

CHAPTER I:
VIETNAMESE PRE-COLONIAL CULTURE
FROM 18th CENTURY TO 1884



Figure 1: *A Female Donor*, 18th Century, Bút Tháp Temple, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

As the introduction implies, Việt-Nam has a long history of rivalling regimes: one thousand years of Chinese authority, one hundred years of French colonisation and from 1954, the rise of Vietnamese Socialism. Unravelling the impact of these influences is critical to understanding Vietnamese art but it is made complicated by unconvincing interpretations of the past. The post-1975 era witnessed a Socialist exaltation of the masses, accompanied by Socialist solutions to Neo-Confucian failures of the 1800s and the influence of French colonialism. In historical accounts, the pre-colonial era is interpreted as both ‘pure’ and ‘simple’ and conjures nostalgic notions of village life. While the exploitation of Việt-Nam by the Chinese and French was intense, this Socialist account is a simplification that romanticises pre-colonial society. For instance, the extent to which Vietnamese society, during this period, not only responded to but shaped foreign or external influences are obscured. Moreover, alternative influences such as patronage of the elite, trade and immigration, have been understated. This is not to suggest that village art was insignificant but, rather, to acknowledge other influences on art during the pre-colonial era that have been overlooked in current Vietnamese interpretations of earlier regimes.

This chapter questions the view that pre-colonial art is a form of ‘unaffected’ village art through an analysis of two prevailing opinions espoused by some influential Vietnamese communist art historians.¹ First, that folk art in village communal houses characterised the aesthetics of pre-colonial times and second, that this was the dominant form of Vietnamese traditional art. By taking into consideration the traditional visual culture of 18th century Việt-Nam, until the death of King Tự Đức (1829-1883) and the French 1884 Treaty of the Protectorate marking Việt-Nam’s loss of independence, two key aspects that shaped Vietnamese pre-colonial aesthetics are acknowledged:

¹ Thái Bá Vân, Chu Quang Trứ, Nguyễn Quân are discussed in the chapter.

(a) The diversity of influences resulting from migration and acquisition of new territories as typified by the emergence of the South as a successfully defended trading region. This diversity was characterised in everyday traditions and is apparent in the means by which Vietnamese ‘wet-rice culture’ shaped philosophical thinking.

(b) Chinese, Neo-Confucian and Buddhist influences were infused into traditional village art. The subsequent artistic imagination helped shape Vietnamese aesthetics, diplomatic ties, court decisions and the scholar gentry. It is evident in the imperial city of Huế that these influences were extensively reworked in the austere Buddhist sculptures in remote temples. Importantly, in acknowledging a range of influences in pre-colonial aesthetics, particularly of the court, this thesis differs markedly from the Vietnamese official view, which considers the art in Huế ‘reactionary’.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF PRE-COLONIAL CULTURE

Việt-Nam is an elongated country in the shape of an ‘S’ extending along a north-south axis from China, in the North to the Gulf of Siam, in the South. Through its geography, climate and history, the nation has evolved into three distinctive regions: North Việt-Nam with Hà Nội on the Red River, South Việt-Nam with Saigon around the Mekong River and central Việt-Nam with Huế on the Perfume River.

During the 18th and early 19th century, Việt-Nam was concurrently an old and new nation. For many contemporary Vietnamese historians, North Việt-Nam comprises 4,000 years of culture and to them Hà Nội, the capital for many dynasties since 1010,² appears conservative in adhering to its traditions and many rituals. These historians compare it to the ‘new land’ in the South acquired during the 17th century through

² Trần Quốc Vượng, 1996, *Theo Dòng Lịch Sử* (Along the Flow of History), Văn Hoá Thông Tin Publishers, p.10.

‘Nam Tiến’ (Southward Advance or Southward Expansion) and the Vietnamese annexation of Chăm (Champa) territory, which is regarded as ‘young’. In 1698, General Nguyễn Hữu Cảnh was appointed by Lord Nguyễn Phúc Chu (a Nguyễn Dynasty ancestor) to establish the first administrative post in Gia Định (part of Hồ Chí Minh City). The population was developed by peasants migrating to richer soil than that of their northern homeland and was boosted in 1679, by 3,000 Chinese troops seeking asylum from the Qing Dynasty. These immigrants to the south exercised tolerance toward each other and helped form the beginning of many diverse communities.

The formation of a united Việt-Nam in the early 19th century was initiated two centuries earlier by the Nguyễn Lords’, who aimed to create a new nation based on an old culture. The civil wars between Lê and Mạc Dynasties and between Trịnh and Nguyễn Lords from 1533 to 1788 had turned the nation into two regions called ‘Đàng Ngoài’ (outer region - the North) and ‘Đàng Trong’ (inner region – the South), separated by the Gianh River (Quảng Bình Province). Trịnh Lords, who claimed to serve Lê Kings, governed Đàng Ngoài. Nguyễn Lords ruled Đàng Trong but with more autonomy than their counterparts in the North, although Nguyễn Lords also declared their fealty to Lê Kings.

Đàng Ngoài was densely populated, while the land in Đàng Trong was fertile and relatively uninhabited. The connection between Đàng Ngoài and China constantly raised threats of invasion and cultural assimilation by its northern neighbour.³ Đàng Trong, on the other hand, was confident in dealing with the assimilation of outside cultures and from the 16th to the 18th centuries had constant exchanges with foreign

³ Đào Duy Anh, 2000, *Lịch Sử Việt-Nam* (Vietnamese History), Văn Hoá Thông Tin, p. 299. Also by Trần Quốc Vương, 1996, *Theo Dòng Lịch Sử* (Along the Flow of History), p. 7.

seafarers, through which developed the energetic port of Faifo⁴ (today's Hội An). Overall, South Việt-Nam was exposed to a wider variety of cultures and developed a greater diversity of characteristics than the north. Li Tana describes Đàng Trong in terms of openness:

The two-century long Nguyen period [17th and 18th] shaped many traits characteristic of southerners, such as their curiosity and tolerance towards new things and new ideas, their more open and spontaneous character, and their willingness not to be fettered by history and tradition.⁵

After Lord Nguyễn Phúc Ánh won his last battle against Tây Sơn in 1802, he reunited the nation, renamed it Việt-Nam and designated himself King Gia Long. After years of wars and uprisings, to regain stability he prioritised Neo-Confucianism as a national policy. Scholars, including Woodside⁶ and Marr⁷ argue that after 25 years of close contact with the West⁸, King Gia Long had opportunities to adopt a non-Confucian system.⁹ However, his dependence on French military aid may have influenced his decision to preserve Neo-Confucianism, with the intention of balancing East and West and so retain Vietnamese culture. Neo-Confucianism inevitably implemented Chinese practices through the reintroduction of Chinese written language in the administrative and education system. The remarkable contribution of the Sino-Vietnamese language (Nôm), created in the 13th century, to Vietnamese literary history, was put in jeopardy.

⁴ See Alexander Woodside, 1995, 'Central Vietnam's Trading World in the Eighteenth Century as Seen in Le Quý Đôn's "Frontier Chronicles"' in *Essays into Vietnamese Pasts*, edit. K.W. Taylor & John K. Whitmore, Cornell Southeast Asia Program

⁵ Li Tana, 'An Alternative Vietnam, The Nguyen Kingdom In The Eighteen And Nineteen Centuries', *Journal of South East Asia Studies*, March, 1998, v 29, n.1 p.111-122.

⁶ Alexander Barton Woodside, 1971, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model*, Oxford University Press, p. 16.

⁷ David Marr, 1971, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism 1885-1925*, University of California Press, p.22

⁸ Gia Long was trying to obtain military help from France, Portugal and Siam (now Thailand) in the fight against Tây Sơn regime.

⁹ See Woodside, 1971, *Vietnam and Chinese Models*, p. 16-18, for further explanation of why Gia Long embraced Confucianism.

It [Nôm] was a rather cumbersome system for representing the sounds of the vernacular with characters adapted from Chinese, but it had an electrifying effect on literature, freeing writers to explore and exploit the resources of their native culture.¹⁰

Master works in Nôm proved that it could express ideas and poetic beauty: *Cung Oán Ngâm Khúc* (Sorrow of an Abandoned Queen¹¹) by Nguyễn Gia Thiều (1741-1789); *Chinh Phụ Ngâm* (The Lament of a Warrior's Wife¹²) originally written in Chinese by Đặng Trần Côn (1715? -1745) and translated into Nôm by Đoàn Thị Điểm (1705-1748). *The Tale of Kiều* is the most well known work of Nôm literature, (also known as *Kim Vân Kiều*, after the three main characters) and initially titled *Đoạn Trường Tân Thanh* (A New Cry from a Broken Heart) by Nguyễn Du (1765-1820). This 3254-line poem follows a six and eight format (a six-word stanza followed by an eight-word stanza). Although *Kiều* was modified from Chinese literature, the six–eight verse format is essentially Vietnamese. The poem describes the fate of a beautiful and talented female named Kiều. The tragedy depicts 15 years of turmoil and unhappiness: Kiều must sacrifice her love and prostitute herself to save her father who was jailed on false allegations of theft. *The Tale of Kiều* became popular because of its many human circumstances and emotions. People learned to sing it from memory, tell fortunes through it and, in the 20th century base paintings on it. The archetypical personalities of the characters came to identify particular human traits by their names: Sở Khanh represented deceptive seduction of women; Hoạn Thư characterised jealous, malicious revenge and Từ Hải described brave and rebellious but gullible traits.

By triumphantly rescuing Vietnamese poetry from the stronghold of classical Chinese, Nguyễn Du performed for the vernacular what Dante had

¹⁰ Huỳnh Sanh Thông, 1983, *The Tales of Kiều*, A Bilingual edition of *Kiều*, Yale University Press, the introduction, p. xix.

¹¹ English translation by Nguyễn Ngọc Bích, 1975, *A Thousand Years of Vietnamese Poetry*, New York: Knopf.

¹² Ibid.

once done for Italian, by liberating it from its position of subservience to Latin.¹³

I draw two points from this description of 18th century Nôm literature. First, Chinese influence was embedded in Vietnamese literature but Chinese written characters in Nôm and six-eight verse poetry suggests modifications through Vietnamese imagination. Second, when Neo-Confucianism became the national ideology, Chinese writing and codes of behaviour were reinforced. However, the adoption of foreign models that incorporate Vietnamese ingenuity is a contradictory facet of Vietnamese culture and it would be a generalisation to consider one without the other.

Commitments undertaken by the Nguyễn Dynasty to Neo-Confucianism in the first half of the 19th century led to indifference toward western contacts and a prohibition on Christianity to safeguard Neo-Confucianism. The ban reinforced Việt-Nam's self-exclusion from the outside world and by the latter half of the 19th century aspirations toward modernity were neglected, unlike Japan and Thailand that had begun modernisation.

