
Ronald R. Robel

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol31/iss31/13
HOW CHINA LOST VIETNAM


Keith W. Taylor's *The Birth of Vietnam* details the history of the Vietnamese from their earliest founding myths to the middle of the tenth century A.D. The text consists of seven chapters, six of which focus on the period of Chinese domination from the Han dynasty through the end of the T'ang. Taylor provides numerous (10) maps and 15 appendices. There also is a Preface, Introduction, a Glossary (with Chinese characters for the place names, administrative jurisdictions and titles from the provincial period, personal names, and terms and expressions) and a Bibliography. Appendix "O" offers a commendable bibliographic essay of eleven pages evaluating the sources Taylor utilized. These are impressively extensive as they include major basic historical documents in Chinese and Vietnamese as well as secondary sources in French, English, Japanese and an assortment of other languages.

Taylor's approach in *The Birth of Vietnam* is to provide what may be considered a handy (yet massive) reference source for the rather complex historical evolution of the Vietnamese people under tutelage of Chinese governance. Each chapter from #2 through #7 covers specific Chinese dynastic periods, treating in great detail the major events involved as pertains to the region of An-nam (or whatever other appellations were assigned to the area inhabited by the Vietnamese). Because the basic orientation essentially mirrors Chinese traditional historiography, familiarity with China's dynastic history during the 1,000+ year period covered is almost *sine qua non* for a truly comprehensible understanding of the materials presented.

At first glance the most impressive aspect of this book is the enormous wealth of information provided. Taylor obviously consulted an extremely diverse number of sources to compile this historical account. The title page indicates this publication is a revision of his Ph.D. thesis (1976) which doubtless accounts for what seems to be a determined effort to incorporate almost every detail gleaned from these sources, often debating in the text itself the potential veracity or lack of such for each historical event covered. Thus, for the general public with a casual interest in either Vietnam or even China, this book presents many challenges. Although each chapter commences with an introductory section designed to sort of summarize what follows, these summaries all too frequently fall short of providing reasonable preparation for the comprehensive and convoluted discussion of the political events that follow. For example, Chapter 6, entitled "The T'ang-Viet Confrontation" offers such an overwhelming presentation of specifics on a year-by-year basis that it becomes exceedingly difficult to determine what actually constituted the "confrontation."

In his introduction, Taylor acknowledges that "Chinese and French sinologists have treated this period of Vietnamese history as a branch of Chinese history.
They have seen Vietnam as little more than a refractory frontier province of the Chinese empire, blessed with China’s ‘civilizing’ influence. Vietnamese historians, on the other hand, look at this era as a time when their ancestors struggled under alien rule, a time when their national identity was tested and refined. To gain a balanced view, it is important to consider both the information about Vietnam recorded by Chinese historians and the historical traditions that preserve what the Vietnamese have remembered from this time.” Although Taylor attempts to offer a new, “balanced” and somewhat unique portrayal of the 1,000 year period when the Vietnamese people were incorporated into the administrative system of the Chinese empire, the underlying thrust of the text, as presented, actually tends to support the original contention of the Chinese and French sinologists. Perhaps the very nature of the primary sources, generally subsumed into the narrative with minimal efforts to extrapolate a broader context, served to undermine Taylor’s original worthy goal. In other words, the text contains so many individual trees that an overview of the total forest fails to take any meaningful shape.

Yet, there remains the chance that Taylor failed to anticipate some potentially important alternative questions that could be asked of these sources, that might prompt a different set of conclusions. This survey largely portrays the major political and military events during this lengthy period. Social, religious and cultural matters received little attention. Even considering Taylor’s use of Vietnamese sources, there fails to emerge from the jungle of specific details any clear picture of a distinctive “Vietnamese” identity, be it political, social or cultural, to basically justify the contention that the Vietnamese were indeed very different from the (Han) Chinese. It being that “national identity” and “nationalism” might well be considered a somewhat recent/modern construct, such terms might be inappropriate for the realities of the tenth century A.D. The quest to finesse the historical materials extant for this early period for evidence of “uniqueness” to justify what later evolved as a Vietnamese Kingdom, staunchly dedicated to independence from Chinese control, may prove to be a misguided endeavor. Very likely, what transpired after the Mid-tenth century A.D., in political and cultural terms is more critical for understanding why and how the Vietnamese successfully embarked on a path of development that actually liberated them from the Chinese empire.

