

COMMEMORATIVE LECTURE

“My Passage to History”

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It is a great honor not only for me but also for Vietnamese scholarly community to receive the Fukuoka Asian Cultural Prize. On this occasion I would like to briefly talk about my life as a scholar.

I was born in Vietnam into the family of a Confucian scholar. In 1913 my father successfully passed the Doctoral Examination (Tien si). This examination was one of the last three national examinations based on the Confucian philosophy to take place in Vietnam. From a very young age, I studied Chinese characters at home, and Vietnamese and French languages at school. In 1945, the year of Victory of the August Revolution, I graduated from primary school. During the first Vietnamese war (1945 - 1954) I finished secondary education and then left my native town of Ha Tinh to enter the University of Thanh Hoa (1952 - 1954). It was the crucial moment in my life as a scholar.

At secondary school, I had been keen on mathematics and physics. Therefore, when entering university I applied to enroll in mathematics and physics courses. But, due to wartime circumstances, I arrived late at school and was unable to enter these classes as they were already full. Prof. Tran Van Giau, the Rector of the University told me to enroll in literature. I was sad, but chose to put up with the situation because there were no other alternatives: Thanh Hoa was the only university in Vietnam at that time. The teachers sent to the university were among the most outstanding scholars in Vietnam such as Prof. Tran Van Giau, Prof. Dao Duy Anh, Prof. Dan Thai Mai, Prof. Nguyen Manh Tuon, Prof. Cao Xuan Huy. As a result, I gradually became more interested in studying. Yet, in that first year, I still regretted that I was unable to study my favorite subjects and sometimes I attended the mathematics and physics lesson instead of my own, for which I was then severely criticized.

In 1954, when the First War ended, I came to Hanoi. I was sent to the newly founded History Faculty at the University of Pedagogy to continue my studies. Student enrollment then was only 29 freshmen. Peace time provided favorable conditions for my studies. I was able to enrich my knowledge by taking advantage of the vast resources (books and periodicals) available at the leading libraries of the capital such as the National Library, the Library of French Institute of Far-Eastern studies (Ecole Francaise d'Extreme-Orient) and the Library of the University. Since that time I have indeed greatly enjoyed studying history. I graduated from History and Geography Section at the University of Pedagogy, and was among the first historians to be trained in the Vietnamese University.

In July 1956, just after graduating, I became an assistant teacher at Hanoi University. I taught in the Department of Vietnamese Ancient and Medieval History which had been founded by Prof. Dao Duy Anh several months before my arrival. Since then and continuously for the last 40 years, I have been lecturing and conducting research at Hanoi University (renamed the National University of Hanoi in 1993).

At that time, Hanoi University only had a handful of lecturers and I belonged to the first young generation of teachers. Newly graduated, I was appointed to lecture on Vietnamese history and to write textbooks for students. On the one hand, the work was too much for me. On the other hand, it was a great challenge, and I made every possible effort in my studying and teaching to cope with it. At the age of 22, I engaged in my work with enthusiasm. After two years at the university I had several scientific works published including the book *Land Ownership and Agricultural Economy in the 15th Century* (1959) and the second and third volumes of a textbook series *History of*

Vietnamese Feudal System (1960). These first successes encouraged and inspired me to continue historical studies and by that time I willingly regarded historical research and training historians as my life's work.

That was how I became a historian. At first, the choice was accidental and even compulsory. Then I became willing and eager to learn the subject. To me, every profession on earth has its own place and significance, and only when you devote all your love and intellect to it, can you see what it really means to you. I came to no longer regret that I had been unable to pursue my ambitions and develop my ability in mathematics and physics. I think those sciences have contributed to sharpening my scientific thought and perfecting the implementation of new techniques in my historical studies.

In 1965, the war spread to Northern Vietnam. Our University was forced to evacuate from Hanoi to a mountainous district. We stayed at local residents' cottages. The teachers and students built the school themselves. The classrooms were made of bamboo we cut in the jungle. We dug shelters around the classrooms to protect them against air-raids. From 1965 to 1972 was a very hard time. We could only bring with us necessary materials for teaching and learning and there were no libraries to do research. Therefore I spent time out-of-school with my students conducting historical surveys in most of the northern provinces. These field studies were part of the training program at the university and were carried out more frequently far from the city in wartime circumstances. Thanks to the surveys, we discovered and collected a number of new materials, including stone stele inscriptions, genealogies, biographies of local saints, village conventions and many folklore works. Examining them, I discovered some historical personages who were not mentioned in official chronicles. For example, Le Thien in Lamson Uprising (1418-1427), Dang Tien Dong at the time of Tayson movement (1771-1802). We were also able to correct many inaccurately recorded events in Vietnamese History.

