

Formation of National Characters : Some comparisons between Japan and Vietnam

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In order to find an answer to the question of why Japan engaged in such a reckless losing war with the U.S. and its allied forces in World War Two and why Vietnam won such a difficult war with the U.S. and its allied forces, the author here attempts to search for how differences were formed between the national characters of the Japanese and the Vietnamese

Key words : Japan, Vietnam, Mongolia, invasions, U.S.A.

1. Geographic, demographic and racial comparisons

(a) Geographic comparison

In shape, Japan and Vietnam are similar. Both countries extend from north to south, although the Japanese Archipelago comprises four main islands and Vietnam is one continuous landmass. In area, the two countries are also very similar. The area of Japan is 370,000 km², whereas that of Vietnam is 333,000 km², which is 90% of the total area of Japan. The biggest geographical difference is that Japan is separated from the Asian continent by the Sea of Japan, whereas Vietnam shares long borders with China, Laos and Cambodia in the Indochina Peninsula. This difference has resulted in big historical differences between the two countries which have led to differences in national characters and values.

(b) Demographic comparison

As regards population, Japan's population is now 126 million, and is decreasing. Vietnam's population was estimated to be 80 million in 2005, and is increasing. The population of the two countries, therefore, will become the same sooner or later.

(c) Comparison of racial origins

The Vietnamese comprise 54 races, 86.2 percent of whom belong to the Kinh or Viet race. Other races are only minorities. Among the Kinh people, there are many who resemble the Japanese. Vietnam began to be inhabited from the north, where it borders on southern China which was one of the places of origin of the Japanese race. Thus the Japanese and the Vietnamese share common ancestors, which is why the Japanese and the Vietnamese look like.

2. Historical comparisons

(a) Vietnam under Chinese Occupation

At a time when the rulers of certain small chiefdoms in southern Japan were setting about making themselves tributaries of the Han dynasty in China, Vietnam had already been occupied by the Han from B.C. 111, when the Han dynasty conquered the kingdom of Nam Viet which had ruled not only the kingdom of Au Lac in northern Vietnam but also several territories in southern China. The Han integrated Au Lac into their empire. From that time the Chinese occupation of Vietnam continued for 1,000 years until A.D. 939, following the fall of the T'ang dynasty in 907. From the start of this long period of occupation, "the history of Viet Nam evolved under the combined influence of two contradictory factors. On the one hand, a policy of economic exploitation and cultural assimilation, and on the other, a steadfast popular resistance marked by armed insurrection against foreign domination. This resistance, after many centuries, led to the preservation of the Vietnamese people's identity, the emergence of a national consciousness and the establishment of the independent state of Viet Nam." (Nguyen, p.16). Insurrections against Chinese domination broke out persistently, century after century. The first and most important was that of two sisters, Trung Trac and Trung Nhi, between 40 and 43 A.D. Another young woman, Lady Trieu, launched in 248 A.D. a large-scale movement against Chinese domination. In every century big insurrections took place. But every insurrection was defeated. Towards the end of the 6th century the Sui dynasty, and in the early 7th century the T'ang dynasty, came to power in China,

and these dynasties extended their administrative network in Vietnam more tightly to exploit the Vietnamese people. But from the start of the 10th century, China entered a period of anarchy, and the T'ang dynasty ended in 907. In 905, the last governor sent by the Chinese court to Viet Nam died. Taking advantage of these disturbances in China, the movement to set up a native Vietnamese administration started and a Vietnamese became governor. But in 930, the Southern Han dynasty, which had come to power in Southern China, invaded Vietnam again. Patriotic Vietnamese fought against Southern Han troops under two successive leaders. Finally, in 938, the Vietnamese defeated the Southern Han fleet at the Bach Dang estuary, the mouth of a river which flows into Ha Long Bay. This Bach Dang victory in 938 put an end to the long period of Chinese domination. But it was only in 1009 that a long period as a stable, monarchical, centralized state began after civil wars and battles against invaders sent by the newly established Sung dynasty in China (Nguyen, pp.21-25). During these 1,000 years of occupation by China, through the succession of revolts and suppressions and final victory, the Vietnamese built up their national identity and patriotism and learned war strategies. At the same time, the influence of the Chinese policy of assimilation was very strong. Vietnamese society, from the central and local governments to the household, were organized in conformity with Confucian doctrine. Taoist doctrine also came in from China. Buddhism came in from China by land as well as from India by sea. The Vietnamese language