Nevertheless, while the monarchy reinforced insular traditional values, some notions of modernity emerged. Nguyễn Trường Tộ (1827-1871), a Vietnamese Catholic scholar and reformer, recommended to the King an innovative education system outlining practical and scientific studies. His restructuring proposal, *Eight Propositions for Warding off the Dangers that Lie Ahead*,¹⁴ expressed concerns about an increasingly elite and backward looking leadership.

At present there are many who still cannot understand the process of development leading from former times to our own time. Instead, they

¹³ Huỳnh Sanh Thông, 1983, *The Tales of Kiều*, A Bilingual edition of Kiều, Yale University Press, the introduction, p. xxi

¹⁴ Excerpts in English can be found in *Vietnamese Literature* by Nguyễn Khắc Viện & Hữu Ngọc, 1980, Red River Foreign Languages Publishing House, p.429-432.

ardently praise antiquity, asserting that succeeding ages cannot equal it. In everything, they [the Vietnamese scholar-gentry] want to return to former times. They have caused our country to take the wrong road and to become feeble, unable to develop and prosper.¹⁵

King Gia Long's regime failed to develop a prosperous Việt-Nam, despite earlier extensive western contacts in the 19th century. Some Vietnamese post-war historians claim that Neo-Confucianism contributed to the unresolved internal conflicts between rulers and the ruled and the difficulties the 'reactionary' court had with peasants.¹⁶ On the other hand, for historian Nola Cook, Neo-Confucianism under the Nguyễn Dynasty was not as strongly upheld as it was by the previous Lê Dynasty:

Everything pointed to the same conclusion: in comparison to past Vietnamese experience, the nineteenth century was no era of widespread Neo-Confucian resurgence, at least as indicated by high examination passes. On the contrary, on this set of indicators Nguyen Vietnam stood at the lowest point of the Confucian examination system.¹⁷

This suggests that 19th century Neo-Confucianism in Việt-Nam might have been less widespread and its impact not significant enough to be solely blamed for the many national 'failings.' Nevertheless, some post-war Vietnamese historians characteristically interpret art created in this period as 'reactionary art produced by a reactionary ideology.'¹⁸

¹⁵ Nguyễn Trường Tộ, cited by Mark W. McLeod in 'Nguyen Truong To, a Catholic Reformer at Emperor Tu Duc's Court', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, September 1994, v 25, n2, p325.

¹⁶ Đào Duy Anh, 2000, *Lịch Sử Việt Nam* (Vietnamese History, Văn Hoá Thông Tin Publishers, p. 460.

¹⁷ Nola Cook, 'Nineteenth-century Vietnamese Confucianization in Historical Perspective: Evidence from the Palace Examinations (1463-1883)', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, September 1994, v.25, n.2, p. 270-313.

¹⁸ This view is argued by art historian Nguyễn Phi Hoanh in his book *Mỹ Thuật Việt Nam* (Vietnamese Art), written in 1974 but not published until 1984 by Hồ Chí Minh City Publishing House.

Việt-Nam and its wet-rice culture.

Resilience and adaptability in Vietnamese culture originated largely from a common response to the environment. For instance, customs associated with the everyday are manifested through associations with water, family and religion. It is on these points that the imposition of Neo-Confucianism must be questioned.

Việt-Nam is a watery country and each square kilometre of land has more than a kilometre of waterways.¹⁹ The Vietnamese word for ‘country’ includes two separate words, one meaning ‘land’ (đất) and the other ‘water’ (nước). Water and soil are two symbolic substances traditionally worshiped by Vietnamese and rituals are performed around them after people move into a new house. Vietnamese formed a philosophy of living with water and land based on the impact of the climate: ‘wet rice culture.’ Lạc Long Quân (c.3000 BC) is regarded by Vietnamese as their legendary father and believed to have originated from the sea.²⁰ Keith Taylor notes that, “Beyond the details of these legends lies a basic psychological truth of ancient Vietnamese society: sovereign power came from the sea.”²¹ Similarly, the legends of Sơn Tinh (Genie of Mountains) and Thủy Tinh (Genie of Water) advised Vietnamese to construct dyke systems to deal with floods.²²

The lived environment in Việt-Nam is surrounded by water and before construction of modern irrigation systems in the 1920s, each village was defined by a communal house (đình), built in front of a pond or river and encircled by a group of dwellings. This

¹⁹ Trần Quốc Vượng, 2000, *Văn Hoá Việt Nam* (Vietnamese Culture), Văn Hoá Dân Tộc Publishers, p. 42.

²⁰ For full story, read Keith Weller Taylor, 1976, *The Birth of Vietnam*, University of California Press, Appendix A.

²¹ Ibid, p. 6.

²² For full story, please see Nguyễn Khắc Viện, 2000, *Vietnam A Long History*, Thế Giới Publishers, p.16, or <http://www.limsi.fr/Recherche/CIG/esontinh.htm>

environmental feature was the origin of water puppetry that developed into a unique form of pre-colonial entertainment.²³

The essence of water is that it changes shape according to its container. There is an old Vietnamese saying, “it’s round when stored in a spherical pot and long in a cylindrical pot.” However, the water is still water and retains its nature while showing a capacity to adjust to new contexts. For instance, after rice the most popular Vietnamese food is watery soups in the form of phở, made with flat rice noodles, and bún, made with round rice noodles. Each region is distinguished by its own version of this ‘soupy’ cuisine and uses the same main ingredients of: rice noodles, pork, beef or fish protein accompanied by vegetables. Local herbs and spices are added to distinguish regional differences: phở, bún ốc, bún riêu, bún thang, bún bò Huế, bún mắm, bún và rau, bún nước lèo etc...and can be identified by the latitudes of the nation.

Based on the idea of water-flexibility, Vietnamese culture over the centuries characteristically adapted and integrated new elements while retaining its essential qualities. Water-flexibility and purity was expressed through ritual practices and religiosity that defined codes of social behaviour. The cult of ‘ancestor worship’ was the substance – the water - which was ‘contained’ in numerous imported religions.

It is commonly thought that most Vietnamese practice ancestor worship, through which they credit their own existence and everyday achievements.²⁴ This belief connects individuals to their family, extended family and even to deceased relatives. In terms of individual decision-making, the family lineage takes priority and to make a mistake is to tarnish the ancestors’ reputations. An ancestral altar is prominently placed in most

²³ Gloria Contreras, ‘Teaching about Vietnamese Culture: Water Puppetry as The Soul of The Rice Fields’, *Social Studies*, January/February, 1995, v. 86, n.1. p.25(4)

²⁴ See more about this in Jamieson, 1993, *Understanding Vietnam*, University of California Press, p.22-24.

households, in front of which family ceremonies and gatherings are carried out. In pre-colonial times people would bow at the ancestral altar with greetings and requests to their ancestors when leaving the house and on return. In rural areas traditional families still practice this custom and great respect is paid to each deceased family member with extensive rituals on the anniversary of their death.²⁵

Ancestor worship is the core around which other beliefs have blended to be part of Vietnamese religious life. Even Catholicism, in the early 19th century, had to accept ancestor worship, after failed struggles with Vietnamese converts to eliminate it. For instance, when Prince Cảnh was sent to Paris with the priest Pigneau de Behaine to request French military aid, the young prince felt so well treated by the French priest that he converted to Christianity. On return to Việt-Nam, he refused to bow in front of his ancestral altar.²⁶ The royal family was shocked and their opinion regarding Christian filial piety was tainted. Likewise, the Cultural Revolution by the Communist Party of Việt-Nam could not substitute ancestor worship for the cult of the Party. Early in the 1980s, many families of Vietnamese Communist cadres began renewing ancestral altars in their houses after almost 30 years of neglect.²⁷

Buddhism is the religion that most compatibly blends with Vietnamese ancestor worship. In the beginning of the first millennium, Indian abbots travelled south via the Indian Ocean, then the Pacific Ocean, finally entering the Gulf of Tonkin and introduced Buddhism into Việt-Nam. They arrived with Indian merchants who came to obtain Eastern goods for their Roman customers, such as ivory, pearls, pepper,

²⁵ See details in *Culture, Ritual and Revolution in Vietnam*, 2002, by Shaun Kingsley, RoutledgeCurzon, p. 138-142.

²⁶ Nguyễn Khắc Ngữ, 1990, *Tây Phương Tiếp Xúc với Việt Nam* (The West Made Contact with Việt-Nam), Tủ Sách Nghiên Cứu Sử Địa, Montreal, p. 126. A letter by Pigneau de Behaine can be found in *Saigon Mistress of the Mekong*, translated by Anastasia Edwards.

sandalwood and the like. Later, abbots who travelled by land arrived in Việt-Nam from the North to establish in the town of Luy Lâu (now in Bắc Ninh Province), a Buddhist centre sponsored by Indian traders.

Buddhist teachings share similarities with Vietnamese ethics and an old Vietnamese expression, “The son will be thirsty if the father consumes too much salt,” highlights the familial relationship between cause and consequence or the karma that one can suffer. According to Buddhism, individuals could even save their ancestors from the sufferings of the inferno (Ullambana). The story of Mục Kiền Liên (Mu-Chien-Lien in Chinese and Maudgalyayana in Sankrit),²⁸ who visited Hell to beg mercy for his profane mother, became so popular in Việt-Nam that it led to the creation of a Vietnamese Mother’s Day. The Buddhist concept of filial piety, the foundation of a Vietnamese way of life,²⁹ is strongly recommended in Buddhist mantras and as Nguyễn Thế Anh observed, Vietnamese Buddhism is summarised in a common axiom expressing a popular belief, “The soil belongs to the king, the pagoda to the village and the landscape to Buddha.”³⁰

The Buddhist monk, Venerable Vạn Hạnh Lý Thái Tổ, raised the first king of the Lý Dynasty (1009-1225), King Lý Thái Tổ, at which point, Vietnamese Buddhism arrived on the political stage, followed by the employment of a succession of Buddhist priests as advisers in their court. However, it was during the Trần Dynasty (1225-1400) that Vietnamese Buddhism established its philosophy through the Zen Trúc Lâm School in the Yên Tử Mountains. King Trần Nhân Tông (reigned 1278-1293), who led Việt-Nam

²⁷ Trần Quốc Vượng mentions this restoration in his book *Văn Hoá Việt Nam, Tìm Tòi và Suy Ngẫm* (Vietnamese Culture, Researches and Reflections), 2000, p. 32.