What The Birth of Vietnam reveals is that during the periods surveyed, Chinese authorities regarded this area’s people and resources as legitimate constituents for bureaucratic control. Yet Taylor fails to assess Vietnam’s actual significance in the broader imperial context. An-nam (or the areas of the empire inhabited by the Vietnamese) being geographically peripheral, perhaps was not of critical importance for central imperial authorities. Thus governance of An-nam evidently failed to consistently achieve a high priority preference status in terms of official appointments. Taylor shows that many officials or magistrates assigned to An-nam, all too frequently seemed marginally capable (if not corrupt, greedy, and inept). As a result, the region proved disloyal, ungovernable, or “refractory.” The history of the Vietnamese portion of the Chinese empire demonstrates a rather constant theme of revolt, unrest and noncompliance with imperial directives. Only when trouble erupted did the central government take action by sending wor-
thy officials to repair the damage. In only a few instances did this region directly impact on a vortex of imperial politics. But, there still remains a basic question begging an answer, which is: "How did An-nam really fit into the Chinese empire?" Throughout the 1,000+ year period, the Chinese sent numerous military forces into the region and a whole host of administrative officials descended upon An-nam to govern the area. What Taylor inadvertently reveals is an interesting pattern, suggesting that large numbers of the Chinese (Han) people sent to this area evidently remained there, intermarried with Vietnamese, at times revolts against the central government; and eventually more identified with Vietnamese political interest/aspirations than retained any basic loyalty to China. This circumstance suggests that, as regards the southern portion of the empire, traditional Chinese (Han) ethnocentric categorization of non-Han people as "barbarian" was perhaps not as meaningful as Chinese attitudes towards the north/northwest, where such "barbarians" as the Hsiung-nu, Huns, Mongols, and so forth maintained a life style quite alien to Chinese settled agricultural patterns and sophisticated cultural norms. Although it was not within the purview of Taylor's survey to account for imperial China's northern borders, considering how the Vietnamese were classified in Chinese traditional bureaucratic structural terms does raise yet another important question that can be asked of the available sources. It seems that the Chinese, from the Han through the Tang periods, evinced very different attitudes towards "northern barbarians" vs "southern barbarians" in their governmental structure. A very distinct organ of the central government was entrusted with dealing with "barbarian affairs" on the northern border. The Birth of Vietnam does not reveal that during this period any similar organ of government was in place for the south. This suggests a most intriguing set of questions. If the northern barbarians throughout most of Chinese history seemed rather susceptible to being seduced by the attractiveness of Chinese culture and thus frequently "absorbed" into the social/cultural milieu, what was the case for such "barbarians" on the southern border? Does this imply that the northern barbarians were somehow different? If in the south, "barbarians" successfully resisted Chinese political control, yet retained almost without exception all vestiges of the Chinese way of life (= government structure, social values, economic patterns, religious beliefs, and cultural/artistic norms), as was the case for Vietnam, how could this occur? Taylor does not address this matter. The answer very probably lies in what takes place after the mid-tenth century A.D. But, prior to that time, considering what follows, it seems highly unlikely that the Vietnamese could have successfully maintained a way of life that was significantly different from the Chinese norm. And very likely the Vietnamese then really considered themselves part and parcel of the Chinese orb, despite efforts made by later generations in the Vietnamese Kingdom to justify independence.

There yet remains another question that must be asked that doubtless will cause considerable consternation for the Vietnamese. "To what extent did [Han] Chinese [in Vietnam] contribute to the eventual political independence of Vietnam?" Taylor reveals numerous instances when local [Han] Chinese fomented rebellious acts against Chinese imperial authority. Such matters are among the "trees" that Taylor offers but fail to appear in any "forest" overview that he does...
not effectively provide. These matters simply cannot be ignored for any meaningful assessment of this period. There thus emerges the potentially embarrassing situation that actually in political terms the Vietnamese were generally content to be a part of the Chinese system during the period surveyed. Chinese administrative ineptitude may be the major reason prompting them to seek liberation. Yet to be documented and described is any sort of fundamental evidence that the Vietnamese truly maintained a cultural way of life marking them as distinctively different from the [Han] Chinese. And there remains unresolved an analysis of how the Chinese simply failed to administer this region and its people effectively; how Chinese actions or policies managed to promote the spirit of independence in Annam that eventuated in a Vietnamese state (kingdom). "The Birth of Vietnam" presents few convincing arguments for the "birth" of anything.

Ronald R. Robel