borrowed extensively from Chinese. The occupation by highly civilized Chinese brought the benefit of technological development to Vietnam. In this period, the foundations of the Vietnamese national character and national values were laid.

(b) Japan: Follower of its mentor China

On the other hand, in the period before and after the beginning of the Christian era, when the Chinese occupation of Vietnam began, there was no written history in Japan. But the Chinese dynastic histories such as in the *Wei Chih* (*Gishi*) contain records of Japan. According to these Chinese records, the Japanese Archipelago was divided into many small countries with kings or queens. The kings or queens of those “countries” decided to pay homage to the Chinese emperors. Embassies from Japanese “kings or queens” , including Queen Himiko, to China in A.D. 107, in A.D. 239, in A.D. 243, and A.D. 266 are recorded in Chinese documents. A gold seal which had been given to a “king” in a small northern Kyushu “country” by a Han emperor in A.D. 57 as a token of his being Han's subject was discovered in 1784.

In the middle of the fourth century, the strongest clan established the Yamato Court. From the middle of the fourth century to the early fifth century, Japan invaded Korea and established a Japanese colony on the tip of the Korean peninsula. Early chronicles record that a famous military expedition was organized and commanded by an empress named Jingu. Thus soon after Japan was unified, it displayed the character of an aggressor nation, while Vietnam was colonized by China.

At the beginning of the fifth century the Chinese script was officially adopted in Japan. Not only the script but also many other significant things were imported from China through Korea. Many Koreans and Chinese came to settle to Japan, among them skilled artisans, scholars and priests, who brought their various skills, learning and civilization. Around the middle of the sixth century one-third of the noble families of Japan were of Korean or Chinese descent (Storry, p.29) . But these Koreans and Chinese and their descendants do not seem to have behaved as invaders or occupation forces. On the contrary, they were assimilated into Japanese society.

In A.D. 589 China was unified by the Sui dynasty, which was followed by the T'ang dynasty from A.D. 618 to 906. During the period of these dynasties many groups of Japanese, including official embassies, scholars, priests, officials, artists, artisans, etc. made their way to China in highly perilous sea voyages. In particular, the Japanese found the T'ang empire so marvelous and impressive in many ways that their leaders tried to learn and adopt things Chinese, and adapted or ‘Japanized’ some of them. Their capitals: Heijo-kyo, Nagaoka-kyo, were copies of the T'ang capital at Ch'ang-an.

But once China started falling into disorder from early in the ninth century and the Japanese felt that they had little to learn from contemporary China, “Japan entered a period of relative isolation, for not only did connections with China become tenuous, but also relation with Korea had long ceased to be intimate, following the abandonment of the

colony in Korea in the seventh century” (Storry, p.33) . At almost the same time, the Heian period began in 794 and lasted about 300 years until 1185, by which time the peculiar Japanese culture had ripened. Separation by sea made it possible for Japan to choose policies alternating between learning from advanced countries abroad and isolation, in comparison with a country like Vietnam, which shared borders with strong countries. Vietnam was faced with the fear of invasion by Chinese empires, i.e. the Sung (11th century), the Mongols (in the 13th century) and the Ming (in the 15th century). Even recently from 1978 to 1979 the northern frontier provinces of Vietnam were occupied by Chinese troops which supported the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia.

