

TEN GREAT REFORMS AND RENEWALS IN VIETNAM'S HISTORY

VĂN TẠO. *Ten Great Reforms and Renewals in Vietnam's History.* Hanoi Pedagogical University Press. 2006. 394 pages

summarized by

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The country of Vietnam has existed and developed for thousands of years. This long history has been marked by a number of reforms and renewals that were carried out during the different royal dynasties. Ten Great Reforms and Renewals in Vietnam's History, written by History Professor Văn Tào, successfully provides readers with a general and systematic view of Vietnamese reforms and renewals, especially those during times of peace. Many historical lessons can be drawn from these reforms and utilized for reforms and renewals in Vietnam today. The book, published by Hanoi Pedagogical University Press, is about 400 pages long and is divided into three main parts. The following is a brief summary of the book.

PART ONE: “Theoretical Awareness”

of such terms as reform, renewal, and revolution, both historical and dialectical categories (pages 5 – 17). The practice of human history has shown that revolutionary violence plays a vital role in the change of social regimes (chattel slavery to feudalism, feudalism to capitalism, capitalism to socialism). Therefore, it is astounding that the August Revolution is Vietnam's only violent revolution in its thousands of years of history. Meanwhile, Vietnam has continuously made great contributions to the development of the whole world with its reforms and renewals that have been implemented throughout its history. The book focuses on the reforms and renewals

of peaceful eras and does not give details of those that took place after Vietnam's victories over foreign invaders during the Lý, Trần, Lê, and Tây Sơn Dynasties. The purpose of this is to draw historical lessons for the present renewal in Vietnam.

After meticulously analyzing historical practices, the author explains and interprets the dialectical relationship between *reform*, *renewal*, and *revolution*. These are the three vital revolutionary forms necessary for a society to exist and develop, and they all share the same purpose of resolving social crises, either on a general scale or in a particular sector, such as the economy, politics, or society. Using critical reasoning and convincing

evidence, the author proves that reform, renewal, and revolution are separate historical categories that occur at a particular place (a country or a region), at a particular time, and connect the past, present, and future. They are milestones in the development of social history, pushing society forward. In addition, reform, renewal and revolution are dialectical categories and are inter-connected. Renewal and reform are a part of revolution; renewal is a part of reform. Reform and renewal can sometimes have a greater societal impact than revolution, and reform is sometimes an important part of a revolution. In other cases, one movement will be the effect of a previous movement as well as the cause of a future movement.

These relationships are shown clearly and vividly in ten great reforms and renewals in the history of Vietnam, most of which were instigated by a change in the people's mentality.

PART TWO: *Ten great reforms and renewals in Vietnam's history*

Based on research from various significant historical sources and the author's personal method of reasoning, each reform is described in the following logical sequence:

- a/ Time of arising
- b/ Historical person (who initiates and carries out the reform)
- c/ Methods
- d/ Effects

I. The administrative reform of the Khúc family

According to the author, the basis of this reform was the country's critical social crisis under the feudal rule of the Đường Dynasty (China, 618 – 907). The invaders were also facing a serious crisis in China during this time that had resulted from the division of "Five Dynasties, Ten Nations"

(Ngũ đại, thập quốc). The exploited Vietnamese in Đại Việt finally revolted under the leadership of Khúc Thừa Dụ, who the author describes as "generous, kind, and helpful". The historical records say that "he was appointed by the Vietnamese people. As someone with a wide area of influence, Khúc Thừa Dụ proclaimed himself governor." The reform was based on a critical and brilliant observation: the foreign invader could only exert its authority on a macro level, in districts and provinces, but not at a grass-roots level in villages and communes. Therefore, the only way to gain independence was to establish authority beginning at this lowest level, in which information about each resident could be easily gathered and administrated. Khúc Thừa Dụ advocated various means of carrying this out, including:

- 1/ Divide the country into different districts, towns and communes, governed by mandarins such as village mayors and chiefs
- 2/ Require all citizens to have their own register of births, marriages, and deaths, as well as a family record book
- 3/ Implement an average land-tax for everyone; abolish corvee.

One historical source states that "It is the simplicity and the tolerance of the political policies that helped citizens lead a peaceful life." The reform not only gained self-governance for Đại Việt, it also laid the foundation for national independence. Khúc Thừa Dụ's achievement was inherited by later generations, from Dương Diên Nghệ, who proclaimed himself governor, to Ngô Quyền, who was able to set up his own monarchy.

