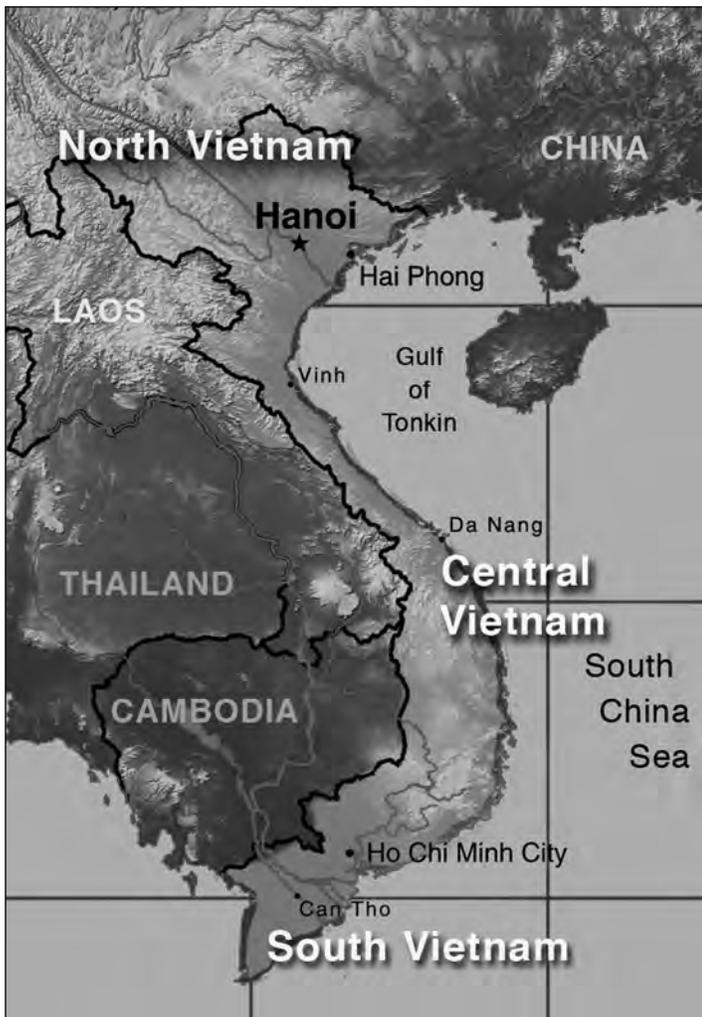




Silk Roads into Vietnamese History

By Charles Wheeler



Map illustration by Willa Davis.

Running along the long, slender “S” that forms the basic contour of today’s nation-state, mountains, alluvial plains, and seacoast laid the basis for three ecological zones—forest-forager, agricultural, and aquacultural.

Vietnamese and world history matter to each other. Yet, the images that popularize Vietnam suggest otherwise. One recurrent image familiar to textbooks and movie screens depicts anonymous peasants toiling in slow, silent rhythm over featureless rice paddies, surrounded by jungle. This image evokes pervasive assumptions that I choose to debunk. First, the icons of the peasant, the paddy, and the jungle suggest a Vietnamese people disengaged from the outside world, who change only when outsiders (friends or aggressors) compel them to do so. Second, this iconic trio implies that Vietnam is historically an earthbound society, its people uninterested in the sea. There has been little to refute either idea in academic, not to mention mainstream, discourse. But Vietnamese society was anything but isolated, changeless, or landlocked, as the recent historiography featured in this article will show. Vietnam’s ancestors (Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese alike) were integral to the creation of crosscurrents of people, goods, and ideas across Asian lands and seas before 1500—a phenomenon now better known as the “Silk Roads.” And as they interacted with the world, the world interacted with them. They changed one another as a result.

Despite its colonial era trappings, the Silk Road has proven useful in recent years as a tool that demonstrates how the premodern world shaped our interconnected world of today. The approaches that work for Silk Road scholars work for Vietnam as well: seeking evidence of long-distance connections and cross-cultural trade by looking for clues in geography and ecology, and looking at how those connections have impacted the series of episodes over time that led to what we now know as Vietnam. When approached in this way, we see a Vietnam not represented by the timeless, isolated peasant. We see instead a society whose predecessors engaged with the world around them.

The Vietnamese coast drew merchants from as far away as the Middle East and Japan. It also spurred centuries of intense competition for control among local rulers, which ended only when Vietnamese conquered and colonized the Center's seaports during the second millennium, an event mythologized as the "Southern Expansion."

