondered: How would the Vietnamese face it all? I was curious about the future, not much about the past, much less about a past that went as far as the Roman Empire! But that was before I heard Helen Chauncey, a professor of Vietnamese history from the University of Victoria in British-Columbia, Canada.

"The Vietnamese language and culture survived a thousand years of Chinese occupation", she said during a talk to my beginning VIetnamese class at the University of Washington. "Vietnam's history is a perfect showcase for dilemnas most dramatically expressed in countries like Yugoslavia, and less dramatically in Canada. What makes a nation? How diverse can a country be before it begins to fall apart? What keeps it together?" My mind went racing.

(1). Keith Weller Taylor, The Birth of Vietnam, University of California Press, 1983, preface.

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As a French speaker in North America, I know what it means to keep a language alive in an overwhelmingly English speaking continent. I could not begin to imagine what a thousand years of Chinese language, education, administration and justice, would do to another culture. And yet the Vietnamese language had survived. The question began to nag me: "Gosh.. who are these people? How did they do it?"

Chauncey was given only an hour to summarize 2000 years of Vietnamese history (the Vietnamese say their history goes back as far as 3000 years, but that is another debate). It was an impossible task. But she did it well enough to send me scrambling for the thick books I had left unattended on my desk. A few weeks later, another scholar, Patricia Pelley from Cornell, gave a nine hour seminar on Vietnam's history. By then, I couldn't wait to hear more about the ancient Vietnamese.

Would you believe that in the 11th century, the Vietnamese were holding exams for civil servants in large outdoor fields surrounded by elephants and armed guards? (2) The exams went on for days. Applicants were required to write classical Chinese poetry and well documented essays on Chinese policies. How do you think Canadians or Americans would react if in order to become civil servants they had to write poetry in Shakespearian English?

So who were those Ancient Vietnamese? Had they come from China, as the Chinese claim? Or were they there before, in the Hong River Valley, in what is now known as northern Vietnam? Were they truly another civilization?

I am still not sure I have the answers. The matter is the object of quite an academic controversy.

The Vietnamese founding myth reads like a fairy tell. According to it, the Vietnamese people were the off-spring of a male dragon which came from the water, and of a female immortal who belonged to the land. (3) The hero, Lac Dragon Lord, was said to have come from the sea to teach people to cultivate rice and to wear clothes.

The Chinese have a different vision of history. They claim the origins of the Vietnamese people begin with the arrival of migrating *Yüeh* (barbarians) during the 7th century BC. Historians like Keith Taylor question this thesis, asserting that there is insufficient evidence to support the idea.

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(2) Alexander B. Woodside, Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam, East Asian Research Center, Harvard University, Houghton Mifflin Cie, Boston, 1976, p.14.

(3) Woodside, op.cit. p.191.

Others, such as historian Jean Pryzloski, say that the myth itself is proof that the Vietnamese identity finds its root not in a continental culture such as the Chinese one but in a prehistoric maritime civilization, just like the rest of Southeast Asia. "The source of political power and legitimacy, which attended the formation of the Vietnamese people in prehistoric times, is the earliest hint of the concept of the Vietnamese as a distinct and self-conscious people". (4)

According to archeologists, the different cultures of North Vietnam became united around the 7th century BC under the influence of the oldest bronze age culture of the region. At the same time, an "extraordinary man united all the tribes under his authority and took the title of Hung King". (5) For the Vietnamese, that is their true beginning, the time they were born as a people.

Chinese power had not yet reached Vietnam yet. The China of the time was way up north, restricted to the valley of the Yellow River, in what is now northern China.

How did the ancient Vietnamese call themselves? Well, nobody knows for sure. There are no Vietnamese records of that period. We know that the Chinese called them "Lac" and later on "Yüeh" (barbarians). But we don't know how the early "Vietnamese" call themselves. *Lac* is the earliest recorded name for the people of the Hong River. Japanese scholars have suggested *Lac* derives from the Vietnamese word *lach* or *rach*, which means ditch, canal or waterway. As for *Viet*, it is very simply the Vietnamese way of pronouncing *Yüeh*. And Nam means South! South of China, obviously. So that is how the Vietnamese people acquired their own name.

And what a people it was. The ancient Vietnamese were quite different from the Confucian Chinese! Their women enjoyed relatively high status. Inheritance rights could be passed on through both maternal and paternal line. Family authority was loose and individualistic tendencies ran high.(6) Theirs was a wealthy community, with a far-reaching trading culture. Bronze Vietnamese trading drums from that period have been found as far as India. They spoke a language borrowing from cultures as diverse as India, Jarai (a mountain tribe) and Thai.

