

## Government

### FOCUS POINT

Vietnamese Emperors ruled by divine right.

Emperor **Tu Duc** (1848–83), like all Vietnamese monarchs before him, was considered to be a demigod who represented Heaven and Earth. Venerated by the people as a symbol of wisdom, compassion, charity and understanding, Tu Duc ruled a multilingual, ethnically diverse territory of nearly 385 000 square kilometres, which extended from China's borders in the north then south along a vast coastal plain fronting the South China Sea. The Confucian ethic, or formal codes of conduct, embraced all aspects of government and society. Politeness and respect for self and others were important. Ancestral worship, or the care of parents while they were alive and tributes to their memories after death, were also binding obligations.

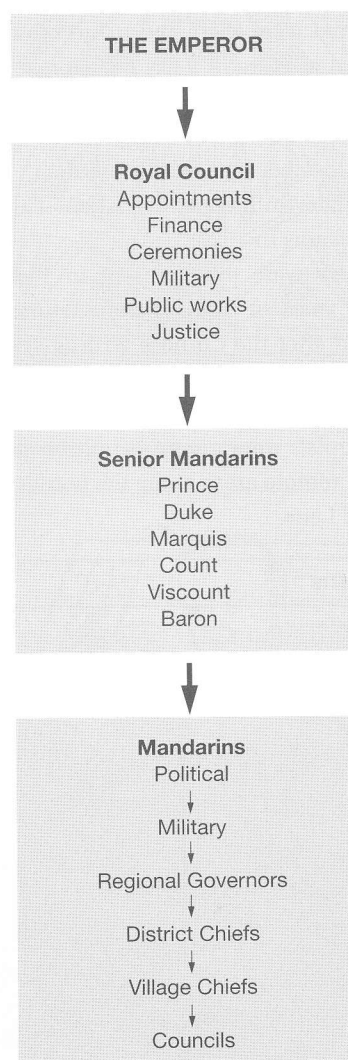
Tu Duc's government was located at **Hue** in central Vietnam. Here he presided over a Royal Court composed of dynasty relatives, advisers, scholars, philosophers and military officials. Members of the Royal Court were very well educated—another example of the Confucian ethic—especially the **mandarins**. The mandarins represented the Emperor throughout rural Vietnam. They acted as administrators, regional governors and province chiefs and reported to the Emperor, in person, three times a year. The mandarins also collected taxes and conscripted manpower for military purposes.

Admission to the mandarin class was open to anyone, either rich or poor, male or female, and represented another example of the Confucian ethic: promotion by merit instead of inheritance. This policy, a Nguyen Dynasty innovation, also stripped away the semi-feudal titles that had existed in Vietnam for centuries. Thus the title of 'Duke' or 'Count' was awarded to the best candidate based on examination success and could not be passed on from father to son. Mandarin candidates studied Vietnamese and Chinese history, law, government, business contracts, money systems, poetry and philosophy before attempting exams held every three years. A National School was established at Hue, which prepared future mandarins for government service. At the same time, a rudimentary system of schools existed at the provincial level, run mostly by mandarins who charged a variety of fees. Predictably, formal schooling was beyond the financial grasp of most rural parents and consequently their children remained illiterate.

However, the mandarin ranks of district chief and village chief required little, if any, formal schooling. Therefore the government's largest component—its rural base—was

controlled exclusively by the farming community. This policy was based on historical precedent and gave rise to the saying 'the power of the Emperor stops at the bamboo gate', which meant that the Royal Court did not interfere with the day-to-day life of Vietnam's 100 000 villages and 300 000 hamlets. Village life was considered sacred and the backbone of the nation. Local folk elected their own councils that worked with district and village chiefs.

This simplistic form of government resembled a contemporary public service. It was also based on patronage, or an unwritten system whereby those in positions of authority looked after the needs of their subordinates and expected absolute loyalty in return.



### System of government during the Nguyen Dynasty

A system of taxation, compulsory labour service on government projects and periodic conscription for military purposes also existed. The Royal Family and select members of the Court were exempt from these obligations.

Tu Duc ruled alone and had no precise political portfolio except to be an inspired leader. This would always remain a challenge for Vietnam's emperors.