Vietnam's Connected Geography

We see this in the geography of Vietnam itself, which divides and connects along a north-south, east-west matrix. Running along the long, slender "S" that forms the basic contour of today's nation-state, mountains, alluvial plains, and seacoast laid the basis for three ecological zones—forest-forager, agricultural, and aquacultural. The habitats that developed in each of these three ecozones, and the interactions between them, formed a basic dynamic in economy, culture, and politics dating from at least the second millennium BCE. Until the nineteenth century, this trans-ecological interaction conformed to patterns set by a series of rivers that run perpendicular to the Vietnamese coastline, from the mountains to the sea. While most are small, two great rivers located on each end of the "S" form large deltas within which lie two of Vietnam's three main historical regions: the North around the Red River Delta, and the South around the Mekong River Delta. Here we find the kind of agrarian environment we normally associate with Vietnam, but, in addition to farming, the maze of waterways in these deltas facilitated easy travel for exchange in premodern times. Between them lies the Center, a region with a very different geography. Its small rivers run steeply down mountain slopes into small alluvial plains before emptying into the South China Sea. In all three major regions, through Vietnam's rivers large and small, the many footpaths, and the few roads that complimented them, flowed the human traffic that integrated mountain foragers, deltaic agriculturalists, and coastal aquaculturalists, and circulated goods and ideas among them. Porters, horses, elephants, and all kinds of watercraft connected these peoples of forests, farmland, and sea to Asia beyond. Looking from north to south, these connections with the world have differed between North, South, and Center. While North and South had access to the Asian continent through the great rivers of the Red and Mekong, the Center benefited from its strategic position in Asia's sea lanes during the age of sail. The dangerous shoals of the South China Sea forced oceangoing vessels sailing between China and India to hug the Center's coast, making it one of the best traveled sea routes of the "Maritime Silk Road." This proximity to one of Asia's most strategic sea lanes offered tremendous opportunities for creating wealth and power to those who could control it. The Vietnamese coast drew merchants from as far away as the Middle East and Japan. It also spurred centuries of intense competition for control among local rulers, which ended only when Vietnamese conquered and colonized the Center's seaports during the second millennium, an event mythologized as the "Southern Expansion." Naturally, this drew Vietnamese even more deeply into global circulations of commerce and culture. Historical inhabitants of Vietnam's territory, then, were predisposed to connections, by land and water, to the world.

This expansion underscores two important points about Vietnam. First, most of Vietnam is actually very new, as a quick look at Vietnam's main cities will verify. While Hanoi, Vietnam's capital and the North's urban center, can claim an ancestry that dates back to the earliest polities, the South's primary city of Saigon was founded in 1692. That makes it younger than many East Coast cities in the "young country" of the USA. As one moves south from Hanoi to

Saigon, each city grows younger and younger. Each of these cities, and their hinterlands, can claim precedents in non-Vietnamese cultures, like the Cham who controlled the Center for centuries, or the Khmer or Cambodians who still regard the Mekong Delta as their own. Second, all of these cities—Hanoi included—trace their origins to seaports that were tied into the premodern traffic of people, goods, and ideas commonly characterized as the Silk Roads.

Forming Engaged Societies

Second Millennium BCE to Third Century BCE

We see this worldly engagement in the earliest evidence of Vietnamese ancestors, too. Archaeological and linguistic evidence suggests that two hemispheric streams of migration merged along Vietnam's coastal plains sometime in the second millennium BCE. Specialists in premodern Southeast Asia associate these migrants with two major linguistic families. Austroasiatic groups (ancestors to Khmer, Tai, Hmong, and other languages) pushed south from China settled into the coastal valleys as Austronesian seafarers (associated with Malay, Cham, Polynesian, etc.) crossed the South China Sea from island Southeast Asia. Out of their interactions, an economic interdependence developed as exchanges grew. Each of the three ecozones relied upon steady supplies of fish from the sea, rice from the plains, and woods and plants from the highlands to sustain its habitat. Access to goods encouraged technological developments that further enhanced this reliance. For example, archaeological evidence indicates that seafarers used a wide variety of plants, woods, and resins for their ships "as fundamental as fish" found only in the forests above, while lowland settlers sought ores for metallurgy. Upriver settlers sought shells, salt, and metal tools from below. Everyone desired rice, and weapons, of course. Linguistic studies support the theory of Vietnamese and foreign archaeologists that this interaction along the Vietnamese coast and in upriver coastal plains and forests led to cultural change as well. In the lowland valleys, the earliest evidence of the cultures Vietnamese claim as ancestral show a mixture of traits we associate with both earthbound Austroasiatic speakers and seafaring Austronesian speakers. These ancestors, then, were the very product of global migrations and the kind of long-distance, cross-cultural exchange we reserve for later periods and 'greater' civilizations.