The Khúc family reform was the first successful administrative reform in

Vietnam's history. Vietnam first established its independence under the Khúc family's reign, and it continued during the reign of the Dương and Ngô families. Although Vietnam did not establish its own monarchy until the Ngô Dynasty, the Khúc family's reform, as well as the role of the Dương family in preserving Vietnam's independence, played a vital role in the establishment of that monarchy. Therefore, all three families, Khúc, Dương, and Ngô, were pioneers of Vietnam's national independence.

II. Lý Công Uẩn's renewal in every area: from changes in the dynasty and the imperial city to society

Under the reign of the Tiền Lê Dynasty, Đại Việt faced a serious crisis, both in society and in the imperial palace. The court was in turmoil, a situation worsened by the competition and murder among Lê Đại Hành's children in their struggle for the throne. Lê Long Đĩnh, who finally managed to gain the throne, turned out to be a cruel dictator. One historical record states, "Ngọa Triều murdered his own brother to gain the throne. He carried out evil and cruel deeds against his citizens to satisfy his sinister mind."

It was Lý Công Uẩn who was able to settle the crisis. "Ever since he was a child, Lý Công Uẩn had exhibited great talent and good looks. Growing up, he developed a strong will and a great love for his people. His love and determination could move the heavens." Thanks to his respectfulness and broad knowledge, he was able to implement number of renewals. The first renewal involved the imperial palace and led to his being appointed king by the mandarins. He then made the historic move of relocating the royal residence from Hoa Lư to Thăng Long, which had been described as a

"coiling dragon, sitting tiger, the meeting point of all four directions".

Moving the royal residence was the decisive factor in opening up new prospects and opportunities to renew the country's politics, economy, culture, society, military, and diplomacy. Thăng Long was not only the capital city of an independent and powerful nation but also the center of the national economy, culture, and society. This was considered an important landmark in the formation of a united national market, which is sometimes wrongly assumed to have its roots in nineteenth century capitalism. It was the achievements of the Lý dynasty that led to Lý Thường Kiệt's later victory over the Tống invasion. Lý Thường Kiệt's poem, "*The Country of Vietnam*" (Nam Quốc Sơn Hà), was regarded as Đại Việt's first declaration of independence.

Lý Công Uẩn's creative renewal established the Lý Dynasty, which lasted 200 years (1010-1225) and was the longest dynasty in national history.

III. Trần Thủ Độ: social renewal, reinforcement of royal authority, and victory against foreign invasion

At the beginning of the first three decades of the eighth century, the Lý Dynasty underwent an extreme recession. The royal crisis led to an overall crisis in society. It was at this critical time that the name of a talented man became widely known – Trần Thủ Độ.

Trần Thủ Độ was an upright man with great respect for his nation and family and a strong determination to reform the dynasty, reinforce royal authority, and renew the social administration. He established the position of Thượng Hoàng (father of the king) to assist young emperors in ruling an entire nation. He

combined the humanity of Buddhism with the legality of Confucianism with the aim of building a strict and consistent national legal system. Members of the royal family who took advantage of their position to break the law were heavily punished. His wife, Trần Thị Dung, was no exception. Trần Thủ Độ led a quick and peaceful overthrow that resulted in a bloodless transition of power from the Lý Dynasty to the Trần Dynasty.

In Trần Thủ Độ's economic renewal, the most important and prominent issue was his determination to push the economy forward by accepting private land ownership by converting some public land into privately owned land. He also promoted production and a united national market and facilitated local and foreign trade.

Thanks to the development of economy, culture, and society, people were able to lead prosperous lives. The Trần Dynasty and its people united to defeat the Nguyên – Mông invasion three times. Trần Hưng Đạo's great determination was shown clearly in his powerful request to the king, "Your majesty, if you want to surrender, please cut off my head." This saying was a reflection of Trần Thủ Độ's own nationalism, exemplified in his statement, "Your majesty, my head is still on my neck. You should not be worried."

All of these remarkable achievements were due to Trần Thủ Độ's renewal.

