

"The Spread of Chinese Civilization: Korea and Vietnam

I. Korea

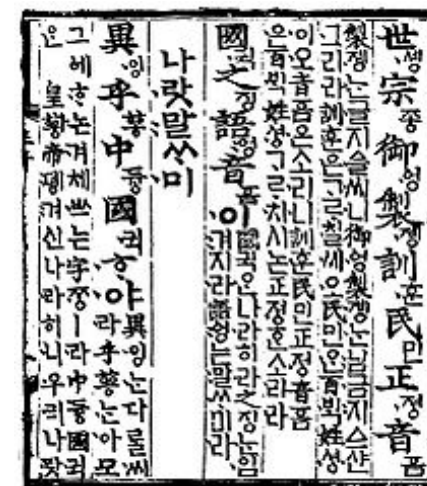
Origins of the Korean People: In prehistoric times nomadic people from the Northeast Asian mainland migrated into the Korean peninsula. By the 4th century B. C. E. the people of Korea had begun to adopt farming and metal working techniques from the Chinese and reside in settled communities. According to legend, the first Korean kingdom, Choson, was established in 2,333 B. C. E. by Tangun, a semi-divine figure. Chinese historical records also show the existence of tribal states in northern Korea before 1,000 B.C. E. In 109 B. C. E. Choson, was conquered by the Han Dynasty, and afterwards parts of Korea were colonized by Chinese settlers. It is through these colonies that Chinese influences began to enter Korean culture.

Three Kingdoms (c. 50 B. C. E. – 668 C. E.): Tribal peoples of Korea resisted Chinese rule, and the Korean peninsula consolidated into three Kingdoms: Koguryo in the north (extending into Manchuria), Paekche in the southwest, and Silla in the southeast. Contacts between Koguryo and the various kingdoms that ruled China after the collapse of the Han Dynasty resulted in the first wave of Sinification, that is extensive adoption of Chinese culture.

The Koguryo king imposed a unified law code modeled after that of Han China, universities were established to teach the Confucian classics, Civil Service exams instituted and attempts were made to set up a Chinese-style bureaucracy.

Chinese writing was also adopted; however, the spoken Korean language has a very different structure from Chinese. So Chinese characters were modified and new characters created to accommodate Korean grammatical patterns. This modified Chinese writing system called idu was used along with “pure” classical Chinese to write the Korean language. (In the mid-1500’s a native Korean writing using a phonetic system was invented. It’s called hangul and is the writing used today.)

Various Chinese sects of Buddhism also took root as Korean rulers financed the building of monasteries and pagodas and supported Buddhist artists.



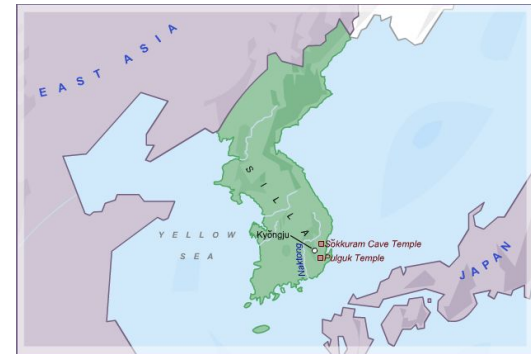
Idu

Silla (668-935)

After centuries of warfare between the three Korean kingdoms, Silla allied with Tang China and defeated its rivals. Silla and China then went to war over how to divide the conquered territories. Unable to defeat the Silla kingdom, the Tang ruler agreed to a compromise. The Silla king became a vassal of the Tang emperor and subject to regular payments of tribute; in return the Chinese withdrew their armies from Korea and peace was assured. This left the Silla the independent rulers of a united Korea.

Under the Silla rulers Chinese influence reached its high point as they consciously strove to transform their kingdom into a miniature Tang Empire. The tribute paying relationship with China furthered this goal. Regular emissaries were sent to the Tang court to present tribute which took the form of splendid gifts and to perform the required Kowtow, a ritual that involved a series of bows or prostrations before the Tang Emperor to acknowledge his superior position. At the end of the tribute paying ceremony, the Emperor gave gifts of greater value than the tribute thus establishing again his superior position as “Son of Heaven.” These regular visits to the Tang court gave the Korean administrators, scholars and merchants who were part of the mission access to Chinese books and works of art, and exposure to the latest fashions. Trade also benefitted with access to Chinese markets and manufactured goods.

