

Sinification of East Asia The Spread of Chinese Civilization: Vietnam

Introduction

Because of the remarkable durability of Chinese civilization as well as its marvelous technological and economic innovations, other cultures began to imitate China. Japan, Korea, and Vietnam were all drawn into China's cultural and political orbit in the postclassical period. Each of the three areas interacted with China differently. Of the three, Japan was able to retain its complete political independence, while Vietnam and Korea were subjected to varying degrees of Chinese imperialism. The latter two regions had less control over the nature of cultural borrowing than did Japan. In all of the areas, Buddhism played a significant role in cultural transformation. Eventually, adoption of Chinese culture caused Japan, Korea, and Vietnam to remain relatively isolated with the exception of their links to China.

Between China and Southeast Asia: The Making of Vietnam

The Chinese were interested in the annexation of Vietnam in order to control the rice production of the Red River valley. The Vietnamese were less conciliatory toward the adoption of Chinese culture than other peoples. The first attempts at conquest during the Qin dynasty resulted in the establishment of trade between China and Vietnam, but no political unification. Aspects of Vietnamese culture such as language, household formation, local autonomy, dress, and the higher status of women differed significantly from Chinese patterns.

Conquest and Sinification

The Han dynasty emperors were responsible for the conquest of the Red River valley. By 111 B.C.E., Chinese troops and administrators were present in Vietnam. Initially the Viet elite cooperated with their conquerors and entered the bureaucratic administration of local government. The Viet elite undertook Confucian education and underwent the Chinese examination system as a means of qualifying for official posts in the government. With the introduction of Chinese agricultural techniques, Vietnamese agriculture became highly productive. Adoption of Chinese military techniques gave the Vietnamese advantages over the neighboring cultures of Southeast Asia.

Roots of Resistance

Chinese cultural importations failed to make an impression on the Vietnamese peasantry. Vietnamese resistance to political inclusion within the Chinese empire led to rebellions. The most famous of the rebellions occurred in 39 C.E. under the Trung sisters.

Winning Independence

Separated from China by substantial distance and geographical barriers, Vietnam was difficult for the Chinese to govern. Whenever political chaos existed in China between dynasties, the Vietnamese were quick to reestablish their independence. Following the fall of the Tang, the Vietnamese achieved separation from China in 939. Until their conquest by the French in the nineteenth century, the Vietnamese were able to stave off foreign invasion.

The Continuing Chinese Impact

Chinese cultural influences did not end with the restoration of Vietnamese political independence. Vietnamese dynasties after 980 continued to imitate the Chinese bureaucracy, examination system, and the scholar-gentry. The Vietnamese administrators were never as powerful as their Chinese counterparts, because their power did not extend effectively to the village level. The competition with Buddhist monks also limited the power of the nascent Vietnamese scholar-gentry. Failure to establish a strong, centralized administrative network weakened many Vietnamese dynasties.

The Vietnamese Drive to the South

Vietnam continued to enjoy advantages over other rivals in Indochina. Their main adversaries were the Chams and Khmers, who resided in the southern portions of the region. The Vietnamese remained less interested in the hill peoples, whom they regarded as savages. Between the eleventh and eighteenth centuries, the Vietnamese drove the Chams from their lands in the south. Following the defeat of the Chams, the Vietnamese expanded their territories at the expense of the Khmers. By the eighteenth century, the Vietnamese had successfully taken much of the land surrounding the Mekong River delta.

Expansion and Division

As southern expansion continued, the central government in Hanoi had increasing difficulties establishing their authority in the south. By the sixteenth century, a rival dynasty the Nguyen emerged to challenge the northern Trinh dynasty. For two centuries, the war between the Trinh and Nguyen continued. Internal war weakened the Vietnamese when it became necessary to face an external threat from European imperialism.