²⁸ For full story find: <http://www.limsi.fr/Recherche/CIG/emuckien.htm>

²⁹ <http://www.quangduc.net/English/ullambana/11filialpiety.html>

³⁰ Nguyễn Thế Anh, 2002 ‘From Indra to Maitreya: Buddhist Influence in Vietnamese Political Thought’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, (June), v. 33, i.2, p.225 (17).

to victory over the Mongolians in 1285 and again in 1288, was the school's founder. He joined the temple in 1299³¹ and over the years produced many interpretive books on Buddha's teachings. For more than a century, the philosophy of the Trúc Lâm School gained strength as the mainstream ideology with unreserved support from the Trần royal family. The historian Lê Văn Hưu noted in *Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư* (The Complete History of Great Viet), "More than half of the population are monks and Buddhist temples are everywhere."³² In the 15th century, Buddhist power diminished when the Lê Dynasty established Confucianism based on the Chinese model. However, subsequent rulers tended to accept Buddhism as a conventional belief.

Vietnamese administrators routinely documented how many temples kings built after they ascended the throne, in order to monitor their moral authority and commitment to national wellbeing.³³ In the 17th century, war between the Trịnh and Nguyễn families divided the nation and Buddhism was re-introduced in both regions, followed by a thriving construction of temples and pagodas. However, in the 19th century, the Nguyễn Dynasty began replacing Buddhism with Neo-Confucianism and various measures were put in place to control the growth of Buddhism, such as monitoring both the number of Buddhist temples built and the recruitment of monks.

Confucianism was introduced in the 1st century AD, after the Chinese Han Dynasty invaded Việt-Nam. It was followed by the circulation of Chinese language and customs to consolidate their rule. In 1070, King Lý Thánh Tông of the Lê Dynasty honoured scholarship by establishing the Temple of Literature in Hà Nội. Later, a

³¹ All the kings of the Trần Dynasty abdicated in favour of their crown princes and acted as superior advisor for the new kings before absolute retirement that often led them to a Buddhist monastery.

³² Lê Văn Hưu, 1983, *Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư* (The Complete History of Việt), translated by Ngô Đức Thọ, Văn Hoá Thông Tin, p.360.

³³ Hà Văn Tấn, 1993, *Chùa Việt-Nam* (Buddhist Temples in Vietnam), Social Sciences Publishing House, p. 94-146 (English version).

golden age of Neo-Confucianism was ushered in under King Lê Thánh Tông, which dominated ideology in Vietnamese society. Between them, these kings created a scholar gentry that formed the intellectual life of the nation and promoted loyalty to the monarchy.

While Buddhism solved an individual's worldly sufferings through karma and determined their destiny, Confucianism helped manage the worldly life and transact it successfully. Vietnamese history has witnessed these two religions compete with each other for political power. Mandarin scholars Lê Văn Hưu, Lê Quát and Trương Hán Siêu were hostile toward Buddhism on the grounds that labour and materials were wasted on monasteries.³⁴

Taoism accompanied the arrival of Confucianism with the first Chinese invasion of Việt-Nam and offered leaders philosophical strategies of non-violence, compassion and humility, together with concepts like being, non-being, virtue, desire, favour and disgrace. As a reaction against rigid Confucianism, Vietnamese people began interpreting Taoism in terms of its principles of nothingness and quiet retirement (abstention), as a special way to reach *Tao* – The Way. There was a tendency for Confucianism to be practiced by the young and energetic, while Taoism was reserved for their old age and many Vietnamese scholars retired to their hometown to enjoy the tranquillity of nature. While Confucianism raised the poetic skills of Vietnamese gentry-scholars, Taoism highlighted poetic relations and offered interpretive ways of living with nature.

Taoism also shared qualities with Vietnamese animism – the worship of nature's power as mysterious and fundamental to humanity. Traditional Vietnamese culture emphasised the nation's watery landmass, which is reflected in the legend and practice

³⁴ Nguyễn Khắc Viện, 2002, *Vietnam, a Long History*, Thế Giới Publishers, p.52-55.

of Tứ Pháp, the Four Gods of Nature: the Cloud God; Rain God; Thunder God and Lightning God. Animist belief was so significant that the Chinese governor Shih Hsieh (137-226) had four pagodas built, accompanied by four statues to venerate these gods.³⁵ Native Vietnamese animism also included the worship of Goddesses³⁶ but it remains unclear whether this is a trademark of a vanishing matriarchy or devotion to Âu Cơ, the legendary mother who gave birth to one hundred sons and claimed to be the source of Việt-Nam's nationhood. Animism is not weighted with concepts but constitutes flexibility and, along with the cult of ancestor worship, remains more of a belief than a systematised religion.

The worship of gods and goddesses plays an active role in Vietnamese social life and in the arts. There is a God of the Kitchen (Táo Quân); God of the Land (Thổ Công, Thổ Địa); God of the town or village (Thần Hoàng) and especially Gods of the crafts. Each profession or craft has a God as the First Master and the craft becomes the main business of a community. The Lady of Sugar Cane is worshiped as creator of the sugar industry in Mía Temple (Hà Tây Province). Some special national heroes and heroines like Hai Bà Trưng and Trần Hưng Đạo, as well as artisans like Trần Lữ as the founder of lacquer, the monk Không Lộ as the founder of bronze casting, are worshiped as gods, as are numerous scholars for their contributions to the nation.

The combination of the cult of ancestors, animism, Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism was smoothly integrated into Vietnamese pre-colonial cultural life, and still is today. In the 1990s a resurgence of interest in belief systems and systematised religions had a profound effect on Vietnamese aesthetics. Those who practice Confucianism might also be Buddhists or a Buddhist might practice Taoism at his or

³⁵ The story can be read in the book, *Cổ Châu Pháp Vân bản hạnh* (Ancient Book on the Cloud God) at Dâu Pagoda.

her own will. People go to Buddhist temples and pray for heavenly salvation from their ancestors, while Confucian values are highly respected because they glorify filial piety. Taoism and animism are practiced in the belief that they will deliver good fortune to the family and eternal rest for their ancestors. The idea of water flexibility shaped the way Vietnamese embrace all these religions and how they see the world.

AESTHETICS IN THE PRE-COLONIAL PERIOD

The flexible but determined Vietnamese culture had one thousand years of Chinese influences that incorporated the traditions of: Neo-Confucianism; 18th century pre-colonialism, the scholar-gentry and the elite, as well as various religious practices and rituals. The incorporation of these ideas into Vietnamese aesthetics of the era raises questions about modern interpretations of this period.

Vietnamese post-war art historians³⁷ and art policy makers focus on the masses, as both history-makers and art producers. They have long argued that the masses alone and not the ruling elite make history.

All the characteristics and superiority of Vietnamese culture are crystallized in the culture of villages. For many reasons and historical conditions, what really made up the Vietnamese national culture is its folk culture.³⁸

Native culture was emphasised through folk art and considered by post-colonial historians as superior to art with foreign influences. This led to the celebration of folk art for its purity and for it to assume its pre-eminent role in Vietnamese art history. By

³⁶ Mẫu (Mother God); Bà Chúa Thượng Ngàn (Goddess of the Upper Lands) or Thiên Mụ (Goddess of Heaven) or Pô Nagar.

³⁷ Post war historians / art historians referred to are those who represent the post-1975 official Communist mainstream.

³⁸ Trần Quốc Vượng, 2000, *Văn Hoá Việt Nam* (Vietnamese Culture), Văn Hoá Dân Tộc Publisher & Tạp Chí Văn Hoá Nghệ Thuật, p.69

ignoring other sources of inspiration and the social contexts in which they were produced, art historians became obsessed with two questions.

(a) Was Vietnamese art a minor copy of Chinese art?

Việt-Nam's culture has been misunderstood as a branch of Chinese culture due to nearly one thousand years of domination by having to share the Chinese written language and its religions. However, although both are Asian nations and have common characteristics, there are many differences.

Imperial China's nobility and landlords were patrons in the development of their nation's art. Furthermore, their support was formally acknowledged in both the artworks and in history. Whereas in Việt-Nam, peasants worked part-time on crafts in villages or craft communes and mostly practiced native art, which remained anonymously entwined within religions and beliefs.

(b) Was there Vietnamese painting in pre-colonial times?

Despite the fact that Việt-Nam shared with China the calligraphy brush, silk paintings are not abundant in Vietnamese art history. This leaves little room for allegations that Vietnamese aesthetics imitated the Chinese and raises two possibilities. First, Vietnamese paintings in pre-colonial times were destroyed by climate and wars. Second, Vietnamese paintings were not created in large quantities because artistic expression might have been dealt with through: textiles, garden-designs or religious prints.

While dealing with these questions, some examples of the late 17th century will also be examined because they share similar themes to the 18th and 19th century.

Folk Art

Is there a traditional visual culture in Việt-Nam?

What was Vietnamese aesthetics before French colonialism?

Throughout its history the identity of Việt-Nam has been a contradiction in that despite Chinese invasions and resisting assimilation, its courts and scholars adopted the Chinese academy as the model to follow – that is, until they faced the western system. The endorsement of Chinese culture in Vietnamese aesthetics was shaped partly from appreciation of its beauty and partly from assimilation of Confucianism. However, the adoption of Chinese influences was always moderated by native cultural endeavours. This confrontation led to a common concept in Vietnamese: ‘đồ ta’ (our objects) as opposed to ‘đồ Tàu’ (Chinese objects). The use of ‘ta’ suggests love and care, which is expressed in the following folk song:

Let's return to have a bath in our pond,
Whether it's transparent or not,
Ours is more preferable.

The song reveals a Vietnamese preference for its own artefacts as opposed to imports from China and asserts a national inclination toward familiarity and preservation. The majority of pre-colonial Vietnamese lived in rural villages with rigid social structures reflected in the proverb, “The king’s law is under the village customs.” Two or three villages formed a commune, with ‘villages and communes’ (làng xã) a fundamental unit of pre-colonial administration.

In their book, *Art in the Vietnamese Village*,³⁹ Vietnamese art historians Nguyễn Quân and Phan Cẩm Thượng, refer to native art before French occupation as ‘village art.’

³⁹ Published in 1991 by Fine Arts Publishing House.

Researchers Nguyễn Bá Vân and Chu Quang Trứ⁴⁰ called it folk art on the grounds of its anonymity and having been made by the masses. The influence of State policy on mobilising the masses to revolt can be recognised through the motto, “Workers, peasants and toiling people, are the masters of the State.”⁴¹ This exaltation of the masses is adhered to in the historical accounts referred to above.