The Silla rulers rebuilt their capital city of Kumsong (Kyongju) to resemble the Tang capital. Aristocratic families who dominated the court and imperial government constructed their mansions in the renovated capital and moved their households there. Most busied themselves with artistic pursuits or the various diversions the capital offered. Some studied in the Chinese schools and even underwent the rigors of the examination system. However, unlike China, Korea never established a bureaucracy based on merit and positions were granted on the basis of birth and family connections rather than scholarly achievement.



Silla Crowns and Royal Tombs
(Burial Mounds)

Buddhism was adopted as the state religion under the Silla and flourished with the support of the kings and aristocracy who continued to finance the monasteries and Buddhist art works. The capital city of Kumsong became crowded with temples and some of the most impressive Buddhist monuments in Asia were built during the this era. Cho (known as Chan in China), Pure Land and other Chinese sects were popular.

The Koryo (918-1393)

The Silla Kingdom declined in the late 9th century and the Korean peninsula again became fragmented into three rival states. This period is called the “latter three kingdoms.” The northern based “Latter Koguryo” established its authority over the whole Korean peninsula in 918. At that time the kingdom’s name was shortened to Koryo. The Japanese pronounced this as “Korei,” and Portuguese explorers transformed the Japanese version into “Korea.”

The Koryo built their new capital at Kaesong, just north of Seoul, modeled on the Tang capital at Chan’an (Xian). They retained Buddhism as the state religion and incorporated most of the Chinese administrative system.

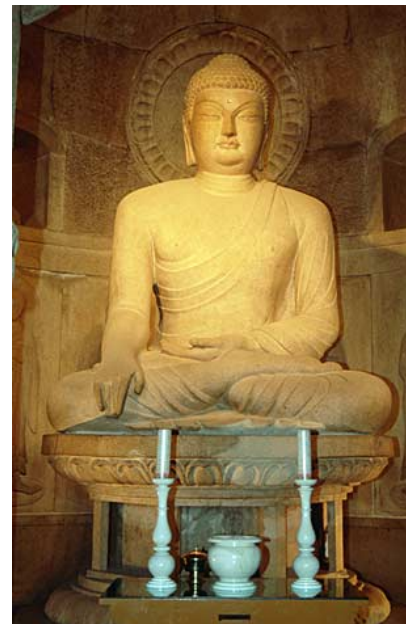
Mongol Domination (1231-1336): the Mongols were a nomadic people from northern Asia who conquered China, much of Asia and eastern Europe. They also invaded Korea and it became a vassal state of the Yuan (Mongolian) Dynasty of China. The Yuan ruler, Kubilai Khan, attempted to use Korea as a bridge to conquer Japan, but his invasions of Japan ended in failure. Mongolian dominance of Korea ended with then collapse of the Mongolian Empire.



Standing Buddha, Silla dynasty. Gilt bronze



Stone pagoda near Gyeongju



Korean Buddhist monks

Sokkuram Cave Temple



Traditional Korean dress called Hanbok – note the use of half-bows in Korean dress.



Korean Celadon Porcelain is considered superior to that of China

While Korea borrowed heavily from China, especially during China’s Golden Age of the Tang and Song Dynasty, it never became totally absorbed into Chinese culture. Rather it developed many of its own traditions resulting in a distinctive Korean culture.

Unlike China, Korea remained dominated by the aristocracy and even Civil Service exams were open only to those from the higher social classes, thus “new Men” were not brought into the administration as they were in China. The highest ranks of the military were also reserved for the upper aristocracy. Thus the government was administered in the interest of the aristocrats resulting in a society with a sharp division between the rich and culturally brilliant lifestyles of the aristocracy and the impoverishment and backwardness of the remaining population that served them.



Traditional homes have distinctive doors, windows and window coverings, and they are heated from underneath the house.

Some examples of Korea’s unique culture is seen in its dress, house construction, marriage and inheritance customs and diet which makes much use of *kimch'i*, a peppery pickled cabbage. And Korean artisans who used adopted Chinese technology at times surpassed the Chinese masters, for example in ceramics and moveable type printing.