In the wartime, the major line in my studies was the antiaggression history of the Vietnamese nation. Several works on this theme were published and many articles came out in scientific journals. It was, I am sure, the mission of a historian devoted to his country at a time when the whole nation was engaged in the war effort to gain independence and reunification.

After the war, I turned to do research on socioeconomic and cultural problems, issues which have interested me since the beginning of my career. The foundation of Vietnamese traditional culture is folklore, the existence and development of which is based on villages. At present, I am doing research on village history, land ownership in villages and problems of Vietnam's traditional culture heritage.

As a science, Vietnamese history originated during the Ly Dynasty (1009-1225) and Historians left an abundant amount of material including: official chronicles by imperial courts, books by historians, and written materials, such as land registers, village conventions, imperial archives, etc. In my studies, I use written materials in connection with field survey results.

In 1981, when I was in Paris lecturing at a university, I had the opportunity to read *The General History of Great Viet*, a precious book of the first edition in 1697. It is an official chronicle, written by famous historians at the time of Tran and Le Dynasties. They covered the history of Vietnam from the beginning until 1675. With the help of French and Vietnamese colleagues in Paris, I was able to bring a copy to Vietnam. The result of its study showed that it was the oldest complete and unique version. Based on this, we published *The General History of Great Viet* in 1993 with the whole text in Chinese characters, as in the first edition in 1697, and the Vietnamese translation, and my scrupulous research on the author, the text and the work. I hope that in the near future Vietnamese history books will be published in a similar way - the original text in Chinese characters with a Vietnamese translation, in order to provide necessary data for researchers and readers. Recently, my colleagues and I have been concentrating on studying the collection of more than 18,500 village land registers, most of which date back to the 19th

century, especially to 1805. I intend to announce the research result, and at the same time provide the systematic data on land registers for scientists of different branches who are interested in them. The collection *Hadong Land Registers* which was published in 1995, and two other collections *Thaibinh Land Registers*, *Hanoi Land Registers* which will be released toward the end of this year are based on the same model.

In wartime, Vietnamese historians were almost completely isolated from interaction with foreign colleagues. This has had some negative affects on our historical studies. As the President of The Association of Vietnamese Historians, I try my best to contribute to overcome those shortcomings by broadening contacts and co-operating with foreign historians, and creating favorable conditions for Vietnamese historians to integrate into international historical organizations and activities. Scientific conferences, such as *Historical Science Before the Renovation of the Country*, held in Hanoi in 1991 and Ho Chi Minh City in 1992, were organized in order to acknowledge and appreciate many historical persons, events and eras, which had not been given objective and due recognition. I was one of the organizer of two international scientific conferences on *The Ancient Town of Hoi An* (1990) and *Pho Hien* (1993), two famous ports, which played the role of a center for foreign trade in Vietnam in the 17th - 18th centuries.

As the Director of The Center for Co-operation in Vietnamese Studies (1988-1995) within Hanoi University, in 1995 it was renamed the Center for Vietnamese and Intercultural Studies within National University of Hanoi, I have been concentrating on organizing projects on Vietnamese studies and establishing and broadening international contacts and co-operation in research and training. Up to now, the Center has established relationships with many foreign researchers working on Vietnam and cooperates with many universities, institutes and research centers in Japan, China, Korea, Thailand, Malaysia, Australia, The United States of America, France, The Netherlands, Germany, Russia, and others.

I recognize the vital links between scientific research, staff training and international co-operation. I like the old saying from a classic book of Confucianism (Luan ngu), which Prof. Cao Xuan Huy often repeated to me: "It is not tiring to learn, it is not boring to teach". Forty years of teaching has created a good environment for me; everyday I have had contact with the young and the best generations of the nation. They have always encouraged me in my research and shared in all my achievements. After graduation, they became my colleagues and worked in many fields of social sciences and humanities all over the country. International contacts and co-operation will pave the way for introducing our research results to the world and accepting new achievements made by foreign scientists. And by means of scientific exchange, we can develop ever further our scientific study of history.

I would like to express many thanks to the Honourable Mayor of Fukuoka, The Yokatopia Foundation and The Fukuoka Asian Cultural Prize Committee, and to all present at the ceremony.