IV. Hồ Quý Ly's renewal, centered on economic and monastery renewals

Hồ Quý Ly's renewal took place from 1395-1407. During this time, the late Trần Dynasty was experiencing a social crisis. Peasants revolted and the ruling dynasty became so weak that the king lost his throne to Dương Nhật Lễ for more than a year (June 1369 - October 1370). When the king finally managed to regain his

throne, both he and his mandarinates had become so powerless that some mandarins recommended Hồ Quý Ly take over the kingship.

Hồ Quý Ly was determined to bring renewal to his kingdom and even criticized some aspects of Confucianism. His great resolve was shown particularly in the construction of the Hồ stone citadel, the only stone citadel in Vietnam. Nowadays, what remains of this impressive citadel in Vĩnh Lộc, Thanh Hoá is still admired by both Vietnamese and foreigners.

Some basic measures that Hồ Quý Ly implemented were limitations on land and slave ownership. He prohibited feudal aristocrat's ownership of land and slaves. Cash was issued to promote the commodity economy. Taxes could be paid with either money or valuable objects.

However, Hồ Quý Ly's renewals were only effective regarding input, but were rather disastrous in terms of output (p.96). The first output problem was that when aristocrats were denied the right to own land, the extra land was confiscated, which reinforced the outdated Asian mode of production. The "freed" slaves were not liberated but drafted either into the army or some other form of service. The introduction of cash was still too early for the under-developed commodity/monetary economy of that time, and therefore yielded very little.

When the powerful Minh army invaded the country, both the king and his mandarins were arrested and all revolutionary achievements destroyed. It was not until Lê Thánh Tông's dynasty that the innovative conscience of Hồ Quý Ly was inherited and implemented.

It has been proven that Hồ Quý Ly's failures were mainly caused by subjective

rather than objective factors, and so he is still considered a great innovative leader.

V. Lê Thánh Tông's administrative reform – the foundation of the most prosperous feudal dynasty in Vietnam

After Nguyễn Trãi gave up his mandarinship in order to escape the jealousies and cruelties of the other mandarins, King Lê Nhân Tông had died after spending a night with Nguyễn Trãi's concubine in the lychee garden. The mandarins accused Nguyễn Trãi of plotting to kill the king, and as punishment, the courts ordered the murder of hundreds of Nguyễn Trãi's family members spanning three generations. Afterwards, the Lê Sơ Dynasty underwent a royal crisis resulting from excessive power abuses by a number of mandarins who were directly involved in the lychee garden case.

When Lê Thánh Tông became king, he was expected to settle the current crisis, enforce royal power, and lead societal development in terms of human needs and the legal system. With strong innovative thought, Lê Thánh Tông established five major policies:

- 1/ Promotion of Confucian legality
- 2/ Compilation of the Hồng Đức code, which was later highly appreciated by European jurists
- 3/ Abolition of multi-level administrative units (regions, districts, towns, prefects, etc.) that were replaced with a consistent national division of 13 districts (thừa tuyên)
- 4/ Reform of mandarin policies, recruitment of mandarins by both examinations and recommendations
- 5/ Fostering of cultural and social development, promotion of the development

of Quốc Tử Giám (the first national university), founding of the Tao Đàn group, utilization of Nôm script, encouragement of patriotic poetry (p.116 – 145).

This was the second successful administrative reform after the Khúc family, contributing to the construction of the most prosperous feudal dynasty in Vietnam.

VI. Đào Duy Từ - the major contributor to South Vietnam

Đào Duy Từ was a typical man of self-reliance and great conscience. Despite his achievements in some royal examinations, the many singers in his family line prevented him from being respected and employed by the royal family. After spending half his life looking for a leader to assist with his talents, he finally settled in South Vietnam. His talents were highly appreciated by the feudal lord, Nguyễn Phúc Nguyên, who later appointed Đào Duy Từ marquis of Lộc Khê.

Đào Duy Từ used his intelligence and creativity in the renewal of society. Within eight years, he had made significant contributions to the renewal of South Vietnam. There were great economic and social developments, and great achievements could be seen in all fields: private ownership, the commodity economy, local and foreign trade, culture, education, and the military. The educational administration of the North was reformed so as to fit the current conditions of South Vietnam. The construction of Trường Dục and Đồng Hới ramparts played the key role in the cease-fire between the north and the south of Vietnam, creating favorable conditions for negotiation.