Kimch'i and Chili peppers: staples of Korean cuisine

II. Vietnam

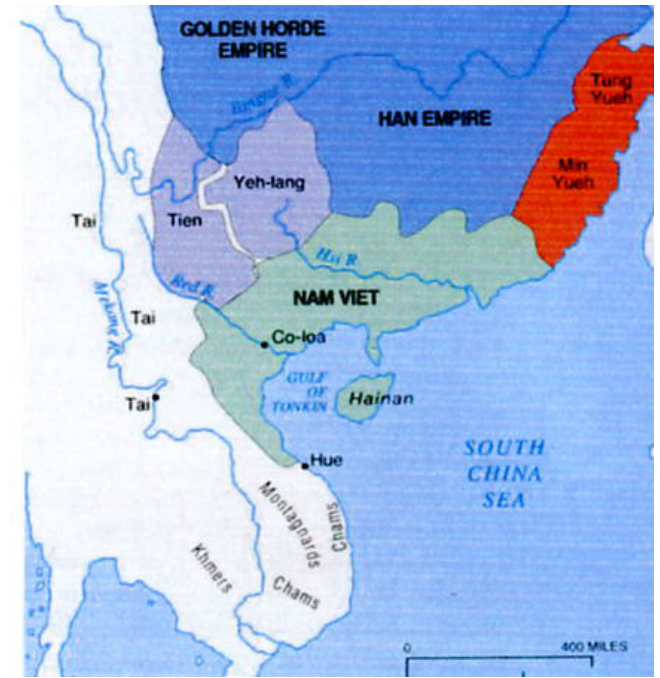
Pre-Han Vietnam:

Evidence indicates that the earliest inhabitants of Vietnam arrived about 10,000 years ago during the Neolithic Period and settled along the Red River in the Tonka Delta. It is believed that groups of extended families lived in small communities and developed two ways of cultivating rice: dry fields used in upland areas and wet fields used along the river banks.

A bronze Age culture, the Dong Son, emerged between 800-200 B. C. E.; however, it is not clear whether bronze technology was introduced from China or Thailand. These people used bronze to make drums employed in their rituals. The drums were etched with scenes from every day life showing people farming, doing daily chores, building boats, playing musical instruments, etc. They also had images of animals such as frogs, seabirds and deer that may have reflected animistic religious beliefs. Dong Son-like drums are still used in the highlands of Vietnam today.

The early movement of people in Vietnam is explained in origin myths. The most well-known one says that the first Vietnamese people originated from a marriage between a dragon father and a fairy mother that produced 100 sons. Since the dragon was a water creature, the fairy mother took 50 sons to the highland and the dragon father took the other 50 to the coast. The sons who went to the coast are considered to be the people of the Lac kingdom who had developed agriculture by early 1500 B. C. E. One of these sons founded the Hung Dynasty (2,769 B. C. E. to 100 C. E.).

Vietnam is characterized by two major river deltas: Red River Delta in the north and Mekong River Delta in the south. In prehistoric times a kingdom formed between these deltas comprised of Malayo-Polynesiam people who were influenced by Indian and Indonesian trade and religion. The area developed into the Hindu-Buddhist kingdom of Champa.



South China and Viet Nam on the Eve of Han Conquest



Dong Son

Chinese Colonization (111 B. C. E.-939 C. E.)

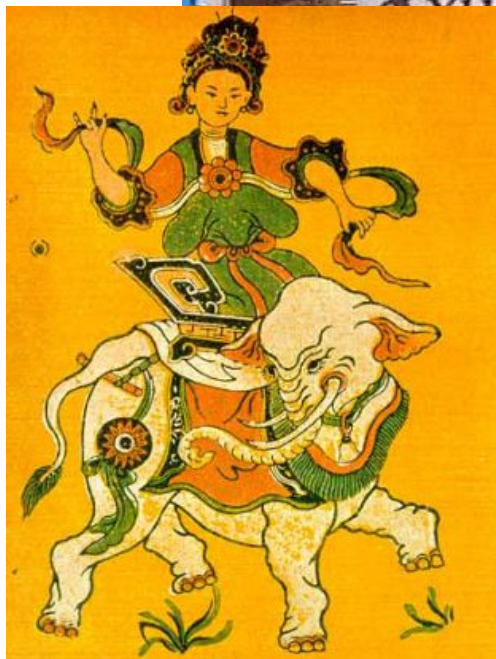
In the beginning of the 2nd century B. C. E. deposed members of the Chinese Qin Dynasty began to move into the Tonkin and Red River Deltas after the Han Dynasty gained power. They brought with them Chinese technology, language and culture beginning the Sinicization of Northern Vietnam. In the following decades Viet rulers defeated the feudal lords who controlled the Red River valley expanding their kingdom. They also intermarried with the Khmer (Cambodian) and Tai people who inhabited the region which was important for the formation of the Vietnamese as a distinctive ethnic group.