(c) Victory of Japan and Vietnam over Mongolian invaders

In the 13th century both Vietnam and Japan were invaded by the Mongols. Vietnam was attacked three times and Japan twice. Thanks to the brave Vietnamese fight against the Mongols, the Mongols' third attack on Japan was abandoned. The Mongols were defeated in all these wars of invasion. These victories over the Mongols contributed to making the differences in national characters and values between the Vietnamese and the Japanese.

i . Vietnamese Victory

At the beginning of the 13th century, Mongolia was unified under Gengis Khan, and he started out on a war of conquest. In 1257, Kubilai Khan's army invaded Vietnam to attack Sung China from the south. The

Mongol army seized the capital Thang Long (the present Hanoi). The Vietnamese King Tran and the inhabitants left the capital. The Mongol army was not able to get food except for food that had rotted in the tropical climate. It was driven out of the capital by a Vietnamese counter-attack and in its retreat was attacked by an ethnic minority group. This was the first Vietnamese victory over the Mongols.

The cutting off of the supply of food and the rotten food tactic was used by the Vietnamese in the victorious 1953-54 battle of Dien Bien Phu. The support of minority groups was also seen in modern Vietnamese wars.

After their first defeat, the Mongols under Kubilai prepared another expedition against Vietnam. At first, 1282, the Mongol army landed in the coastal area called Champa. But the Champa dynasty's resistance was so strong that the Mongol army was crushed and withdrew in 1284. Kubilai had prepared 500,000 cavalrymen and infantrymen for a powerful expedition against Vietnam and Champa. The Vietnamese king consulted all the princes and high-ranking dignitaries on the action to be taken; their unanimous response was to fightA congress of village elders from all over the country was convened, and the following question put to them: “Should we capitulate or fight ?” A great cry arose from the assembly: “Fight!” . The Vietnamese force of only 200,000 men led by the famous general Tran Hung Dao fought bravely with 500,000 Mongolian men. The Vietnamese soldiers' morale was so high that they all had tattooed on their arms: “Death to the

Mongols” (Nguyen, p. 39). The villagers resisted the invaders by every possible means. They took refuge in the forests and mountains, if necessary, and continued the struggle by guerrilla warfare. Once the majority of the historically Vietnamese territory was controlled by the Mongols, the Vietnamese population left a vacuum in the path of the Mongols to cut off all access to supplies, and the Vietnamese forces attacked the vulnerable disconnected positions of the outspreading Mongolian army posts. The Mongolian general was killed and 50,000 soldiers were captured. The Mongol army of half a million was almost completely annihilated. And finally the whole country was liberated by August 1285.

Kublai abandoned his plan for a third invasion of Japan in order to prepare an expedition of revenge against Vietnam. In 1287, the same Mongolian general as in the previous invasions crossed the northern frontier with 300,000 soldiers, and a fleet of 500 vessels headed for the Vietnamese coast. The Vietnamese people again used the starvation tactics in which the king and people left the capital and hid their rice. General Tran Hung Dao used the same tactic as was used in the 10th century to expel the Chinese, in which they planted iron-tipped stakes at the mouth of the river at high tide, and when the tide was ebbing a small Vietnamese fleet retreated quickly and the pursuing Mongol junks were broken up on the iron-tipped stakes. The Mongolian general was taken prisoner, 100 junks were destroyed and another 400 were captured. This was the third Mongol defeat in 1288. In the following year, the Vietnamese

king handed over the captured generals and officers. After the death of Kubilai in 1294, the new Mongol ruler established friendly relations with Vietnam.