‘Folk art’ includes painting and sculpture, practiced by villagers and was understood to be crafts that were integrated into daily life. Crafts, in general, were strongly attached to rural communities, leading to the concept of ‘craft villages’ (làng nghề), which at one time totalled 800 various crafts in the Red River Delta, alone.⁴² To list a few: Bát Tràng with ceramics; Đông Hồ with wood prints; Đông Kỳ with wood carvings and furniture; Đình Bảng with lacquer; An Thái with “dó” paper; La Khê with weaving and Nga Sơn with mats. The 36 streets in ‘the old quarter’ of Hà Nội were craft communities and in the 17th century, when Việt-Nam expanded its territory, these skills were taken southward with the population. However, compared with their northern partners, these new craft villages were flexible and less concentrated on one craft.

Đình in the pre-colonial cultural life of Việt-Nam.

The most notable site for folk art is the communal house in each village - the ‘đình’. According to Hà Văn Tấn and Nguyễn Văn Kự,⁴³ the oldest intact đình in existence, is in Lỗ Hạnh (Hiệp Hoà district, Bắc Giang Province) and dates to the 16th century. The

⁴⁰ Nguyễn Bá Vân, Chu Quang Trứ, 1984, *Tranh Dân Gian Việt Nam* (Vietnamese Folk Painting), Văn Hóa Publishing House p. 7.

⁴¹ Lê Duẩn, 1967, *On the Socialist Revolution in Việt-Nam*, Foreign Language Publishing House, p. 65.

⁴² Đỗ Long, Trần Hiệp, 1993, *Tâm Lý Cộng Đồng Làng và Di Sản* (The Communal Psyche of Villages and Heritage), Social Sciences Publishing House, p. 44.

⁴³ Hà Văn Tấn & Nguyễn Văn Kự, 1998, *Đình Việt-Nam*, (Community Halls), Hồ Chí Minh City Publishing House, 1998.

đình, from a western viewpoint, can be seen as combining a town hall, a church and a theatre. In Vietnamese rural society these functions are not separated as they are in the west, but are smoothly integrated.

The đình is the place to meet and discuss all village affairs, to judge lawsuits, to impose fines, etc. in accordance with village norms... a place to worship the village deity... the place to perform all kinds of theatre and songs, such as chèo (opera) or Hát cửa đình (singing at the door of the đình).⁴⁴

The importance of the đình is reflected in the five ranks of the village: notables and mandarins; functionaries; literati; village elders and commoners.⁴⁵ Seating order in these communal houses and the amount of food presented at feasts revealed an individual's rank and social status. A common saying was, "a slice [of food] at a đình is worth a tray in the home kitchen." Throughout the year, villagers were involved in ceremonial customs that included rituals, feasts and processions: spring and autumn festivals; welcoming home a graduate mandarin; celebration for turning 18 years of age and becoming a 'taxpayer' and ceremonies for the village deity. Visual culture and performances were nurtured in communal houses long before the appearance of professional theatres and art academies.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 70.

⁴⁵ Đào Duy Anh, 2000, *Việt-Nam Văn Hoá Sử Cương* (Concise History of Vietnamese Culture), Culture & Information Publishers, p.146.



Figure 2: Đình Bảng Communal House, 18th Century, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Most of the early đình were stilt structures, consisting of several main compartments and two subordinate sections. It remains unclear if this character is a continuity of the stilt house recorded on the Ngọc Lũ bronze drum dated 300BC. A typical example of the architectural structure is, *Đình Bảng Communal House* (fig.2) built in 1736 in Bắc Ninh Province. It has seven main compartments with two subordinate sections at the sides, all enclosed in a space 20 metres long, 14 metres wide and 8 metres high.



Figure 3: Curving Roof of Đình Bảng Communal House, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.



Figure 4: Decoration on Beams of Đình Bảng Communal House, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

The roof occupies two-thirds the height of the house and slopes down 45 degrees but the four curved lines of the roof reduce the ‘visual’ weight of the massive roof (fig.3). A Đình is the largest building in a Vietnamese village but it is no comparison to religious architecture elsewhere in Asia, such as The Wild Goose Pagoda in China or Angkor Vat in Cambodia. In order to compensate for modesty of size, the đình has carvings integrated into its architecture with the intention to expand the perspectives (fig.4).

Pagodas and temples are decorated with images in accordance with regulations governing religious representations, but images in the đình are almost the opposite. Sculptures in the đình, especially in North Việt-Nam, are vivid expressions of human activities such as: hunting; fishing; harvesting; farming; playing chess; shopping at open markets or honouring a scholar returning to his village. Forms flow with casual animation and planar perspectives are manipulated according to available space. This has led to carved figures frequently being out of proportion, with the body too small for the head, conveying a naive joy and humour to the carvings.

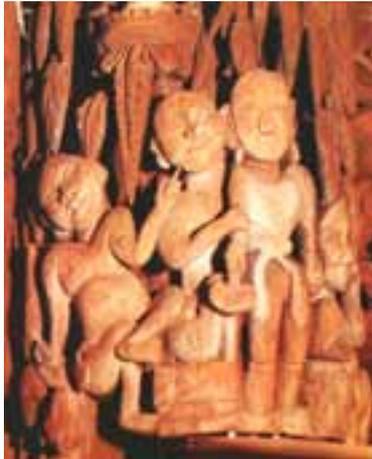


Figure 5 (left): Carving at a Đình, Young Men and a Woman Playing, photograph extracted from Đình Việt Nam by Hà Văn Tấn & Nguyễn Văn Kự.

Figure 6 (right): Carving at a Đình, Playing Chess, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Folk art in the đình advocates natural relationships and communication between men and women, courtship, love and everyday activities (figs. 5-6). In this context art in the đình is seen as contrary to court art produced under Confucian values that was opposed to contact between the sexes.

Buddhist temples and ‘high’ art in pre-colonial times

Another avenue to access pre-colonial Vietnamese art is through Buddhist temples. While the đình was the hub of community life, temples were remote and required a pilgrimage. Temples were always located in attractive sites, therefore going to a temple incorporated sightseeing and relaxation. Tây Phương Temple (Hà Tây Province) was built on top of Tây Phương hill and visitors must climb 237 laterite-paved steps to the entrance. Bút Tháp Temple (fig.7), on the other hand, lies on the flat plane of Hà Bắc Province, surrounded by large rice paddies. Literature on these temples is scarce but sources date their origin to before the 16th century and Trịnh Lords undertook restoration in the 18th century.



Figure 7: Part of Bút Tháp Temple, the Tịch Thiện Am House, photograph from *The Pagoda Bút Tháp, Architecture/ Sculpture*.

Bút Tháp (the Pen Tower) is a nine-floor wooden octahedral tower complex of various architectural elements: the gate; the double storey bell-tower with eight roofs; the vestibule; the great hall; the pen-shaped stone tower and a pagoda called ‘Gathering the Goods.’

Architectural structures in the đình have an abundance of entwined carvings that have little aesthetic value in temples or pagodas, where three-dimensional sculptures possess the most religious significance. Bút Tháp is renowned for the wooden carving (dated 1656) of *Kwan Yin with One Thousand, Eyes-One Thousand Hands* (figs.8-9), who is portrayed as having 42 arms and a halo of 952 arms, with each hand holding an eye. The two metres tall *Kwan Yin* sits on a lotus pedestal held up by a unicorn that arises from a pool-like pedestal. This classical representation of Kwan Yin, with

dancing female arms, is a well-composed carving and is unique in that it bears an inscription of the artist's name, Mr Trương.⁴⁶



Figure 8: Kwan Yin, Bút Tháp Temple, 1656, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.
Figure 9: Kwan Yin, details, replica at the Museum of History in Ho Chi Minh City, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

⁴⁶ Nguyễn Quân & Phan Cẩm Thượng, 1989, *Mỹ Thuật của Người Việt* (The Arts of the Vietnamese) Fine Arts Publishing House, p.190



Figure 10 (left): A Female Donor, 18th Century, photograph from *The Pagoda Bút Tháp, Architecture/ Sculpture*.

Figure 11 (centre): A Female Donor, 18th Century, photograph from *The Pagoda Bút Tháp, Architecture/ Sculpture*.

Figure 12 (right): An Elderly Monk, 19th Century, photograph from *The Pagoda Bút Tháp, Architecture/ Sculpture*.

Bút Tháp Temple⁴⁷ is remarkable in the sculptures of various princesses, queens, monks and temple donors. These wooden statues are highly individualised and could be compared to a passport photograph. A life-size portrait of a female donor in her mid-thirties with a melancholy expression reflects an unhappy life (fig.10). The sunlight shimmers on her grieving face and accentuates her loneliness, as if waiting for the return of her husband. Another portrait of a female donor (fig.11) is unusual in its representation of strong-willed women. It depicts a determined looking personality with phoenix-like eyes and tightly closed lips, demonstrating similarities to the portrait of an elderly monk (fig.12), with high cheekbones and square face typical of northern men. Compared to the stylised symbolism in most statues of Buddha, these portraits record real people.

⁴⁷ See Hoàng Đạo Kính, 1993, *The Pagoda Bút Tháp, Architecture and Sculpture*, State Centre for Restoration of Cultural Monuments.



Figure 13: Tây Phương Temple, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.



Figure 14, Figure 15 and Figure 16: Lohans at Tây Phương Temple, photographs by Boi Tran Huynh.

Tây Phương Temple has three parallel buildings (fig.13), which house 18 pre-colonial statues of Lohans⁴⁸ that are considered by all Vietnamese art historians as masterpieces of 18th century sculpture (figs.14-16).

Most statues in Vietnamese temples are differently proportioned, in terms of western criterion, in that they have a large head with a body occupying only 3.5 to 4 times the length of the head. The Eighteen Lohans in Tây Phương Temple are, however, anatomically correct in that the proportion is 6.5 times the length of the head, and have expressive postures that display a good understanding of composition. Vietnamese art historians claim that Wu Deng Hui Yuan of the Chinese Song Dynasty and San Cai Tu Hui of the Chinese Ming Dynasty based the statues on sketches.⁴⁹ Notwithstanding the extent that Vietnamese artisans relied on these sketches, a two-dimensional plan cannot provide all the information for constructing three-dimensional volume. The sculptural rendering displays the emotional gestures of: happiness; sadness; indifference; melancholy and anger, indeed, the sculptures are as realistic as snapshots of living people.

⁴⁸ Also called “Arhats”, who were described as attaining religious perfection of Buddhism. Chu Quang Trứ, *Tây Phương Pagoda*, p. 106.

⁴⁹ Chu Quang Trứ, 1998, *Tây Phương Pagoda*, Fine Arts Publishing House, p. 106.