Excavations of the new cultures that developed out of this mainland-maritime synthesis exhibit signs of continued interaction with the outside world throughout the first millennium BCE. Dong Son bronze drums, claimed to be the product of an ancestral Vietnamese society, provide a striking example. Named for the village just south of the North's Red River Delta, these drums probably derived from drums made farther up the Red River in southwestern China and functioned as both musical and religious instruments. Known for their high quality, grand sizes, and intricate geometric motifs, the drums depict a range of social activities, including hunting, weaving, war, and kingship, but the presence of so many boats indicates a waterborne culture. The great drums were distributed widely, for they have been discovered as far afield as eastern Indonesia and southern China. Most likely, mariners exchanged or captured these drums to add to their collection of prestige items, much as upriver

forest societies would come to incorporate Chinese ceramics into their political culture as necessary symbols of power. Similarly, the Center and South also indicate interaction along land-river and coastal passages at the same time, though these cultures evolved in very different directions, as we will see. Artifacts of the Sa Huynh culture identified with the Center region can be found as far inland as Laos and as far as the Philippines, while local artifacts reveal signs of technology transfer in the Sa Huynh assimilation of bronze casting. So, as the end of the first millennium BCE drew near, people circulated via land, river, and coast (with limited cross-oceanic passings by Austronesian speakers) through the broad arc of



Dong Son bronze drum. Image source: Mandalay Road Trading Company, Inc. <http://www.trocadero.com/mandalayroadtrading/items/415342/item415342.html>

continent, islands, and sea that makes up Southeast Asia, and through the lands and waters of North, Center, and South. This growing traffic further encouraged ambitious lowland chiefs to develop exchange alliances with upriver and downriver neighbors and to marshal their collective power for the purposes of controlling the sites of production and the avenues of exchange developing around them. This political economy of competing chiefdoms remained a key variable in the history of the Vietnamese coast and the societies of the South China Sea until modern times, and encouraged both trade and raid as strategies for building wealth and power. News of the region's growing wealth, however, attracted other, larger forces.

Trading States Form

Third Century BCE—Circa Tenth Century CE

Over these chiefdoms a new kind of political-economic system imposed itself in the third century BCE. According to the early Chinese historian Sima Qian, the first emperor of China grew deeply interested in lands of South China and Vietnam for the wealth it could provide him. He learned about the maritime-oriented societies of the "Hundred Viet" people who lived along the coast of South China and northern Vietnam from merchants, who we are fairly certain bartered or traded along this coast as early as the sixth century BCE. The Red River Delta was home to the southernmost band of this so-called Hundred Viet, the Lac Viet, whom we also associate with the legendary kingdom of Au Lac and the archaeologist's Dong Son culture. By 214 BCE Chinese land and sea forces had conquered the Red River valley and established a Chinese administration there. Chinese rule did not fully take hold, however, until the reign of Emperor Wudi, the famous empire-builder of the Han Dynasty, who took an active interest in expanding China's Silk Roads. He established a series of prefectures, outposts really, along the northern Vietnamese coast, subordinate to a new city called Giao Chi (associated with modern-day Hanoi), which operated as the main administrative center and empire's main port of call for the South China Sea. In this way, for the next thousand years, Giao Chi and its subordinate prefectures along the Center region's northern coast functioned very much in the same way better known settlements along the continental Silk Road, like Dunhuang, did. That is, they operated like colo-

onial outposts of Chinese and sinicized indigenous peoples surrounded by locals and other peoples who traveled from upriver hinterlands to transact with Chinese for a variety of goods. In fact, as Emperor Wudi sent Zhang Qian, the legendary Chinese explorer often credited with "creating" the Silk Road (he didn't), the monarch sent Viet ambassadors into southern seas to gather information and "search the sea markets" for precious items, "bringing with them gold and various silks" to establish trade relations with other "kingdoms."