The victory over the Mongols, who were superior in numbers and armaments, was attributable to the real national unity which was built up over the long course of struggle against foreign invaders, and excellent leadership like that of General Tran Hung Dao who had the advantage of superior tactics and popular support, in particular tough guerrilla warfare, with a peasant-soldier system under which each man became a combatant and ethnic minority groups played a part in mountainous regions. These characteristics have been inherited again in modern wars in Vietnam led by General Vo Nguyen Giap.

ii . Japanese Victory

In 1274 and again in 1281 the Mongol Emperor Kubilai Khan sent fleets to attack Japan. The first attack was launched after the Japanese rejected a Mongol demand that they acknowledge the sovereignty of Kubilai. On the day after the invading force of 40,000 men had landed near Hakata (the present Fukuoka), a storm suddenly arose, destroying a large part of the fleet and drowning many of the soldiers.

Seven years later in 1281, after the Japanese had again rejected Kubilai's demands and, furthermore, beheaded his envoys, he sent a force of 150,000 men. After 53 days' stubborn battle in Kyushu, a severe typhoon again arose. The Mongol force embarked and retreated.

These victories over the Mongols left the

Japanese warriors disappointed, after initial joy over the victory and a sense of national unity, because there were no enemy estates to be distributed among them as a reward. This was the beginning of the collapse of the Kamakura shogunate. These two successive victories due to typhoons made the Japanese so superstitious that they believed the *Kamikaze* or 'Divine Wind' would always help the Japanese in war. This superstitious belief made the Japanese rush into a reckless war against the Allied Powers.

- (d) Similar incidents, different results between Vietnam and Japan
 - i. Modernization of Japan

In the mid-19th century, towards the end of the feudalistic eras in Japan and Vietnam, these two countries were approached by Western powers aiming at colonization or seeking trade. In 1853, an American squadron under Commodore Mathew Perry came to Japan with a letter from the U.S. president requesting the opening of trade relations. The Tokugawa shogunate was embarrassed by Commodore Perry's appearance and demands, since Japan had closed her door to the world under the isolation policy for more than two centuries. But in the following year, 1854, Commodore Perry and his fleet came back to Japan. The Japanese shogunate government finally decided to open her door to the world. And a Treaty of Peace and Amity between the U.S.A. and Japan was signed. Treaty of friendship and trade were signed one after another with Britain, Russia, the Netherlands and France. These treaties with five western powers were called 'Unequal Treaties' because

extra-territorial rights, a very low scale of import duties and other privileges were provided to the nationals of eighteen countries including the above five countries.

After a severe civil war between the supporters of Imperial rule and those of the Shogunate, finally, in 1868, the Imperial supporters won and restored Imperial rule. In this civil war, France supported the defeated shogunate in many ways. Japan started a process of modernization, and protected her independence even under the 'Unequal Treaties', taking careful note of the Opium War and the colonization of China by Western powers.

Japan rushed along the road to modernization and westernization. She won the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905). The 'Unequal Treaties' were abolished. Japan annexed Taiwan in 1895 and Korea in 1910. Japan now becoming a militaristic invader. She established the puppet state of 'Manchuria' in China. In 1937, a full-scale war against China began. And finally Japan, as a country of the Tripartite Axis, started the Pacific War against the U.S.A. and the Allied forces and invaded large areas of Asia including Vietnam. Japan was completely dominated by a militaristic and fascist regime.

In 1945, the dropping of the A-bombs put an end to the war and Japan's militaristic regime. Japan had taken quite a different path from that of many other colonial Asian countries. Japan had tried to imitate the Western powers and had taken the industrial, militaristic and colonial invader's way, and finally it was almost destroyed. The

Kamikaze, or Divine Wind, did not blow for invading Japan as it had in the 13th century when Japan was invaded by the Mongols. In the final stages of the war, this militaristic Japan organized and used a special unit of suicide pilots called the *Kamikaze* Special Unit to attack U.S. warships.