Figure 17 (left): Bohdisatva, 19th Century, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 18 (centre): Serving Maid, 19th Century, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh

Figure 19 (right): Vajrapâni, 18th Century, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Three cultural styles are evident in Tây Phương Temple. Demonstrating the first are the 18 Lohans in the main hall, accompanied by similarly proportioned statues of *Bohdisatva Buddha* (fig.17) and Guatama Buddha of Himalaya. The second style is characterised by a series of figures that are not in proportion but emphasise symbolism, such as *Serving Maids* (fig.18). These sculptures display similarities to the folk carvings and bas-reliefs in a đình. The third style is shown in the temple guardian statues (Vajrapâni), which are always located at the entrance and are little or no different to Chinese versions (fig.19). Their height almost reaches the roof and creates an intimidating feeling. These three styles of sculptures show the additions to Vietnamese temples through different periods and indicate that Chinese influence is only partial.

Likewise, Vietnamese artisans have a variety of representations of Sakyamuni Buddha statues. For instance, different styles of statues of Sakyamuni at the Himalayas are in four temples: Nễ Châu Temple; Mía Temple; Tây Phương Pemple and Bút Tháp Temple.

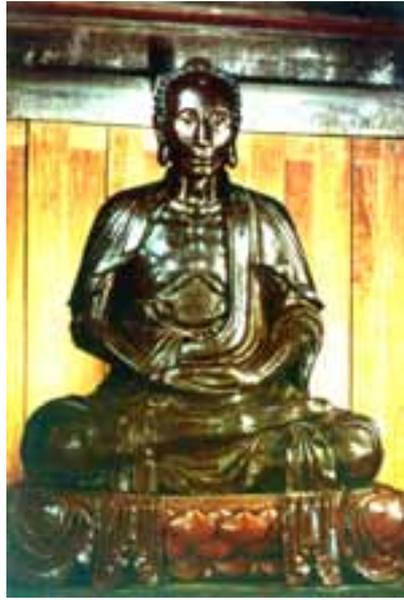


Figure 20: *Sakyamuni* at Bút Tháp Temple, late 17th Century, photograph from *The Pagoda Bút Tháp*.

Figure 21: *Sakyamuni* at Tây Phương Temple, 18 Century, photograph from *Buddhist Temples in Vietnam*.

The *Sakyamuni at Bút Tháp Temple* (fig.20) is so detailed that it could well represent a real meditating northern Vietnamese priest. Anatomy is beautifully represented on that part of the body which is partly naked, and the flowing folds of the robe that follow the curves of the arms and lower limbs display an overall effect of serene composure. In contrast, *Sakayamuni at Tây Phương Temple* (fig.21) reveals a Buddha with exaggerated head, ears, chest and arms, to convey his search for enlightenment through starvation. Although his face portrays calm meditation, the stiff straight lines of his chest, arms and hands contradict the appearance of serenity.

The vernacular version of *Sakayamuni at Mía Temple* (fig.22) is a clear shift from religious iconographics to that of common life. A scrawny undernourished layman sits in the relaxed pose typical of elderly Vietnamese but his closed, frowning eyes reveal worries. In harmonising detail, his chest is partially covered by a scrappy cloth as it sags downwards to cover the lower body.



Figure 22: Sakyamuni at Mía Temple, 18th Century, photograph from Buddhist Temples in Việt-Nam.

Figure 23: Sakyamuni at Nễ Châu Temple, late 17th Century, photograph from Teaching Kit, the Fine Arts University of Hà Nội.

The *Sakayamuni* at *Nễ Châu Temple* (fig.23) goes even further in realistically expressing the suffering of malnutrition. A seated, bony-cheeked old man with skeletal limbs reveals unhappiness in his downward gaze. The statue does not follow anatomical accuracy but gains its impact through expressive representation.

Vietnamese Buddhist sculptures, particularly the four Sakayamuni statues, show some Chinese influences but on the whole they have their own aesthetic of unadorned humanistic forms. Countless other statues were commissioned by royalty and set the standards for many that are considered classic examples of Vietnamese Buddhist art.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Nguyễn Phi Hoanh, Nguyễn Quân, Phan Cẩm Thượng, Trịnh Quang Vũ are the art historians who appraise these works.

It is arbitrary to describe these temple sculptures as ‘folk art or village art’ as many historians do.⁵¹

Folk art and craft is based on repetition with little variation from one village or community to another and tends to depict spontaneous and everyday human activity. In contrast, classical art requires skills in accuracy, anatomy, devotion to detail and complexity. Although many works of the pre-colonial time were anonymous and housed in villages, many of them were created with high quality. Therefore, it is inappropriate to categorise all pre-colonial works as village art or folk art just because it was from a village or unsigned.

Folk Prints in pre-colonial times

Woodblock prints probably originated in the Lý Dynasty (1010-1225)⁵² and technically improved under the Hồ Dynasty when Hồ Quý Ly introduced paper currency (notes) for the first time in Việt-Nam’s history. The denomination of each note was indicated by different images: waves; clouds; dragons; turtles; unicorns or phoenix. Vietnamese history records that the diplomat, Lương Như Hộc, born in Hồng Liễu village, Hải Dương Province, was sent to China as an envoy of King Lê Thái Tông (reigned 1434-1442). In his spare time he studied the techniques of Chinese woodblock printing and circulated the method upon his return to Việt-Nam. The Nguyễn Đăng family in Đông Hồ village records 20 generations of manufacturing folk prints which are recognisable by their naive outlook and simplicity in representing agrarian society. This is also the main feature of carvings in village communal houses.

⁵¹ Nguyễn Quân & Phan Cẩm Thượng, 1991, *Mỹ Thuật Ở Làng* (Art in the Vietnamese Village), Fine Arts Publishing House.

⁵² Nguyễn Bá Vân & Chu Quang Trứ, 1984, *Tranh Dân Gian Việt-Nam* (Vietnamese Folk Prints), Văn Hoá Publishing House, p.29.

Multi-woodblock printing in Đông Hồ village uses numerous blocks for the colours required and a final block for the black contour. Simple lines and large planes of natural bright colours are features of these works as is the layer of crushed shell used to create the shiny effect of silk. The prints are displayed as an unframed informal compliment to the interior of every household.

Đông Hồ village also produces joss-paper items for burning, a Tao tradition still practiced today. They are used to accompany the worship of many deities, including the God and Goddess of sky, land, and water. By burning joss-paper images of clothing, houses or vehicles, for instance, it is believed to be a way of offering deceased loved ones what they might need in their afterlife. The market driven economy of the 21st century has witnessed many families burning joss-paper images of American dollar bills for their ancestors. When a funeral convoy passes by, joss-papers copies of American money blows in the wind before the ashes settle on the ground.



Figure 24: A Flock of Chickens.

In general, Vietnamese folk prints are used to symbolise good fortune, worship or commemoration and are conveyed mainly through metaphoric images of animals. A

Flock of Chickens (fig.24) portrays a happy family reuniting for Tết, a compelling duty for every Vietnamese.



Figure 25: A Pig.

The most unusual decorative folk print of Đông Hồ is *A Pig* (fig.25). Its mouth is embellished into a smile, accompanied by colourful patches of yin and yang motifs on its body that exaggerates the pig's whirling hair.

Folk prints went further than other visual art forms in critiquing social injustice and unpleasant customs. Alluding to the common practice of corruption through bribery, *Mouse's Wedding* (fig.26) portrays mice carrying gifts to a cat so that a ceremony can peacefully proceed.



Figure 26: Mouse's Wedding.

In an obvious attack on adultery, *Jealousy Scene* (fig.27) depicts a young man whose hand rests his lover's naked breast while she taunts the wife with her long hair. His angry wife wields a pair of scissors, suggesting her revenge on both mistress and husband.



Figure 27: Jealousy Scene.

The print, *Toad Teacher* (fig.28) criticises a Confucian teacher's mistreatment of his students. It portrays a classroom where students serve their master by beating disobedient classmates with a bamboo stick. Large and small toads in their usual postures create a noisy scene that disrupts the teacher's attempts to circulate knowledge.



Figure 28: Toad Teacher.

Folk prints became part of traditional Vietnamese culture, and some, are still appreciated in all households, especially in times of celebration and worship. A print of the Kitchen God is renewed annually and the *Tiger* print, (fig.29) consistent with animism, is supposed to guard the house and chase off evil spirits.

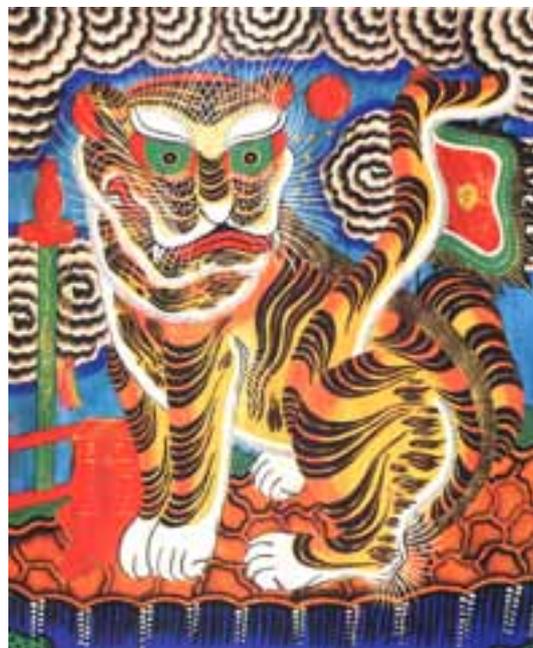


Figure 29: Tiger.

To promote nationalism, typical folk prints used images of historical themes commemorating heroes and heroines. For instance, the Trưng Queens riding an elephant or Đinh Bộ Lĩnh⁵³ as a buffalo boy, leading a group of children with a palm leaf for a flag (fig.30). These representations helped disseminate Vietnamese history throughout the community.

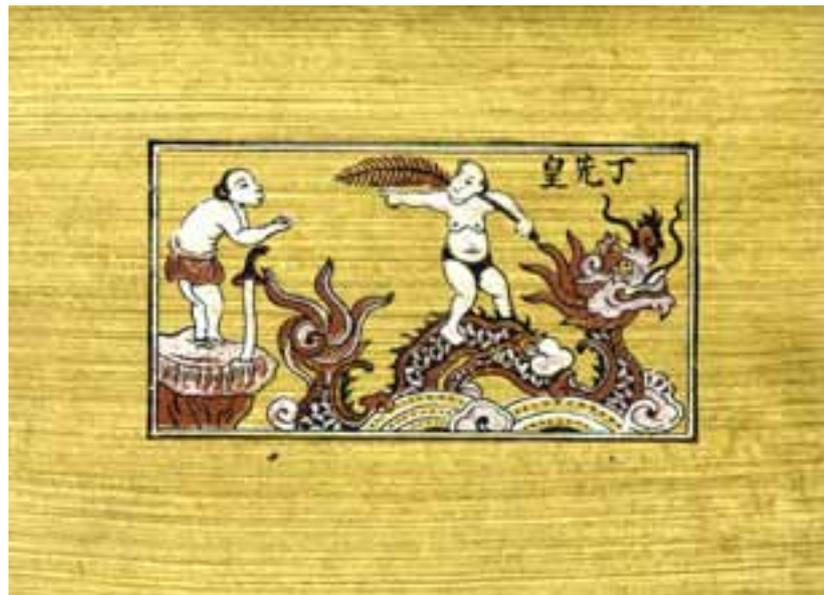


Figure 30: Đinh Bộ Lĩnh.

