

Did China Colonize Vietnam?

Vietnamese often speak of a long history of domination at Chinese hands, while Chinese youths are taught that Vietnamese territory was previously part of China.

By **Christelle Nguyen**

August 24, 2023



In this July 24, 2016, file photo, Vietnamese protesters shout slogans while showing an anti-China placard during a rally against China near the Chinese Embassy in Seoul, South Korea.

Had Xie Yan from Chongqing never studied Vietnamese language and spent time in Hanoi as an exchange student back in 2013, she would not have known that Vietnam was under Chinese occupation for centuries. Nor had she been aware that for most of its history, the entity known as Vietnam today used classical Chinese characters in writing.

In Vietnam, Xie came across the term “*ngàn năm bắc thuộc*” (a thousand years of Northern occupation) for the first time. In Vietnamese, it refers to the early Chinese rule of northern Vietnam. In Chinese textbooks on Vietnamese history in both Xie’s BA and MA program on Vietnamese studies, this era was mostly called 郡县时期 (*junxian shiqi* or prefectural period).

“I was in the beginning shocked by the name ‘bắc thuộc,’” said Xie, admitting that her peers did not know that term either – with all it implies about Chinese rule over Vietnam.

Little did Xie know that the history of her favorite place in Hanoi, Hoàn Kiếm lake, has a connection with her home country as well. According to Vietnamese legend, Emperor Lê Lợi received a magical sword from a saintly turtle, which helped him successfully fight against invading Ming forces in the 15th

century. After ascending to the throne and founding the Lê Dynasty, Lê Lợi returned the sword to the lake, which led to the lake being named Hoàn Kiếm, meaning “Returning the Sword” in Vietnamese.

Similarly, when Zhang Xiao Shu, originally from Guizhou province, first came to Vietnam in 2012 as an exchange student, she did not have the faintest idea as to why a few elderly landlords declined to rent her an apartment upon seeing her Chinese passport. A Vietnamese language major at that time, she had little idea of the Vietnamese history of fighting against China, and that China is known in Vietnam as an aggressor par excellence, which largely contributed to the prevailing anti-China sentiments in the country.

“I did not know the Vietnamese people would normally say China had occupied Vietnam for 1,000 years,” said Zhang.

As a sign of the divergence in historical narratives, Zhang recalled that when doing Vietnamese-to-Chinese translation, she often translated references to Chinese colonization or occupation as “junxian shiqi,” to be in line with traditional Chinese historiography.

Interviews with 21 Chinese youths in urban areas testified to their limited knowledge

about the historical links between China and Vietnam. While Chinese youths are well educated about their country's historical victimhood under colonization – commonly referred to as the “hundred years of national humiliation” (百年国耻) – they remain in the dark about China's early domination of Vietnam and the complex and contentious relationship between the two countries, which a number of Vietnamese and Western scholars refer to as [colonization](#).

Politicized Vietnamology in China

In the 2022 book “From Jiaozhi to Yuenan” by Gu Xiaosong, Liang Maohua, and Xiong Shiping, Vietnamese territory was considered part of China's territory and was referred to by different names, depending on the time periods: Red River Delta and its surrounding areas (prior to 214 BC); Xiangjun (214 – 207 BC); Jiaozhi (207 – 111 BC); the three prefectures of Jiaozhi, Jiuzhen, and Rinan (111 BC – 203 AD); Jiao Zhou (203 – 679); and Annan (679 – 1803). Only in 1803 did the name Vietnam (Yuenan in Mandarin), designated by the Qing Dynasty, come into being.

According to a young Chinese researcher based overseas, even though Vietnam is an important neighbor, there are only a small number of institutions throughout China that

do research on Vietnam. Even fewer focus on Vietnamese history. Major books for Vietnamese language learners are written by Chinese historians who lack Vietnamese language proficiency and practical experience living in Vietnam.

“For Chinese junior scholars who just started doing research on Vietnamese history, there are not many book options,” said the scholar, who asked to remain anonymous because giving an interview without his superiors’ permission might cause trouble.

In addition, the anonymous scholar said that Chinese language scholarship focused on Vietnam does not recognize any Vietnamese independent state before the early rule of China, for example, Văn Lang or Âu Lạc.