Japan recovered from the war-devastated ruins. She started out as a peace-loving and democratic nation. The new post-war constitution provided expressly for the renunciation of war. The Korean War broke out in 1950 on the other side of the Sea of Japan. A National Police Reserve, the forerunner of the present Self-Defense Forces was created. The pacifist Constitution prohibited Japan from participating in the war directly, and Japan reaped the economic benefit of the Korean War. Japan's economy not only recovered but began booming. The Korean War provided the impetus, and the Renunciation of War article of the Constitution which kept defense expenditure down to a low level contributed to Japan's rapid economic growth. In 1967, Japan achieved the second largest GDP in the world after the U.S.A. But Japan has depended upon the U.S.A. for defense so much that now Japan has to follow the requests of the U.S. and send the Self-Defense Forces abroad to such places as Iraq. The Renunciation of War article, which is supposed to be a lasting national value, is now facing controversy over amendment.

ii . Colonization of Vietnam

Around the same time as the U.S. fleet's appearance in Tokyo Bay, Japan, on 31st

August 1858, a French naval squadron attacked Da Nang, Vietnam, launching a war of colonial conquest. The Vietnamese under a decaying feudalistic monarchy split into a pro-French faction who sought compromise and strong group of militant patriots who had inherited the long tradition of struggle for national independence. Insurrections took place from time to time. But finally in 1885 Vietnam was annexed to France. Even after the annexation Vietnamese resistance continued. It was in 1897 that a colonial regime was established, when a Governor-General of Indochina was appointed, who governed not only Vietnam but also Laos and Cambodia.

Japan's victory over Tsarist Russia in 1905 encouraged Vietnamese patriots to nurture the hope that Japan, as an Asian power, would offer aid and possibly support in their struggle against French colonialism. Towards 1908 about 200 young students were sent to Japan to study as part of what was known as "the Go East" movement. But in 1909, the Japanese government, bribed by the French government, recognized French conquests in Asia and expelled Vietnamese patriots from Japan. The Japanese government betrayed Vietnamese patriots' expectations. Japan was already an imperialist power which had colonized Taiwan in 1895 and Korea in 1905 (Nguyen, PP.167-168).

After the First World War, from 1919 to 1929, the economic exploitation of Vietnam was intensified by the French colonialists for their economic rehabilitation. At this time, Marxism-Leninism or communism was adopted as the theory for the liberation

struggle of colonized Vietnam by Nguyen Ai Quoc (later called Ho Chi Minh) and other liberation movement leaders, who were influenced by the Russian Revolution. About a decade after the end of the First World War and the Russian August Revolution, in 1929, the Communist Party of Indochina was founded. The struggle against the French colonialists to achieve national independence came to be led by the communist party.

The Second World War, starting in 1939, imposed a heavy burden on the Vietnamese. Tens of thousands of Vietnamese soldiers and workers were sent to France. The Vietnamese were ordered to provide France with vast quantities of food, raw materials and war materials. In 1940, France was defeated by Nazi Germany. This French defeat and the invasion by Japanese troops threw the French colonialists into confusion. Japan sought to take advantage of the French colonial administrative apparatus. The French were forced to let Japanese troops enter Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand, then allied with Japan. The pro-Nazi French government and the Japanese militaristic government colluded to exploit Vietnam's resources and to hold back the Vietnamese national independence movement. Vietnamese uprisings took place one after another but were suppressed.

In 1941, the Viet Minh Front (League for Vietnamese Independence) was founded, comprising many workers, peasants, youth and women's organizations, guerrilla units, even the bourgeoisie and land-owners: people from all social strata who agreed to struggle against the French and Japanese colonialists. The Viet Minh rapidly gained support among

the Vietnamese.

Under the dual control of both France and Japan, the Vietnamese suffered from severe poverty, in particular, starvation. Japanese troops hoarded rice for their own use. Two million people died of starvation.

In 1945, Nazi Germany was defeated and the pro-Nazi Vichy government in France fell. De Gaulle promised Indochina a degree of autonomy to safeguard the French presence in Indochina. Japanese troops disarmed the French. The coming defeat of Japan became obvious. Before and after the surrender of Japan, on 15th August, insurrections occurred through Vietnam. On 25th August, with the abdication of the King Bao Dai, the Vietnamese succeeded in the August Revolution of 1945. This politically and militaristically well-prepared revolution put an end to 80 years of French colonization, abolished the monarchy and re-established an independent Vietnam.