Later, craftsmen from Đông Hồ village began to produce folk prints in Hàng Trống, one of the 36 streets of Hà Nội's old quarter. After adopting the complexity of urban living they gradually departed from their original print style. Their images tended toward Chinese motifs, with ornate topics of refined urban life: four ladies with four musical instruments (fig.31); four seasons - apricot, orchid, chrysanthemum and bamboo (taken from Chinese motifs); three wishes - happiness, longevity and prosperity (also from Chinese sources).

⁵³ Đinh Bộ Lĩnh became the founder of Đinh Dynasty, stylised King Đinh Tiên Hoàng, reigned 968-980. He played a significant role in the restoration of independence after the long Chinese occupation.



Figure 31: Four Ladies.

The printers at Hàng Trống also produced some genre prints influenced by gentry and mandarin scholarship. *The Map of Agriculture* (fig.32), displays the impact of exposure to Confucian and Chinese aesthetics in Hà Nội, as do the exotic artefacts imported by visiting diplomats.



Figure 32: Folk Print of Hàng Trống, *The Map of Agriculture*.

Cultural interactions always occur and one of the consequences has been that Vietnamese people have preferred some artworks from neighbouring countries. Those who kept them, modified, renewed and recreated them in ways to suit the sentiment and aesthetics of the nation have enriched the treasure of folk prints of our country.⁵⁴

This quote acknowledges the Vietnamese adoption of foreign art and without specifying which, “neighbouring countries” it can be understood that China is relevant in this context. Furthermore, to have, “modified, renewed and recreated” these influences makes explicit that they were actively changed to suit Vietnamese feelings and taste. However, the statement also reveals an anxiety about conforming to outside influences and how it goes against Vietnamese nationalism, particularly in the postcolonial era.

Folk prints were popular in pre-colonial times in the Red River Delta and in Central Việt-Nam, after the southward extension of the nation in the 17th century. Sinh village, on the Bao Vinh River in Huế, is known for the prints it produces, today, as they were in pre-colonial times, and still used for the same purpose. Production methods,

⁵⁴ Nguyễn Bá Vân, Chu Quang Trứ, 1984, *Tranh Dân Gian Việt Nam* (Vietnamese Folk Prints), Văn Hoá Publishing House, p.28.

however, differ from those in Đông Hồ village, in that one woodblock is used for the outline and colours are added by hand (Fig.33).



Figure 33: Woodblocks at Sinh village, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

The most popular prints in Sinh village portray human figures, ‘replacing figures,’ dressed in traditional Vietnamese costumes and burnt in the belief that they remove troubles and bad luck. On a field trip to Sinh village in 2002, I witnessed the remarkable speed and rhythm of the craftsman’s hands, as he coloured a hundred or so sheets within 15 minutes, using a plant turned into a broom-like tattered brush. All the prints’ images were linear with brushed on colours that meant that no one print was the same.

Sinh village does not produce prints for aesthetic pleasure alone, possibly because other traditional cultural activities are practiced in the region. Garden design is a strong feature of Huế’s cultural life, contributing to the label ‘Garden City’ and ‘Garden Homes,’ which suggests the animistic respect for nature and Taoist influences. Kite designs and their flight performance in kite festivals is another speciality in Huế (fig.34-35), as is the manufacture of remarkably light conical hats with delicate transparent patterns, which have been a hallmark of Huế for years.



Figure 34: A stamp of Huế's Phoenix Kite.



Figure 35: The National Kite Festival in Huế, 2003, photograph from Viet Nam News.

Few paintings exist in Huế's folk art tradition - religious customs in the region⁵⁵ are so strong that an ephemeral votive image, despite being finally burned, lingers in an individual's mind so, perhaps, there is no need for a permanent representation. In 1993, UNESCO recognised Huế as a heritage site, resulting in extensive studies of its

⁵⁵ See Didier Bertrand, 'The Thay Masters in Hue, Vietnam', *Asian Folklore Studies*, October 1996, v. 55, n. 2, p. 271-287.

imperial culture. As yet, there have been few new studies of its folk art and little research on the prints of Sinh village, in comparison to those of the Red River Delta.

Vietnamese folk prints declined in popularity after western contact and particularly after the introduction of mechanical printing. Wars also contributed to their disappearance due to conscription of artisans, but the principal cause was their diminished relevance to society. Before 1945, around 220 men out of a population of 500 were involved in woodblock printing in Đông Hồ village.⁵⁶ Now, only Nguyễn Đăng Chế practices the craft. He uses the old woodblocks and images to make prints mainly for museums, researchers and curious tourists.

The disappearance of folk prints created a desire for the past, witnessed by the efforts of artist and cultural official at Hà Nội's Art Research Institute, Đặng Thị Khuê is one. She and other Vietnamese colleagues campaigned to, "get rid of the French impact on Vietnamese contemporary art and return to Vietnamese native art of the pre-colonial era."⁵⁷ This intention of Party officials in the 1990s shows a clear preference for traditional art, as the policies always advocate, at a time when Vietnamese contemporary art was in vogue throughout Asia and got exposed to international interactions. The other side of this good intention is to pull the populace back to the 'village pond' and avoid the unfamiliar issues.

The Establishment of the Citadel City and Royal Mausoleums:

The Nguyễn Dynasty (1802-1945) established its capital in Huế. Its first king Gia Long chose the location as the capital for several reasons. First, to avoid proximity to North Việt-Nam, where its gentry-scholars still had sympathy for the Lê Dynasty (1427-

⁵⁶ Nguyễn Bá Vân, Chu Quang Trứ, 1984, *Tranh Dân Gian Việt Nam* (Vietnamese Folk Prints), p. 14.

⁵⁷ This conversation took place at the third Asia Pacific Triennial in 1999 in Brisbane.

1527).⁵⁸ Second, Gia Long was respecting and glorifying his ancestors by choosing Huế, where their lineage originated and where they gradually amassed land during their 200 years of exile from the court in Hà Nội. Gia Long was the first king to unify the nation and expand it to its present size. The centrality of Huế was a wise geographical choice for administrative purposes and from which to establish Gia Long's architectural and cultural innovations.

Prior to 1975, most northern Vietnamese scholars denounced the Nguyễn Dynasty and its art as decadent. However, Socialist art historians during this period based their comments on memories of elderly researchers, who had been to Huế before 1954. The art historian Nguyễn Phi Hoanh saw the late architecture of Nguyễn as evidence of bad taste.

As Nguyễn Dynasty restored an outdated regime that copied many aspects from Chinese Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), its arts went from the weakness of the early kings to the extremely decadent points in the last years of the dynasty.⁵⁹

Commenting on the dragon symbols of the Nguyễn Dynasty (Fig.36), another art historian from Hà Nội, Chu Quang Trứ suggested:

In the architecture of the 19 century, dragons built with paste or carved from wood and stone were: lifeless; strained; puzzled; thin; patched up; trifling; trying to be serious but in vain and threateningly horrible.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ After 1527, Lê Kings still ruled the throne, but real power lay in the hands of Trinh Lords in the North, and Nguyễn Lords in the South until late 18th century.

⁵⁹ Nguyễn Phi Hoanh, 1984, *Lịch Sử Mỹ Thuật Việt Nam* (Vietnamese Art History), Hồ Chí Minh City Publishing House, p. 171.

⁶⁰ Chu Quang Trứ, 'Con Rồng trong Nghệ Thuật Việt Nam qua các Thời Đại' (Dragons in Vietnamese Arts in Different Periods), published firstly in *Khảo Cổ Học* (Archaeology) n. 5-6 (1970), republished in *Nghiên Cứu Mỹ Thuật*, 1992, Viện Mỹ Thuật, Hà Nội, p.93-109. Cited p. 108.



Figure 36: Dragons on the Roof of Thái Hoà Palace, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Recent research demonstrates the superficiality of regarding the Nguyễn Dynasty as a resurgence of Neo-Confucianism or that Chinese culture prevailed in 19th century Việt-Nam.⁶¹ Likewise, I would argue that the borrowing of cultural aspects took place prior to the Nguyễn Dynasty and that Vietnamese characteristics were already made apparent in this era.

Vietnam, being small and crowded, can never afford the great spaces devoted to architecture as in China. The plan of Thái Hoà Palace built in 1805 by the Nguyễn court, bears little resemblance to the grandeur of other Asian edifices, rather it is closer to Vietnamese communal houses (đình) from earlier times. This tradition in architecture has an odd number of compartments, (three, five or seven), defined by the space between two rows of columns and alter (or throne) located in the middle.

⁶¹ Nola Cook, 'Nineteenth-Century Vietnamese Confucianization In Historical Perspective: Evidence from the Palace Examinations (1463-1883)', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, September 1994, v 25, n. 2, p. 270-313.

The invention of a new way to extend the interior length of the đình by combining two structures under two roofs is considered a unique aspect of Huế's 19th century architecture. Until then, Vietnamese architecture tended to enlarge the width of a building by extending the two compartments on the two sides of the building. This does not deal with the expansion of the length of the building, however, the main obstacle to which was how to extend the roof. This was solved by joining two roofs with a decorative motif usually of open-mouthed dragons, as seen in *Dragons on the Roof of Thái Hòa Palace*, (Fig.37).



Figure 37: The Joint of Two Roofs on a Building, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Vietnamese architects of this era took into account the natural environment in their designs and the roof on Thái Hòa Palace is another original feature of Huế's architecture. By replacing the familiar curves seen on northern temple roofs with straight lines, storm water from the region's heavy rainfall runs off quickly. Furthermore, if we compare the roof of Đình Bảng communal house mentioned early in this chapter, to the roof of *Thái Hòa Palace* (Fig.38), the đình house roof seems

massive and oppressive. In order to reduce this heaviness, the palace's four gables were curved up to the sky.



Figure 38: Thái Hoà Palace, postcard.