In his 2015 book “Research on Sino-Vietnamese Relations,” Gu Xiaosong, dean of the ASEAN Research Institute at Hainan Tropical Ocean University, directly refuted the existence of an early independent state in modern Vietnam. Gu argued that that Vietnam’s description of autonomy from the 3rd to 4th century BC, as well as its depiction of the then Chinese empire as a “northern invader,” is not in line with the “objective history.”

“Văn Lang is merely a legend. It is highly likely that there was a tribe in history with that name, but it falls far short of the concept of a nation,” wrote Gu.

There’s a reason for the uniform approach: China has implemented rigorous regulations on research into Vietnam, similar to how the Vietnamese government has maintained control over its own scholarship on China.

“There are a lot of politically delicate issues when it comes to research on Vietnam,” said the junior scholar. In particular, books on diplomatic and political relations are particularly subject to scrutiny. “Research on Vietnam is not of interest to scholars because one might have to touch on many sensitive issues,” said the scholar. “It is now even harder to do more research on Vietnam under Xi.”

A mainland Chinese professor at a prestigious university in Beijing is struggling to have his book on Vietnamese history published, since censors have detected some issues with his book. “One of the issues is related to my mention of *Beishu* or Northern Occupation,” said the professor.

Two other China-based experts on Vietnam did not respond to requests for comment on the junxian period.

Vietnam's Portrayal of China as a Perpetual Invader

By contrast, Vietnamese are well-steeped in the history of China's repeated conquests of their homeland. At an early age, Vietnamese students are taught, formally and informally, the ill-fated love story of My Châu and Trọng Thủy (known as Zhong Shi in Mandarin).

Trọng Thủy, son of Governor Triệu Đà (Zhao Tuo) from the Nanhai Commandery, was part of the Qin Expeditionary Force dispatched to conquer the region. My Châu was the daughter of King An Dương, who ruled over the kingdom of Âu Lạc. Both factions had been deadlocked in a nearly decade-long war, with Triệu Đà conquering the northern half of Âu Lạc through strenuous efforts against the guerilla warfare tactics of the Âu Việt tribes. Meanwhile, King An Dương had successfully defended the remaining territories and the capital, Cổ Loa, with the help of a magic crossbow (as the legend goes).

After a period of time, Triệu Đà and King An Dương agreed to a ceasefire and formed an alliance, solidified by the marriage of Trọng Thủy and My Châu. The couple developed a deep and genuine love for each other.

However, Trọng Thủy, after relocating to Cổ Loa, also acted as a spy for his father, stealing

the crossbow and replacing it with a fake one with the help of My Châu. Consumed by anger over his daughter's betrayal, King An Dương killed My Châu and jumped into a river. This act contributed to the downfall of Âu Lạc and led to the emergence of a new independent kingdom of Nam Việt, established by Triệu Đà in 204 BC.

Nationalist narratives in Vietnam place great emphasis on the country's military victories against China and its steadfast refusal to be culturally assimilated. Almost every Vietnamese dynasty engaged in conflicts against Northern armies. The Trưng sisters, for instance, led a rebellion against the ruling Chinese Han Dynasty in 43 AD, successfully establishing a short-lived independent state. Ngô Quyền defeated the Chinese Southern Han army, securing Vietnam's independence from Chinese domination in 938. Many of these leaders became national heroes, and their names were bestowed upon numerous places throughout Vietnam as a tribute to their legacy.

Throughout different generations of Vietnamese historians, including prominent works like the "Complete Annals of Đại Việt" in the 15th century, a consistent approach has been taken, depicting the Northern occupation

as a source of indignation and fuel for rebellion among the colonized.

Nevertheless, following each conflict, Vietnamese rulers made every effort to restore the tributary system. The victors took the initiative by dispatching envoys to Beijing, offering respect to the vanquished in return for recognition. For the Vietnamese, the focus was not always on competing with their massive northern neighbor, but rather on coexisting harmoniously and fostering productive relationships.

In their 2016 book “Foreign Relations, Harmonious Border Regions, and China’s Strategic Positioning,” Xing Quangcheng and Li Quoqiang noticed that Vietnam has always regarded “resistance against Chinese aggression as the main theme of historical and national defense education,” even though the two countries normalized their diplomatic ties in 1991.

“Vietnam downplays the historical fact of China’s assistance to Vietnam in its resistance against French and American aggression, and emphasizes Vietnam’s inheritance of the so-called ‘territory’ during the period of French colonization,” argued Xing and Li.