Đào Duy Từ was also a great writer. His work, “Hồ Trướng Khu Cờ,” was

descended from and reflected the great military mentality of Trần Hưng Đạo that was expressed in *The Elementary War Manual* (Binh Thư Yếu Lược) and *The General and Commander Proclamation* (Hịch Tướng Sĩ). Đào Duy Từ was also the father of Tuồng (Classical drama), through which he expressed his strong desire for national renewal and the means to save the country. In general, he was a great contributor to the development of the whole of Đại Việt.

VII. Trịnh Cương's financial reform (1716-1729) – a temporary solution, but the only financial reform in the history of Vietnam

After the long war between the North and the South, the Lê – Trịnh Dynasty experienced a financial crisis. Many people starved and revolutions rose up everywhere. The royal family could no longer support itself financially. In order to solve these problems, Trịnh Cương decided to implement a financial reform.

Trịnh Cương was decisive and hard-working. He also appreciated talented men and had gained a deep understanding of human life through his own observations. Trịnh Cương also had great faith in his own competence to implement reform. He therefore managed to carry out a series of financial reforms, including the redistribution of public land and the promotion of private ownership. Refugees were encouraged to come back and reclaim their land, the poll-tax and land-tax were equalized, and some commodities such as copper, cinnamon, and salt were taxed.

These measures yielded many benefits. They overcame the economic crisis, stabilized society, and strengthened the legal system after over 100 years of civil war. Many people were raised out of

poverty, and it consolidated the position of Đại Việt in the world. This could be seen in several different achievements. For example, in 1715, the most noticeable result was the abolition of Đại Việt's elephant and rhinoceros tusk tribute to King Khang Hy of Qing (a large foreign country). When the Thanh ambassador visited Đại Việt in 1719, he could not help praising the life of the people as "peaceful, courteous, worth preserving and learning from".

Nevertheless, Trịnh Cương's financial reform was only a temporary solution because it could not resolve the comprehensive and serious crisis of the late feudal Vietnamese dynasty. The crisis resulted from a contradiction between the outdated feudal mode of production, which bore some typical features of the Asian mode, and the demand for development of the commodity economy, which laid the foundation for a prosperous national market. This national market would be vital as capitalism had already begun to develop in neighboring countries.

The specific achievements of the reform may be disappointing because of their limitations and self-contradictions, but when approaching it from a historical perspective, the reform has great value, and its lessons were highly appreciated. In short, Trịnh Cương's financial reform was considered a breakthrough for Đại Việt to enter a new age, the age of global humanity (p.210).

VIII. Minh Mệnh's administrative reform: rewards and drawbacks

Minh Mệnh's reform took place after the failure of Gia Long's attempt to improve the Nguyễn Dynasty's administrative machinery, which proved that there were still many differences between the administration of the North and the South.

At that time, the country, which stretched from Cao Bằng, Lạng Sơn to Cà Mau, Hà Tiên, Phú Quốc, was divided into bulky units. The largest unit was the central monarchy, followed by units called “Thành”. Each thành consisted of a number of districts (trấn). For example, Bắc Thành had 11 districts, whereas Gia Định Thành had five districts. Next was the quarter (doanh) level. Kinh Kỳ, for instance, had four quarters: Quảng Đức (Thừa Thiên), Quảng Trị, Quảng Bình, and Quảng Nam. The administrative machinery was also complicated, as in the case of Bắc Thành and Gia Định Thành. These two thành were monitored by two military governors (tổng trấn) who had great power equal to a viceroy. They controlled one third of the entire nation. This often led to their abuse of power or the threat of their taking control of the kingship.

Minh Mệnh was determined to abolish the administrative levels of thành, district, and quarter. He managed to do this by dividing the country into provinces with lower administrative levels of prefects, districts, towns, and communes. In addition, he set up different positions of authority and eliminated the position of military governor. Each large district was under the authority of a viceroy of Tonkin (tổng đốc), and small districts were controlled by province chiefs (tuần phủ). Provincial treasurers (bố chính) and provincial judges (án sát) monitored lower level administrative units.

The reform brought about a number of successes, as proudly claimed by the Nguyễn Dynasty:

- Having fewer mandarins resulted in less competition.
- The understanding between provincial mandarins allowed complete control by the monarchy.

- The division of authority helped create more responsible mandarins and improved regulations.