But then, the Chinese arrived. "Vietnam emerges from legend and enters history during the first and 2nd century BC, in the Chinese annals, as a conquered province," writes French scholar Paul Mus.(7)

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(4). Taylor, op.cit. p.7, quoting Jean Pryzluski in "La Princesse a l'odeur de poisson et la Nagi dans les traditions de l'Asie orientale".

(5). Taylor, op.cit. p.4.

(6). Taylor, op.cit. p.13, quoting Yamamoto, "Myths", p.83.

(7). Paul Mus and John T. McAlister Jr, The Vietnamese and their Revolution, Harper and Row Publishers, 1970, p.49.

Caught between the imperial armies of the Chinese civilization and the trade routes of the hinduized civilization of India, ancient Vietnam becomes "an international entrepôt and a cultural battleground".(8)

For a thousand years onward, the ancient Vietnamese go through cycles of embracing Chinese culture and then rejecting it. Rebellions are numerous. In A.D. 29, two women raise an army and force the Chinese occupiers out of Vietnam. The Hai Ba Trung sisters (literally translated sister two and sister three) became national heroines even though their victory was short lived.

In the 11th century, the Vietnamese finally succeed in defeating the Chinese. The first independant Vietnamese dynasty is established. Christopher Colombus has not yet discovered America. Montreal and New York are nothing but forests roamed by the forefathers of todays's Native Americans. But in the area now known as Hanoi, thrives a cosmopolitan city named "Thang-Long" (Ascending Dragon), a world of temples and buddhist monks arrived by boat from India.

At the time, the Mekong Delta was not part of Vietnam. "Vietnam" does not extend further down then modern Hué. South of that is Champa, an hinduized kingdom, and Cambodia. The Vietnamese migration to the Mekong Delta takes place much later, around the 19th century.

"Those who went South were a little like the American pioneers moving West, says Helen Chauncey. It was a free spirited, open ended, individualistic society, just like our own Far West in the 1890's. Land was there to be grabbed. And that explains some of the cultural differences between the North and the South."

So history does help us understand the present. Just like it would have helped the United States Army, in 1968, to know about the Tay Son rebellion. (In 1789, a peasant rebellion led by the Tay Son brothers disregarded the celebration of Têt, the lunar New Year, and launched an uprising against the Vietnamese emperor of the time. They were victorious.) "The US military would have been well advised to know the Vietnamese history better", says Helen Chauncey, recalling the bloody 1968 Têt offensive during the "American War."

Is there something in Vietnam's early history that could help us now understand them and predict the future? "An interesting question", says Patricia Pelley, who is finishing a thesis on Vietnam's attempt and failure to attain a consensual view of its own past. But a difficult one to answer."

"When there is a lot of political dissent among Vietnamese, one of the ways they face it is by displacing it on the foreigners, to say it is the foreign people who create this dissent. I would not be shocked if at some point Vietnam became more restrictive about who enters the country and for what reason."

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(8). Taylor, op.cit. p.60.

Alexander Woodside, a Harvard-trained historian now teaching in Canada, calls the situation a "dead-lock". "It is very difficult to be a Communist these days in Vietnam," he says. "It is like living in a house with your great-grand-father, your grand-father and your father. And the great-grand-father is still giving orders! The prime minister of Vietnam is 76 years old. He was a house painter in Hanoi when he joined the party in the 1930's. The four generations are busy making treaties with each other, looking for some sort of consensus within the party that the four generations can agree to. That leads to deadlock. But beyond that drab governement is a rich society, a rich popular culture. Who knows what will happen.."

Helen Chauncey won't predict either. "Every time foreigners have tried to predict they have been wrong", she says. "In Vietnam you have a Communist party who looks at Eastern Europe and the ex Soviet Union and doesn't like what it sees. At the same time they are incapable of running an economy. Who knows what they will do? They are looking for a model. And they are not finding any."

Chauncey is a fervent partisan of increased teaching of Vietnam's history in American universities. Vietnam is the 12th largest country in the world and the 6th most populated one. It should be studied, says Chauncey, "because it's there". But teaching Vietnamese history in the States is not easy, she adds.

After ten years of teaching Chinese history at Georgetown University, Chauncey is moving this fall to the University of Victoria (British-Columbia, Canada) to teach Vietnamese history. She is not the first American to leave the United States to teach about Vietnam. One of the world most renowed English-speaking historians on Vietnam is an American living abroad: David Marr, professor at Australia's National University. Another famous one, Alexander Woodside, who was trained at Harvard, teaches in Canada, at the University of British-Columbia. "David Marr couldn't find a job in the States even though he is the best in his field," says Alexander Woodside, during an interview in his Vancouver office. "And me... well, I was born in Canada. And I got tired of American obsessions."

Helen Chauncey is as blunt. "There was a time, in the 1970's, when it was just impossible to do scholarly work on Vietnam in the United States."