Contestable Colonization

Dr. Kathlene Baldanza, an associate professor of history and Asian studies at Pennsylvania State University, stressed that during the millennium from 111 BCE to Vietnamese independence in the 10th century, there was no “Vietnam” as we think of it today and no constant and unchanging “China” either.

“The conflicts and connections between the two places are complex and confusing,” said Baldanza.

To that end, Professor Vũ Trường, a political scientist from the University of Oregon, argued that Chinese interventions are often depicted in contemporary Vietnamese nationalist historiography as “foreign invasions,” overlooking the fact that many of these invasions were prompted by the requests of a substantial portion of the Vietnamese elite.

“One should avoid using the terms ‘colonization,’ ‘China,’ and ‘Vietnam’ as all are modern concepts. Instead, it is better to say ‘Han rule over the Red River Delta,’” said Vũ via an email.

In a [2016 article](#), Vũ cited numerous examples in which being part of the Sinosphere was desirable. “Many premodern Vietnamese elites felt proud of being part of the Sinicized world and sought to impose Sinic

institutions and cultures on neighboring Cambodia when they had the opportunity in the nineteenth century,” he wrote.

In the face of the rising threat from the French in the mid-19th century, Vietnamese elites even sought Chinese protection. Nguyễn rulers turned to Beijing for help, only to see China humiliated at the hands of the French.

In a [2013 article](#), Professor James Anderson noted that the two entities thrived on the principles of harmony and hegemony at the same time. The premodern Vietnamese state was able to survive on the periphery of various Chinese empires through “a gift-based diplomatic protocol of the tribute system,” which should not just be viewed through the imperialistic lens of a recent past. The dynamic of relations was shaped by the relative strengths and weaknesses of each side, which varied by time period.

“Vietnamese leaders negotiated their status within the Chinese tribute system in such a way as to establish regional independence while maintaining a check on Chinese incursions,” wrote Anderson.

No Land for Free Historiography

In both China and Vietnam, however, history is not taught as a tool of reflection, but rather

a vehicle of nationalism. Both Communist Party-ruled governments hold a monopoly over the publication of history textbooks. Teaching history serves to cultivate a national spirit and patriotism, and to build a sense of pride, mission, and responsibility among the citizenry. In both countries, learning history is characterized by exam-oriented rote learning of established facts with little room for critical thinking.

Beijing has been [tightening control over history textbooks](#) in recent years. In 2017, President Xi Jinping put an end to the practice of having diversified history textbooks throughout China. Instead, he authorized a single series of textbooks that were written and approved directly by the Ministry of Education. Not only are students required to memorize the contents of these textbooks, but most teachers also heavily rely on them for their own teaching.

The Ministry of Education exercises [direct authority](#) over both the content of history textbooks and teaching methodology. The official version of modern Chinese history is stated as follows: “Chinese modern history is a history of humiliation that China had been gradually degenerated into a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society; at the same time, it is

also a history that Chinese people strive for national independence and social progress, persisted in their struggle of anti-imperialism and anti-feudalism, and was also the history of the success of New Democratic Revolution under the leadership of the CCP.”

History education in China understandably tends to focus on the country’s own history, rather than on the histories of other countries. In Chinese textbooks, China was a victim, not a perpetrator of violence. This means that the Chinese education system may not place much emphasis on teaching students about China’s past of aggression in Vietnam (or other neighboring kingdoms, for that matter).

Through offering students the sole and “correct” perspective, Chinese history textbooks [frequently succeed](#) in persuading their readers to embrace narratives that align with Chinese communist ideology. The Chinese government may downplay or omit certain historical events that could reflect negatively on China’s actions in the past. According to Baldanza, the omission is not surprising.

“The millennium-long Chinese dominance of northern Vietnam is not an important part of China’s curriculum, because it’s not an easy fit with the kinds of stories China tells about

itself,” she said. “Resistance to Chinese aggression is an important part of Vietnamese national narratives, so the period of Chinese domination is more important for Vietnamese historical memory.”

She added, however, that these kinds of omissions are not uncommon in historiographies in other countries.

“How many Americans could explain the U.S.’s relationship to Puerto Rico or know about American actions in the Philippines following the Spanish-American War, for example?” Baldanza asked.

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