However, the absence of a hereditary ruling class and promotion based on merit via the mandarin system gave Tu Duc's government a wide popular base and a respectability, at least in theory. The reality was quite different. Vietnam before the French was a very poor country. Wealth and power remained exclusively with the Royal Court and the senior mandarins and their subordinates, whereas the rural peasants never escaped from the constant struggle to survive.

## Society and culture

Tu Duc's empire contained dozens of ethnic groups. Over 80 per cent were Vietnamese, but others added to a colourful racial mixture.

The *Chams* were migrants from Cambodia with distinct Indian features. The Kingdom of Champa (circa 200 CE) was located in Central Vietnam. Most Chams were Hindus later influenced by Islam. The Vietnamese defeated the Chams in 1822.

The *Chinese* were ever present in Vietnam due to one thousand years of Chinese domination. The People of Han (named after the Chinese writing system) made a profound impact on Vietnamese society.

The *Montagnards*, a French term that identified the 'mountain people', were a semi-primitive group of tribes that inhabited remote areas along the borders of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.

The *Khmers* were a large ethnic group in Vietnam southwest. They are the present-day people of Cambodia. The ruins of the ancient Kingdom of Angkor (9th–13th century) today remain as a tribute to Indian-influenced Khmer architectural ingenuity. A smaller group, the Khmer Krom, or mixed Vietnamese/Khmer, also lived in villages along the Cambodian border.

The *xa* (village) is a Chinese word meaning 'place of spirit worship'. In Vietnamese culture, the concept of family, religion, prosperity, life, death and land are essential *xa* values. In Tu Duc's Vietnam, villages of 150–300 people were common. Each village was the ancestral home of various families linked by marriages which created a genealogy hundreds of years old. All villages elected chiefs and councils to deal with relevant affairs such as harvests and security. The select elders of the *xa* maintained particular positions of respect because of their wisdom. Extended families of 50–60 members were common. Thus the *xa* was based on kinship and mutual sharing in every aspect of life. This made it holistic and harmonious. Senior male members of any *xa* family held a titular position of importance which enforced patriarchal values. The concept of the desirability of sons rather than daughters was an important fact of life and marriages were arranged. Nevertheless, matriarchal (female) viewpoints, while suppressed, were never entirely dismissed, as such an action would undermine the concept of community.

### Men in sampans



be made available. When Vietnam was unified in 1802 Gia Long was conscious of the debt that he owed to the missionaries, but he did not want to encourage the French. He tolerated Christianity, but made sure that the French were given no chance to extend their influence. His successors were under no obligation to the French missionaries, and in the 1830s started to persecute them and had ten of them executed.

This persecution did not stop the missionaries, who realised that a few martyrs would increase their popularity in France, and put more pressure on the government to back them up. One of them, Dominique Lefebvre, was twice expelled from Vietnam, but returned both times. The second time, in 1847, two warships were sent to help him. An incident at Hué led to the shelling of the city by the warships and hundreds of Vietnamese were killed. The French had arrived.

Poor government by the Nguyen emperors made it easier for the French to extend their influence. The Nguyen dynasty, founded in 1802 by Gia Long, was the most disastrous of all Vietnamese dynasties. The rulers were cruel, oppressive and ineffectual and opposition to the Nguyens increased during the nineteenth century. Local rebellions became common.

The French Emperor, Napoleon III, decided in the late 1850s to extend French influence in the area. In 1858, fourteen warships and 2500 soldiers were sent to Vietnam. Da Nang was taken easily, and the next year Saigon was attacked and its citadel destroyed. In 1861, the French claimed southern Vietnam (Cochin China) as a colony, and in 1862 forced the emperor to hand over three southern provinces.

Over the next twenty years the French gradually extended their control northwards. In 1885, the emperor was forced to sign the Treaty of Tientsin, handing over control of all of Vietnam to the French. The emperor kept his position, but the French were clearly in charge. Two years later they added Cambodia, and created the Indo-Chinese Union. Laos was added six years later, and the Union divided into five areas for administration: Cambodia, Laos, Tonkin (North Vietnam), Annam (Central Vietnam) and Cochin China (South Vietnam).

The French claimed to have interfered in the area to stop their missionaries being persecuted, but their real motives were to open the area for trade, and to back up their expansion into southern China.