These emissaries were part of a political restructuring of trade along the Vietnamese coast that oriented societies beyond the boundaries of the new Chinese empire into a new

system of diplomatic relations expressed through gifts, or tribute, that governed access to Chinese markets. This encouraged coastal chiefdoms to create regimes according to political forms that would make sense to this new Chinese imperial system. Specialists now believe that this explains the sudden emergence in Chinese court histories of two "kingdoms" along the Vietnamese coast: Funan in the South (seen as a forerunner to larger states like Angkor and Cambodia), and Linyi in the Center (linked to Sa Huynh culture and predecessor to Champa). Chinese court histories, travel accounts, and even paintings chronicle the regular tribute embassies by "South Seas kingdoms" like Funan, Angkor, Linyi, and Champa that would last into the middle of the second millennium CE, before Vietnamese power conquered Center and South. Once the rituals of this grand gift exchange were complete, merchant members of these embassies could conduct business with the imperial house. However, excavations like those at Oc Eo in the South and Tra Kieu in the Center, which archaeologists believe are the remains of Funan and Linyi respectively, confirm the development of extensive interior and maritime exchange networks. These sites have also yielded many artifacts indicating commercial production and far-flung trade, and signs of extensive waterways used to enhance transportation and agriculture, surely created to manage growing population densities. In addition, coins confirm historical evidence of early market relations.

Thus, the Chinese conquests transformed the Vietnamese coast in two ways. In creating their imperial economy, Chinese conquerors established a hierarchy of trading centers, which local chiefs subordinate to the empire supplied with goods through networks of forest, lowlands, and seacoast inhabitants allied with them. Stronger chiefdoms outside the Chinese empire remade themselves as "kingdoms" in the Chinese sense, in order to establish diplomatic relationships directly with the imperial court, for purposes of profit as well as power or prestige. However, these networks of local trade and tribute could be undone whenever these alliances broke down. Raiding was a regular feature in political and economic competition between local chiefs, and sometimes this was turned upon long-distance trade itself; foreign accounts into the late nineteenth century complain of the Vietnamese coast as a source of piracy. Sometimes, the Chinese

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court responded with force, at other times with diplomacy, and still other times, apparent resignation. Whatever the case, raiding demonstrates the endurance of older forms of political and economic strategies as new rulers introduced different models of political organization. The integration of local and imperial systems of trade and political organization insured the flow of goods in high demand at Chinese markets to the Vietnamese coast. These included slaves, gold, emeralds and other exotic stones, tropical birds and bird feathers, animal skins, ivory, rhinoceros horn, musks, pearls, abalone, shark fins, tortoise shells, cinnamon bark, medicinal plants, and a wide variety of exotic woods, from fragrant woods for incense to hardwoods for boatbuilding. Replace boats, elephants, and pearls with horses, camels, and jade, and the situation could be any classic Silk Road region in Central Asia.

These trade and diplomatic connections led to other connections, just like everywhere else along the Silk Roads. They were especially important to the spread of Hindu and Buddhist belief systems among the peoples living along the Vietnamese coast, who in turn helped facilitate their spread to other countries from India to places like China. Hinduism appears to have taken hold earlier, at least by the time Funan emerged in the second century CE, while Buddhism becomes more apparent by the fifth century. However, the rulers of Funan and Linyi both adopted Hindu and Buddhist concepts of statecraft into their trading polities, in contrast to Giao Chi, which developed around a Chinese model that synthesized Buddhist with prior Taoist and Confucianist concepts and practices. Buddhism, then, offered a channel through which the Chinese-dominated Viet people of the North continued to interact culturally with the Hindu-Buddhist Cham and Khmer of the Center and South. The earliest practitioners of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam to travel through or settle in the cities that formed along the Vietnamese coast originated from all over Asia. As in other Silk Road urban centers, they lived in close proximity to local merchant communities, and served local rulers. For example, Vietnamese today credit the creation of the first Vietnamese school of Buddhist practice to two monks who fit the Silk Road stereotype. The first, Kang Senghui, contributed to the establishment of Buddhism in his native Giao Chi (Hanoi) before sailing north to proselytize in southern China. As a Sogdian, Kang belonged to an ethnic group of merchants whose network broadcast from Central Asia into the continent's major commercial centers. Vinitaruci arrived from India via China in the sixth century, and established a school of Zen near Giao Chi. Both Kang Senghui and Vinitaruci lived in worlds where boundaries between faith, commerce, and governance were faint compared to our time, where temples, markets, and garrisons or offices of a ruler normally stood in close quarters. As elsewhere along the Silk Roads, holy men, merchants, and rulers played complimentary roles in the development and spread of a common mode of doing business, conducting diplomacy, and practicing the Buddhist faith. Merchant ships leaving Giao Chi most likely carried Vinitaruci's disciples to new monasteries elsewhere in the Chinese empire, Linyi in the Center region, Funan in the South, and beyond, to serve merchant communities, to conduct diplomacy on a monarch's behalf, or to spread the faith. Giao Chi, Linyi, and Funan all became important centers of Buddhist learning too, even after

Linyi became Champa and Funan became Zhenla and then Angkor. Monks circulated between North, Center, and South as well. They would eventually come to play more central roles in the governance of these regions, too.