Likewise, Thái Hoà's roof is slender, as a result of it being divided into two parts, one overlapping the other, which creates an illusion of height. The panel that connects the two parts is a decorative section of colourful enameled paintings that helps to create the magnificent look of a royal palace, without the grand scale. In addition, the slim style of Thái Hoà's columns defines the architecture of pre-colonial Huế and contrasts with the corpulent pillars in palaces of Hà Nội and Peking. Thái Hoà's columns were built half a metre below floor level and, thus, add height to the palace and help create a majestic appearance (Fig.39).⁶²

⁶² I attribute the explanation on Huế's architecture to Mr. Phan Thuận An, a Huế scholar, who I consulted during my visit to Huế in January 2002.



Figure 39: Column in Thái Hoà Palace, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Gia Long put in place restrictions on high-ranking officials, forbidding them from building larger houses than the royal palace. Lower ranks would estimate building limits from their superior's structures and laymen would make calculations accordingly. Huế's artisans kept these guidelines in mind when applying their characteristic decorative motifs to represent: hope, longevity, happiness and prosperity, using symbols from different religions: wheels, waves and lotus from Buddhism; eight fairies crossing the sea from Taoism; dragons, unicorns, turtles, phoenix from Confucianism and the four pastimes (music, chess, poetry and painting). Human nature was interpreted through other symbols found in Chinese ornamentation:⁶³ custard apples, pumpkins and pomegranates for fertility; turtles and peaches for longevity; dragons and phoenix for a happy marriage. Dragon symbols

⁶³ Nguyễn Hữu Thông, *Mỹ Thuật Huế, Nhìn từ Góc Độ Ý Nghĩa và Biểu Tượng Trang Trí*, (Huế's Art, Seen from the Concepts and Decorative Symbols), Thuận Hoá Publishing House, p. 179.

appeared frequently in a variety of styles, Captain P. Albrecht from the Association of Friends of Imperial Huế commented:

One must admit that An Nam people have turned that single topic into many changing flowing graceful details with daring and roaming lines in its complexity.⁶⁴

A woodcarving was stylised into a vast variety of complicated curves to form dragon motifs, bearing many similarities to French Baroque art (Fig.40).



Figure 40: Decorative Motifs of Dragons, drawing by L. Cardière.

Huế's decorative tradition led to the use of mosaics as a strong characteristic of its religious, civil and royal architecture. It is thought that this practice was introduced to prevent rain damage on lime-painted surfaces, particularly temple windbreaks and roof decorations. The shiny, colourful pottery was deliberately broken into shards and arranged to form mosaic images of flora and fauna as well as the human figure. Later, the technique was used to great effect on three-dimensional structures, such as the *Hiển Nhơn Gate in the Huế Citadel* (Fig.41).

⁶⁴ Captain P. Albrecht, *Details of Decorative Arts in Hue: the Dragon*, first published in 1915 in *Bulletin des Amis du Vieux Hue*, Vietnamese translation by Đặng Như Tùng, 1997, published in *Những Người Bạn Cố Đô Huế*, volume II, Thuận Hoá Publishing House, Huế, p. 6-7.

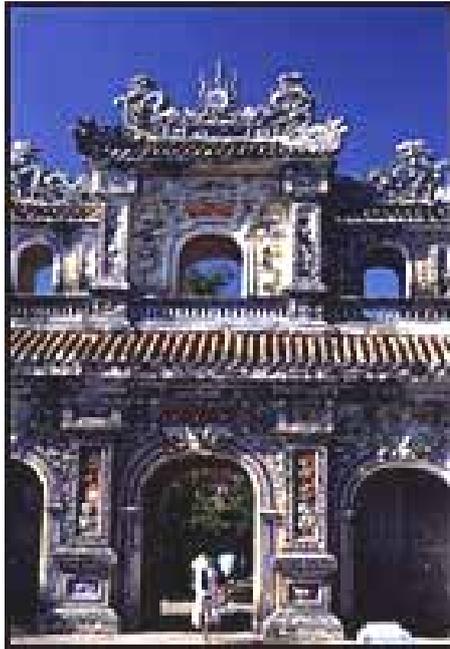


Figure 41: Hiên Nhon Gate in the Huế Citadel, photograph by David Henley.

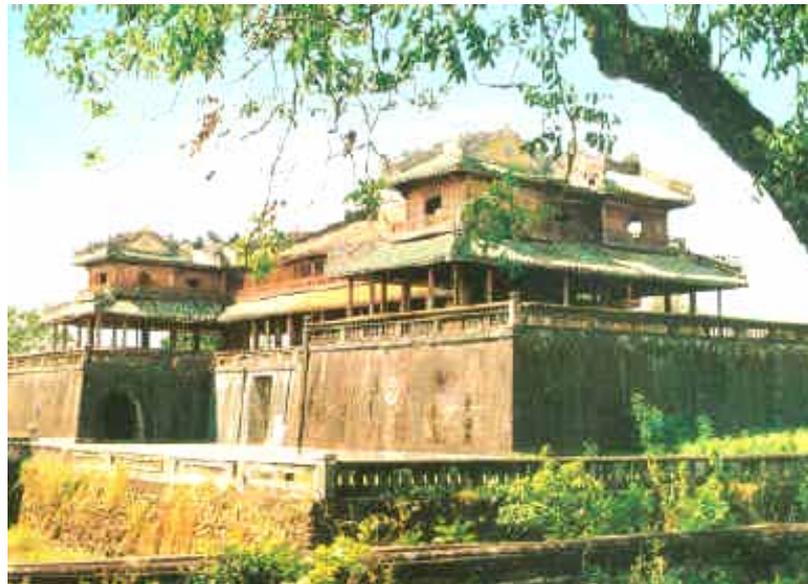


Figure 42: Huế's Citadel, photograph from AsiaVietnam Monument.

Another instance of Huế's architectural expertise is the southern gate of Huế Citadel. This gate withstood a major storm in 1904 whereas a span of the steel Tràng Tiền Bridge crossing the Perfume River, was torn off.

Despite his conservative political nature, Gia Long utilised French technology to construct numerous fortresses. He first utilised the Vauban style of citadel⁶⁵ in 1790 at Gia Định, followed by the citadel in Huế. In the 1860s, French forces destroyed the Gia Định fortress and Huế has the sole existing citadel in Việt-Nam with the distinctive star shape. It was believed for almost two centuries that the French military engineer Colonel Olivier de Puymanel built both the Gia Định fortress and the Huế Citadel. However, researcher Phan Thuận An in his book, *The Citadel Huế*,⁶⁶ argues that Olivier died in 1799 and the construction of Huế Citadel did not begin until 1805. Phan Thuận An maintains that Gia Long and his courtiers: Phạm Văn Nhân; Lê Chất; Nguyễn Văn Khiêm and Trần Văn Học, designed and supervised the construction of the citadel.

Nevertheless, Huế's dilemma was to either continue the traditional artistic values that Hà Nội had embraced for years or commence a new ethos. Gia Long's struggle to establish an independent sovereignty, which was reflected in his approach to culture. The will to make a break from Hà Nội was obvious when one looks back on 18th century history. In 1749 Lord Nguyễn Phúc Khoát proclaimed himself King of the southern half of the nation and ordered a change in civil clothing to distinguish his citizens from the northerners.⁶⁷ The costume for northern women was a long skirt and a blouse, (the wide belt with long strips was only worn by royal maids) (Fig.43). King Nguyễn Phúc Khoát instructed southern women to wear pants instead of skirts, a radical move which led to this folk song:

In August the king issued a decree
Scaring everyone by banning skirts

⁶⁵Sebastien le Prestre de Vauban (1633-1707) created star-shaped forts with straight-sided moats. He was employed by the French king, Louis XIV, to build 33 citadels and he strengthened hundreds of forts. His name was used to define the style.

⁶⁶ Phan Thuận An, 1999, *Kinh Thành Huế* (The Citadel of Huế), Thuận Hoá, Huế.

⁶⁷ Đào Duy Anh, *Lịch Sử Việt Nam*, (Vietnamese History), Văn Hoá Thông Tin Publishers, p.408.

Not going to the market is impossible
When one has to go
There'll be reluctance to borrow husband's pants.



Figure 43: Statue of Ngọc Nữ (a heavenly maid) at Dâu Temple, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.



Figure 44 (left): Headwear of Northern Women, (portrait of Nguyễn Thị Ngọc Hoàn, 1918, courtesy Trịnh Bách.



Figure 45 (right): Headwear of Southern Women, (female guerrilla by Huỳnh Phương Đông), 1960s.

The differences between decorative details on important administration sites distinguish North from South Việt-Nam, as seen in the dissimilarity of steles in the Literature Temples of Hà Nội and Huế. Steles of the Lê Dynasty in Hà Nội have a

round top (Fig.46), while those in Huế have decorative cloud motifs (Fig.47) and in a humorous comparison, Hà Nội's steles are said to look like a monk's head, while those in Huế look like a head of curly hair. After 1975, post-war art historians with biased opinions, claimed that artefacts of the last Nguyễn Dynasty display strong imprints of the Chinese. However, Vietnamese artisans left their distinguishing features while taking up some Chinese concepts.



Figure 46: Steles in Literature Temple in Hà Nội, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.



Figure 47: Stele at Tự Đức's Mausoleum, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

In 1835, King Minh Mạng built nine similarly shaped bronze urns with 162 uniquely Vietnamese images (Fig.48). Based on an idea from the Chinese, Zhou Dynasty (fig.49), the urns embody unity when seen as a series, by varying only slightly their size and shape. The largest urn in the series is 2.2 metres high, with a diameter of 1.65

metres and weighing 2,755 kilograms. The smallest urn is 1.9 metres high, with a diameter of 1.61 metres and weighing 2,047 kilograms.⁶⁸



Figure 48: Nine Urns at Thái Miếu Palace in the Imperial City Huế, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

⁶⁸ Please see Vĩnh Phối, ‘Cử Đỉnh – Sự Toả Sáng của Nghệ Thuật Đồ Đồng Huế thế kỷ XIX’ (The Nine Urns – An Enlightenment of Bronze Art of Huế in the 19th Century), *Mỹ Thuật*, (Fine Arts magazine) n. 18-19/97, p. 46-50.



Figure 49: Chinese Urn, Zhou Dynasty, photograph from *The Golden Age of Chinese Archaeology*.



Figure 50: Rain, (details of carving on the nine urns), photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

One particular image depicts rain, symbolised in early times by clouds of which each dynasty had its preferred shapes. Hué has the highest national rainfall⁶⁹ and clouds were symbolised with diagonal dotted lines, to form a shower from a cluster of clouds

⁶⁹ The rainfall can go up to 3,000mm annually.