Our compatriots, not well informed on history, suppose that France came to intervene in Annam solely for the protection of missionaries... The missionaries, in reality, have only been the pretext for our action against Annam. The loss of India in the eighteenth century, the increasingly rapid extension in the Far East of our perpetual rival England imposed on us the obligation to set foot in the China seas, the only alternative being our falling into a state of contemptible inferiority. Annam gave us the opportunity, the massacre of Frenchmen who were there as missionaries gave us the pretext.

FRENCH  
MOTIVE

Captain Gosselin, French officer-historian, in 1904, in Robert Asprey, *War in the Shadows*, Macdonald & Janes, London, 1975, p. 596

### Review

- Why would the Vietnamese distrust the Chinese?
- Outline the stages by which the French took over in Indo China. What were their motives?



## Gunboat diplomacy

In 1847 Tu Duc's father, Emperor Thieu Tri, arrested Monsignor Lefebvre, a senior French priest, for treasonous activities. News of his future beheading sparked an immediate French response. Admiral Cecille, commander of French naval forces in Asia, ordered two ships—the *Glory* and the *Victory*—to confront the Vietnamese and demand Lefebvre's release. On 23 March the ships arrived at Da Nang Harbour, in central Vietnam, and presented the Royal Court with two ultimatums: the persecution of priests must stop, and, in future, all missionaries must be granted unlimited freedom on Vietnamese soil. Thieu Tri did not respond. Two weeks later, *Glory* and *Victory* opened fire and systematically destroyed Vietnamese naval strength at Da Nang. Fishing boats and naval vessels were sunk, barges burned, dockyards laid waste and at least 80 civilians were killed. Cordial relations between the French and Vietnamese had now ended.

Predictably, Tu Duc followed his father's policies. Over the next decade French priests were deported, gaoled or beheaded, which infuriated the French. Finally, in July 1857, the French Minister for Foreign Affairs, Count Walewski, urged a direct attack on the Vietnamese. The government agreed and, one month later, **Admiral Rigault de Genouilly** returned to Da Nang aboard his flagship, the *Victory*. But Genouilly was not alone. His fleet included 14 warships armed with over 100 cannons, plus 2500 troops. Within 48 hours Genouilly successfully blasted his way through Da Nang. The harbour lay in ruins. Tu Duc's citadel, or military garrison, in Da Nang was overrun and occupied. One day later, Tu Duc received news of this disaster. He sent Genouilly the following message:

Your country belongs to the Western seas, ours to the Eastern. As the horse and the buffalo differ, so do we—in language, literature, customs. If you persist in putting the torch to us, disorder will be long. But we shall act according to the Laws of Heaven and our cause will triumph in the end.

A new chapter in Vietnamese history was about to unfold.

Genouilly's success was short-lived. A Vietnamese Catholic uprising against Tu Duc, as the missionaries had predicted, did not occur. Therefore, the French had no reinforcements. Within months Genouilly's force had succumbed to malaria, dysentery and cholera caused by unforgiving monsoonal rains. An attack on Tu Duc's citadel at Hue, previously considered, was now dismissed. The French also fell victim to bands of Vietnamese civilians now converted into militia by local mandarins. Poorly armed with farm tools and spears, these militia continually harassed the French, denied them access to safe drinking water by poisoning local wells, and stole their equipment at night.

Leaving a token force at Da Nang, Genouilly sailed south to Saigon, hoping to capture food supplies and enlist the help of local Catholics. He eventually occupied the city but found little food and no support from Vietnamese *chretientes*. Eventually he retreated, returned to Da Nang, and later sailed back to France. His mission had failed. But Genouilly's successor, Admiral Charner, was more successful.

Between March and November 1861, Charner's forces systematically targeted, besieged and eventually occupied military citadels in southern Vietnam. Tu Duc's forces were a poor match. Armed with spears, bows and arrows, lances and rudimentary firearms, they were continually humbled by French muskets, cannons and mortars. Vietnamese military strategies were based on defensive, not offensive, tactics, which suited the French. When Tu Duc's troops left the safety of their citadels, their manoeuvres were slow, cumbersome and tragically comic. Infantry skirmishers (foot soldiers), mounted on elephants and accompanied by horse-drawn chariots, fell victim to French mortar crews who defeated the Vietnamese with solid iron balls, grapeshot (broken chain and metal) and incendiary (explosive) canisters.

In 1862 Tu Duc was demoralised. His armies were defeated. The French had also confiscated Saigon's rice supplies and threatened economic warfare which would



Admiral Rigault de Genouilly