Dai Viet as a Silk Road Kingdom Circa Tenth Century—Fifteenth Century

Monks came to play a much more important role in the development of the first independent Vietnamese states that began to appear at the end of the first millennium CE. Giao Chi and its subordinate prefectures had never been more than loosely incorporated into the Chinese imperial states that dominated them. Sometimes Giao Chi enjoyed periods of independence, but never for long. However, by the tenth century, local elites had managed to secure an independent kingdom called Dai Viet in the Red River Delta and along the adjacent coastline, the first of many Vietnamese-dominated polities that would remain independent throughout the second millennium CE, with relatively brief interruptions. This independence may have been good for local elites, but it was not good for trade overall, since Giao Chi lost its privileged position in Chinese sea trade and thus lost much of its shipping and trade to cities like Panyu (Guangzhou/Canton). Nevertheless, Dai Viet's rulers stressed policies that would encourage continued trade, diplomatic, and religious ties with China. In matters of economy, the kings of Dai Viet did as their South China Sea neighbors did and immediately pursued close diplomatic ties through imperial China's tribute system. Monks, largely responsible for the development of the first Dai Viet kingdoms, played a key role in the early development of these Dai Viet diplomatic relations.

The trade strategy of Dai Viet did not end with securing tribute relations with China as once thought, however. Recent studies show that they also looked to this tribute system as part of a larger strategy that sought access to Chinese markets, the control of trade networks, and export-oriented production as their key source of revenue, leaving agriculture second. As they promoted diplomatic ties, successive dynasties advocated the development of export-oriented commerce. They set about controlling the highland forest societies that traveled to downstream markets to trade with lowland merchants, and the seafarers who inhabited the coast, while seeking to attract sea traffic by establishing royal ports that could accommodate ocean carriers, building ports like that of Van Don and inviting foreign merchants to reside there. By the twelfth century, their leaders began to move beyond simply tapping natural resources to promoting newer forms of production, including farming. They developed waterways and other infrastructure to improve transportation and promote agriculture. This continued to grow for the next three centuries. A notable example of this domestic commercial growth can be found in the growing archaeological and art historical literature on Vietnamese and Cham pottery production and trade. By the fifteenth century, Vietnamese ceramics traveled as far as the Middle East through Muslim networks that had been growing in Champa since the ninth century. These native industries and infrastructure would place Dai Viet in a very advantageous position when China closed its ports to sea traffic in the fifteenth century.

In the political arena, the relationship between Dai Viet and its rivals began to radically tilt in Dai Viet's favor in the fifteenth centu-

ry, in part owing to Dai Viet's increased access to international markets, which brought it, along with wealth, firearms. This it used to expand its control westward over non-Vietnamese mountain groups, and south against Champa, which it effectively conquered in the 1470s. Now, for the first time, a Vietnamese state controlled the important sea lane that had been the bedrock of Cham power for over a thousand years. It would take another hundred years to quiet the coast, destabilized by internal wars between powerful Vietnamese lords and endemic piracy throughout the South China Sea. When peace came, however, the three factors that shaped trade relations—forest, lowland, and coastal societies, cross-cultural networks mediated through trade, faith, and diplomacy, and the coast's strategic position in Asia's sea traffic—placed Vietnamese monarchs in a position to profit handsomely from the growing traffic in global commerce that sailed along its shores. With the immense profits this commerce provided, Vietnamese overlords built an empire whose territorial outlines roughly conform to that of Vietnam as we know it.

Conclusion

Even in modern times, these Silk Road features endure. Histories of the Vietnam War tell how in 1959 the Communist government in the state of North Vietnam, eager to aid the efforts of revolutionaries in South Vietnam, "constructed" the Ho Chi Minh Trail in the mountain forests that parallel the long curving "S" that signifies Vietnam's geography. American war prosecutors developed ferocious strategies for destroying this "trail." Yet with every trail destroyed, a new one reappeared. Given our new perspective on Vietnamese history, we now know why. So did the revolutionary leaders: Throughout Vietnam's mountain forests lies a network of roads and footpaths, connected to rivers and sea, worn deep into the landscape by the everyday business of moving people, goods, and ideas across vast spaces for thousands of years. Seen in this light, the Ho Chi Minh Trail appears the quintessential Silk Road phenomenon. The example of the Ho Chi Minh Trail should stand to remind us that the historian or area specialist's characterization of a society and its historical relationship to the world has more than academic consequences. ■

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