(Fig.50). Intermingled with images of flora and fauna, the urns show representations of 19th century western ships, canons and guns, used by King Gia Long in his military conquests. When UNESCO recognised Huế as a world heritage site, the symbolic images on the nine urns were considered so unique that embossed rubbings on handmade paper were sold as art souvenirs.⁷⁰ As in the case of Thailand and other countries in the region, the past was manipulated through “the business of nostalgia”⁷¹ though it created a collective identity for the nation.

Another distinguished landmark in Vietnamese architectural history are the royal mausoleums of Huế. Preceding dynasties built mausoleums in their hometowns, such as the Lê Dynasty in Thanh Hoá and Trần Dynasty in Nam Định. However, they did not reach the standard that the Nguyễn Dynasty developed in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Nguyễn Mausoleums were built under the direct guidance of a king and each tomb conveyed his character. They shared a common feature by becoming a focal point of philosophy and literature, which motivated a former UNESCO Director⁷² General to describe Huế as, “A master piece of urban poetry.”⁷³ The simplicity of Gia Long’s mausoleum harmonises with its natural parkland setting, reflecting his motivations and sincere struggles. The Minh Mạng Mausoleum, in contrast, dominates nature and its strict symmetry reflects the most successful administration of pre-colonial times. The poet-king Tự Đức designed an asymmetrical mausoleum, incorporating nature and focusing on aesthetic preferences. His mausoleum took

⁷⁰ An interview with the bookstall manager in Huế Citadel in 2002.

⁷¹ See Maurizio Peleggi, 2002, *the Politics of Ruins and the Business of Nostalgia*, White Lotus Press.

⁷² UNESCO Director General Amadou-Mahtar M’Bow in a 1981 speech in Hà Nội. Cited from Phan Thuận An, *Kinh Thành Huế* (The Citadel of Huế), p.19.

⁷³ Ibid, p.13.

approximately 3,000 workers and soldiers three years to complete in 1867 and was the costliest of the seven Nguyễn Mausoleums.⁷⁴

Bordered by graceful pine trees, Tự Đức's Mausoleum has 50 buildings consisting of: palaces; temples; stele house; courtyard; a waterway; pavilion and artificial lake (Fig.51). It also has the earliest theatre in Việt-Nam, which was restored in 1992 through UNESCO's program of Conservation and Protection of Historic Monuments. Tự Đức enthusiastically supported Vietnamese ritual music and drama and built the theatre on the understanding that his mausoleum would be a place of recreation - not just a cemetery. His love of literature is expressed in the theatre's ceiling painting symbolising stars, which Confucian poets and writers believed they were descended from. The dominating diagram of a star constellation is unusual for its conceptual appearance (fig.52).



1.

Figure 51: The Pavilion at Tự Đức's Mausoleum and the author's daughter, photograph by Justin Hardingham.

⁷⁴ Nguyễn Dynasty lasted from 1802 to 1945 with 13 kings, but only 7 mausoleums were built



Figure 52: Ceiling painting in the Royal Theatre at Tự Đức's Mausoleum, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

In 1993, Huế was recognised as a World Heritage Site, for both its historical value as a bygone imperial capital and its pre-colonial aesthetics.

The complex of Hue monuments was the first capital of unified Viet-Nam, built at the beginning of the 19th century in line with Eastern philosophies and Vietnamese tradition. Its integration with the natural environment and the exceptional beauty of its decorative architecture are a unique reflection of the old Vietnamese empire at its height.”⁷⁵

Chàm culture is also significant in the development of the diversity of Vietnamese pre-colonial arts. In 2nd century AD Chàm ethnic culture with Indian origins, established itself on a strip of land south of Huế, from the 18th to the 11th latitude (Quảng Bình to Bình Thuận). In 1692, Chàm was annexed into Việt-Nam. Since the 10th century, the conflicts between Việt-Nam and Chàm provided an opportunity for Chàm's influences to creep into Vietnamese arts. For instance, Chàm mythological figures Kinari and

⁷⁵ The World Heritage Newsletter, n.4, March 1994, p.7

Garuda are seen in Vietnamese carvings from the 10th century.⁷⁶ However, in their intention to rewrite the history, most contemporary Vietnamese historians see the influence of pre-colonial Chàm culture as an integral aspect of Vietnamese culture. They do not acknowledge past Vietnamese imperialist behaviour toward Chàm.⁷⁷ Chàm had a magnificent art and architectural heritage of Hindu influence, in the form of brick and sandstone towers (kalans). Decreasing sized brick cubes stacked on top of each other, ornamented with stupa-like facets and carvings, formed the towers (Fig.53). These tower-temples remain a wonder of construction, because there is no mortar between the bricks. The inner space carries little interest but intricately decorative facades dominate the outside.



Figure 53: Po Klongirai Temple, Ninh Thuận, postcard.



Figure 54: Dvarapala, Đông Dương, photograph from *Art of Southeast Asia*.

⁷⁶ See Chu Quang Trứ, 1995, *Mỹ Thuật Lý-Trần, Mỹ Thuật Phật Giáo* (Arts of Lý-Trần Dynasties, Buddhist Arts) Thuận Hóa Publishing House.

⁷⁷ See Patricia Pelley, 2002, *Postcolonial Vietnam, New Histories of the National Past*, Duke University Press, Chapter 2, especially p. 70, 110-111. Bruce M. Lockhart also discussed this issue in his paper ‘Competing Narratives of the Nam Tiến’ at the Conference *Migrations of Vietnamese Culture: Postcolonial and Transnational Perspectives on Vietnam and the Diaspora*, 3&4 January 2003, the National University of Singapore.

Chàm temples have an abundance of sandstone statues (Fig.54) and bas-reliefs of Indian gods including: Vishnu, Shiva, Brahma Ganesa and celestial dancer Apsara (Fig.55). Their aesthetic value led to the establishment in 1915 of the Chàm Museum of Sculpture in Đà Nẵng, under the auspices of the Ecole Francaise d'Extreme Orient. While the statues are preserved within a museum, the Chàm towers have been ravaged by war and, over time, local inhabitants excavated the bricks, until they were listed as a heritage site.



Figure 55: Apsara, the Heavenly Dancer, Chàm Museum in Đà Nẵng, photograph from Vietnamtourism.

From the 16th-19th century there also existed within Chàm territory the international port of Hội An. Located 130km south of Huế along the banks of the Thu Bồn River, the port town of Hội An became prosperous through trading with vessels from Holland, Japan, Portugal and China, among other nations. In the 17th century, at the peak of its commercial power, the town became a meeting point for Japanese and Chinese communities.

The *Japanese Roofed Bridge* (Fig.56) is a landmark in the Japanese quarter of Hội An, which includes a row of two-storey townhouses made of a type of wood that can survive the periodic floods of the Thu Bồn River (Fig.57).



Figure 56: Japanese Roofed Bridge, Hội An, 16th Century, photograph by Ray Beattie.



Figure 57: Japanese House in Hội An, (restored in 2000), photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

A policy implemented by the Shogunate early in the 17th century restricting foreign trade saw the Japanese quarter disintegrate, while the Chinese community continued to thrive. The numerous Chinese temples of Cantonese, Fukien and Hakka ethnic groups, built in the 17th and 18th centuries, show a long tradition of Chinese settlement

in this town (Fig.57). Within the limited area of the small Chinese community, Hội An's Chinese temples are as distinctive as those in Saigon's Chinatown (Fig.58). In both cities, the colorful decorative qualities distinguish the Chinese temples from those of Vietnamese.



Figure 58: Chinese Temple in Hội An, postcard.



Figure 59: Chinese Temple in Chinatown, Saigon, photograph by Huỳnh Vinh Thanh.

Hội An had ceased to be an international port by the early 19th century but its well preserved architecture continued to reflect the fusion of different cultures and in 1999 it was classified as an Ancient Town on UNESCO's World Heritage list.⁷⁸

CONCLUSION:

Until the early 20th century, Vietnamese art was generated and nurtured in villages. However, costs kept artefacts modestly scaled and many have been damaged by ideological conflicts over the centuries. The Vietnamese military tactic of 'scorched earth' against the Mongols in 1267, 1278 and 1282, severely mutilated the nation's culture. People were encouraged to destroy their homes and leave no habitation for the enemy; a tactic repeated in the resistance war of 1946-1947, against French occupancy, which saw the destruction of the đình communal houses, some of which

⁷⁸ The Report of UNESCO, 23rd session of the Committee, 23rd November to 4th December 1999.

were two hundred years old.⁷⁹ Some damage was innocently caused through the idea, “to build the nation ten times more beautiful”⁸⁰ and in the 1980s many communal houses became Peoples Committee offices. These events have created gaps in Vietnamese art history and archaeology has disclosed only a fraction of the whole picture. For instance, pedestals were found which have been dated as Trần Dynasty (1225-1400)⁸¹ but the statues for which the pedestals were made have vanished.

Chapter 1 presented the nuances of Vietnamese visual culture from north to south and due to the nation’s history and geographic length, its aesthetics changed across the latitudes. Accompanying the đình, with their communal naive art, were the formal and refined Buddhist sculptures; among the relics of Chăm culture exists Hội An’s blend of Japanese and Chinese architecture and Huế’s art stands apart from the ancient art of Hà Nội. Vietnamese pre-colonial art has merging facets, however, by promoting one feature above all as displaying ‘Vietnamese-ness’, historical accounts favour the art of the Red River Delta in the North to that of the South.

Examples of architecture, sculpture, prints and clothing, reveal the fluidity of Vietnamese aesthetics in the pre-colonial era as having the qualities of ‘water flexibility’. The main influence on Vietnamese visual culture was Chinese but its impact was often reworked and integrated into pre-existing cultural practices. In pre-colonial times authors’ names appeared freely in literature but anonymity was common in visual art, leading some post-war art historians to generate the myth that this was indicative of a native folk art aesthetic. Furthermore, they overlooked the court art of monarchies they considered to be submissive to foreign invasions. This

⁷⁹ Shaun Kinglsey Malarney, 2002, *Culture, Ritual and Revolution in Vietnam*, Routledge Curzon, London, p.45-46.

⁸⁰ Hồ Chí Minh’s *Testament*, 1969.

⁸¹ See Nguyễn Quân and Phan Cẩm Thượng, *Mỹ Thuật ở Làng (Vietnamese Village Art)*, Fine Arts Publishing House, p.89

view ignored the artistic values that the Nguyễn Dynasty introduced to pre-colonial culture and its attempt to create a new tradition. Although painting was not yet a major practice in this era, sculpture was produced in abundance, in folk carvings and classical three-dimensional works.

This complex cultural context, with its blend of native and foreign influences, is the ground on which colonial art would be built.