"The American scholars on Vietnam, in the US are a small club", adds Joe Hannah, master thesis from Cornell on US policy toward Vietnam in the 1986-87 period. "We are talking about the number of people you can count on your two hands. But now, the numbers are growing quite rapidly."

About 300 courses on Vietnam are given right now on American campuses, says Helen Chauncey. But only six are not about the war between Vietnam and the United States! "For a long time in this country Vietnam was a war, not a country, or a culture or a historical experience."

"But that is slowly changing", says historian Patricia Pelley, 37, "Proof is you are here". "You" in that case is "us": about 50 students of the Southeast Asian Summer program, sitting in a dark auditorium of the University of Washington on a bright and sunny July afternoon.

Most are learning to speak Vietnamese; most are Americans, except for two or three. When Pelley began studying Vietnamese in 1983 at Cornell University, she was one of two students! "There was nothing happening at the time", she recalls.

When Joe Hannah, 31, an American graduate in International development and refugee worker, decided to go to graduate school in 1987, after spending a year in a refugee camp, he looked around different universities. "I couldn't find anything on history, or current events or political science related to Vietnam."

According to David Marr, a curious American going to his local library, or even a nearby university collection, "will have difficulty finding enough on domestic Vietnam since 1975 to compose a high school essay". Consulting major on-line computer data bases is not much more rewarding, writes Marr in a 1988 book.(9)

People like Taylor or Marr discovered Vietnam while fighting there. Others like Christine White, professor at the University of Hawai, discovered Vietnam while opposing the war. For Joseph Hannah and Patrica Pelley, the interest in Vietnam was born "from what came after the war: the refugees." Hannah and Pelley both worked in Seattle for the Refugee resettlement program. They represent another generation of scholars, one who who lived its formative years in a period when Vietnam was only talked about in "hushed whispers". "For us, Vietnam was like sex for teenagers", says Joe who was 15 when the war ended, "We knew it was important but we didn't know why."

Sitting in a Seattle café with his Vietnamese wife Hiên Hoang, Joe recalls a telling-anecdote about the changing atmosphere in the United States. At the time, he was studying at Cornell. The 80's were nearing an end. "A visiting professor offered a class on the Vietnam war, recalls Joe. It was probably one of the first classes like that in the country. In 1987, it was unheard of to teach a history class on the Vietnam war. It is bizarre now to think about it, but that is how it was. The professor asked for a room for about 35 students. Three hundred people signed up."

Last spring Patricia Pelley taught a seminar at Cornell on the history of 20th century Vietnam. Enrollment was limited at 17. A collegue told her she would never get that many students. "The class was heavily over suscribed, she now recalls. I kept refusing students. All their lives they had heard veiled

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(9) David G. Marr and Christine White, Postwar Vietnam: Dilemnas in socialist development, Southeast Asia Program, Cornell, 1988, p.7.

references to Vietnam. They knew it was a very politically and emotionally charged issue. They wanted to learn about it."

According to Helen Chauncey, what happened to Vietnam scholarship in the US is not very different from what happened to Chinese scholarship during the McCarthy era. "People who knew the country, particularly people who had a relationship with China, had to take a stand on Communist China or be accused of being part of the other side. That field was rebuilt first, and with some opposition from the United States government, from people who saw Taiwan as China, or people who thought that sending graduate students to mainland China meant supporting the Communists. The foundations played a major role in rebuilding the China field. Only now are we begining to see a serious rebuilding of the Southeast Asia field. But it is very encouraging."

So I continue to read Vietnamese history. I peer into it as I would into a crystal ball. I am especially interested in this "mandate of heaven" Paul Mus describes as being a strong belief among the Vietnamese peasantry, a belief that has sustained them through numerous abrupt changes of dynasties and regimes. "The Vietnamese have a sense of order of things which often expresses itself in a sudden and complete change of mind. Such change is, for them, inevitable; it occurs in response to a power greater than men(..). And when the will of heaven is expressed then men must adapt; they must synchronize a new their movement, their lives, to a new order." (10)

More than 80% of the Vietnamese population still toils the land. Do they still believe in the mandate from heaven? And if they do who do they think has it these days? Will they tell me if I ask? Will I understand their answer?

Facing questions like these, I often wish I had been a scout in Vietnam in the 1930's! There, recalls Alexander Woodside, kids studied *hoc goi* and *hoc mo* : the art of wrapping things up and opening them, which means learning to express thoughts and feelings indirectly and cryptically and learning how to understand the well-wrapped words of others.(11) Any idea where one can learn that these days?

Sincerely yours,

Carole Beaulieu
Seattle 10-08-92

Received in Hanover 8/18/92

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(10). Paul Mus, op.cit. p.17.

(11). Woodside, op.cit. p.147