The Han Dynasty tried to incorporate the Viet kingdom into its Empire by having it agree to a tribute paying vassal status. But by 111 B. C. E. the Han decided to govern the Vietnamese directly. The Red River delta was occupied by Chinese troops and governed by Chinese administrators who encouraged local lords to adopt Chinese culture and enter the bureaucracy. It was the goal of the Han to assimilate the Vietnamese absorbing them and their land into the expanding Chinese empire. Realizing that they had a lot to learn for the Chinese, Vietnamese elites co-operated.

In the centuries after the Chinese conquest, the Vietnamese elite attended Chinese-like schools, learned to read Chinese, studied the Confucian classics and took Civil Service exams that gave them entry into the bureaucracy. Farmers benefitted from the introduction of Chinese agricultural techniques and irrigation technology that made Vietnamese agriculture the most productive in southeast Asia and allowed for an increase in the population. The Vietnamese also found Chinese political and military organization gave them an advantage over their neighbors as they competed for land to settle and cultivate. While Theravada Buddhism was introduced into Viet Nam in the 1st century C. E. from India, Chinese Mahayana sects were established, and eventually the Vietnamese adopted the extended family model of the Chinese and began to practice ancestor worship.



National Heroes, the Trung Sisters are commemorated on a Postage Stamp



Trung Au

Resistance to the Chinese

Despite the benefits gained from Chinese rule and culture, many Vietnamese feared the loss of their cultural identity and resented the disdain Chinese administrators showed for their traditions. Vietnamese women who played an important economic role in agriculture and trade had greater freedom and more influence than Chinese women, and they especially resented the Confucian social order that would confine them to their homes and subject them to male authority. Farmers also feared loss of their land and independence as traditional communal farms gave way to individual landholding and heavy taxes reduced them to the status of tenant farmers. Moreover the farmers continued to give their primary loyalty to the village rather than the distant bureaucratic state and even more remote Chinese capital. Resented too were the Chinese bureaucrats and immigrants especially those who acquired land and became wealthy landlords.

Discontent over the next 700 years of Chinese rule periodically waxed and waned, and at times resulted in major rebellions.

Trong Sisters Rebellion in 39 C. E.: This was the first major rebellion against Chinese rule. It was organized by two daughters of a deposed local leader. They gathered forces, united the people and led the rebellion. One of the sisters, Trung Trac, proclaimed herself queen and for three years they ruled the kingdom. According to Chinese sources, the defeated sisters were killed in 42 C. E., but Vietnamese sources say that rather than surrender to the Chinese, they drowned themselves in the river.

Trung Au Rebellion: In 248 C. E. another woman who was unhappy with Chinese rule and the declining status of women enlisted the aid of neighboring people and led a short-lived and unsuccessful revolt.

Ly Bon Rebellion: In 542 a man of Chinese-Vietnamese descent led a revolt against a corrupt local Chinese official and established his own kingdom before being defeated in 546, but his followers continued to resist Chinese rule until 603 when the Sui Dynasty came to power and restored authority.

Vietnamese Independence

Rebellions increased after the Tang Dynasty gained control over China and Northern Vietnam. The most successful one was led by **Ngo Quyen in 939** during the period of chaos that followed the fall of the Tang Dynasty. Ngo Quyen defeated the Chinese army and established himself as king, but five years later he died and anarchy and civil war broke out. The Chinese, however, were unable to retake Vietnam and its independence was retained.

In 965, Dinh Bo Linh proclaimed himself King of Northern Viet Nam and attempted to bring together Chinese and Vietnamese political traditions and incorporating both Buddhist and Daoist rituals and priests at court. His dynasty was overthrown in 980 and the short-lived Early Le Dynasty replaced it (980-1009). From the 11th to 13th century the Vietnamese Kingdom (Dai Vet) was consolidated under the Ly Dynasty.

Although free from Chinese political dominance, China continued to impact Vietnamese culture. The kings built Chinese-style palaces in their Forbidden Cities patterned after those found in Chan'an and Beijing. Their bureaucracy was a smaller version of the Chinese administrative system. The administrative elite was educated in Confucian classics and competed in Civil Service exams, although they never had as much power as the scholar-gentry of China since local Vietnamese official identified more strongly with the peasants than the court and higher administrators. Moreover, Buddhist monks who were highly esteemed and influential in the villages competed successfully against the Confucian scholars undermining the authority of the Confucian bureaucrats over the peasants.

In subsequent centuries under a succession of dynasties, the Vietnamese will use their advantages in political and military organization as well as technology to conquer its Cham and Khmer neighbors to the south extending its borders.



King Ngo Quyen's Tomb

Hanoi - Literature Temple and Quoc Tu Giam