But this was neither the real end of colonization nor the start of independence. In accordance with the surrender agreements following Japan's defeat, Indochina was occupied in the north by Chiang Kai-shek's Chinese troops and in the south by British troops under Admiral Mountbatten. They smoothed the way for the return of the French. The French government aimed at re-establishing French sovereignty in Indochina and dispatched French troops. On 23rd August, the French delegate declared that France did not recognize Vietnam's independence. On 2nd September, French soldiers, hiding in a church, opened fire on the crowd of those demonstrating in favour of independence. And

the nine years' war of resistance against French aggression broke out on 23rd September 1945, ending with the defeat of France on 7th May 1954 at Dien Bien Phu.

After the Korean War and the Chinese Revolution, from 1950, intervention by the U.S. in this war started openly. After the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, the U.S. took over this Vietnam War. The U.S. troops withdrew from Vietnam in 1973. For another two more years until 1975, the north Vietnam National Liberation Front/Provisional Revolutionary Government forces fought against the pro-U.S. South Vietnam government forces. And the former won and Vietnam was finally unified. The Vietnamese have got 'peace' after this long thirty-year fight from 1945 to 1975.

Conclusion

Japan and Vietnam have similarities and differences. Both countries are similar in land area and population. Both nations have some common ancestral origins. But Japan is an island nation, whereas Vietnam shares a long border with other countries. This difference has given rise to historical differences between the two countries. Vietnam has been invaded around twenty times. Japan has not been invaded so often. Japan has not been colonized, although she was defeated in the Second World War. The Japanese were invaders of neighbouring nations. Early Japanese history started with a military expedition to Korea which was organized and commanded by the Emperor Jingu in the middle of the fourth century. Towards the end of the sixteenth century, the Japanese invaded Korea 1592 and 1598. As soon as the modern era of

Japan started, almost the first thing to be discussed by the government was an expedition to Korea.

Vietnam was colonized by China several times over a long period extending for ten centuries and by France for eighty years. The Vietnamese always fought against invaders and finally defeated the invaders. The Vietnamese have never invaded other nations. They are not a warlike people but peace lovers. They are one of the nations who know best the value of peace in the world. A legend concerning Lake Hoan Kiem in the center of Hanoi tells that, when Vietnam was under the direct control of the Chinese Ming dynasty in the early fourteenth century, King Le Loi, the founder of the Le dynasty, was given a sacred sword by the guardian turtle of the lake in 1428. He fought and won the war of independence against the Ming with that sword and liberated Vietnam. After the war he returned the sword to the turtle.

The Japanese should consider the value of peace more deeply in this conflicting world.

Notes

Vietnamese history is mainly based upon Nguyen (2004);

Japanese history is based upon Storry (1960) and Kodansha International (1996).

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国民性の形成：日本とベトナムとの比較 姉崎 正平

日本が英米をはじめとする連合国と無謀な戦争に突入したのは、軍部指導者のみならず、それに追従、支持した国民の心理的根底に、13世紀の2度にわたるモンゴル襲来の時、台風によりモンゴル軍が壊滅した故事による“神風信仰”があったためである。

ベトナムも13世紀に3度モンゴルの襲来をうけたが、いずれもゲリラ戦で勝利した。それ以前にも、実に1000年にわたる中国の支配を10世紀前半に打ち破った経験をもっていた。これらの経験が、心理的にも、戦術的にも、近代におけるフランス、そして、アメリカおよび南ベトナム傀儡政権との解放戦争に勝利する原動力になった。

日本の太平洋戦争敗戦とベトナム解放戦争勝利に至る両国民の社会心理を比較した。