- The power division between viceroys of Tonkin and province chiefs at the central level and provincial treasurers in specific fields was very successful.

A consistent legal system was implemented in tandem with the standard administrative division and its mechanism. Minh Mệnh promulgated *Royal Law* (Hoàng Triều Luật Lệ), and despite the fact that most of it was taken from the Mãn Thanh Law, it played an important role in strengthening the legal system of the nation. The country therefore regained its stability after the long civil war.

The reform resulted in a strengthened national unity and the promotion of culture and society. The general aim of the reform, however, was to strengthen Tống Confucianism rather than Ming Confucianism, so agriculture was given more priority and limitations were imposed on trade. The public land policy, which established common land that was owned by nobody, persisted and resulted in the public land lying unused while many farmers lacked their own land to farm. All of these factors ended in the country becoming stagnant and weakened and led to its failure to resist foreign invaders.

Minh Mệnh's reform was the only one in the history that did not grow out of a progressive outlook. Therefore, it could not solve the comprehensive and serious crisis of society during the late feudal dynasty and its achievements were inevitably limited.

IX. Nguyễn Trường Tộ – a prominent nineteenth century reform conscience

In the nineteenth century, France's colonization of Vietnam resulted in serious crises in all areas of society.

Intellectuals who had gained knowledge of European civilizations developed a strong determination to reform the country. One of the most prominent reformers was Nguyễn Trường Tộ.

Nguyễn Trường Tộ was intelligent, courageous, and took great pride in his country and its people. He was determined to express his opinions about the current state of society. Despite his low status in society, he presented his *Reports and Reform Proposals* to the king. Some of his main proposals were a discussion on the current national position, a plan to renew the country, a plan to take advantage of the country's natural resources, the organization of mining activities and expert training, a discussion of foreign relations, a recommendation for an open society, and more. These recommendations unfortunately received little attention from the king and his mandarinates and were not used to improve the current situation.

Although the reform conscience of Nguyễn Trường Tộ did not have much concrete effect, it is considered to be an indispensable part of the history of mid-nineteenth century Vietnam. It not only had a significant impact on other intellectuals of that era, it also provided invaluable lessons for later reforms at the beginning of the twentieth century and for the present renovation.

X. The reform at the beginning of the twentieth century – A great contribution to the development of the all Vietnamese society

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Vietnam experienced another serious crisis even as new and advanced ideas from neighboring countries like China and Japan were becoming widely known in Vietnam. This led to a new reform movement encompassing the entire

country. The most prominent movements were:

1/ Phan Bội Châu's advocacy of *Improving people's intellectual standards, fostering people's spirit, and redeeming people's talent* (Khai dân trí, chấn dân khí, thực nhân tài). This aimed at liberating the country by violent revolution with foreign aid.

2/ Phan Châu Trinh's advocacy of *Improving people's intellectual standards, fostering people's spirit, and treating citizens with consideration* (Khai dân trí, chấn dân khí, hậu dân sinh). This aimed at promoting the national bourgeois democracy in order to gain national independence. He proposed such measures as improving education, widening people's knowledge, innovating traditions and customs, promoting a commodity economy, opening more shops, and fostering local and foreign trade.

3/ Lương Văn Can's *Đông Kinh nghĩa thực* movement. In Hanoi and some neighboring provinces, a number of schools were founded and funded by a group of Vietnamese revolutionaries. This encouraged the development of the bourgeois democracy. The movement was supported by intellectuals all over Vietnam, pushing the country forward.

4/ Huỳnh Thúc Kháng's advocacy of an open and public struggle against the present rulers by means of parliament and the media. He established the People's Voice newspaper (Tiếng dân) and asked the People's representative institution to implement democratic reforms and the practice human rights.

All four of these movements had a profound impact on people throughout the country. They inspired people's patriotism and encouraged self-governance and the determination to fight for their independence and freedom. Although these reforms did not survive French

colonization, their achievements were still great. The promotion of a bourgeois democracy laid the foundation for future revolutions in the twentieth century, the most important of which was the revolution by the supporters of Marxism and Ho Chi Minh ideology.

PART THREE: *The relation between the ten reforms and the present; The Sixth National Party Congress – The opening of a new era*

Several pages are dedicated to the renewal cause of Vietnam's Sixth National Party Congress. The Congress marked an important milestone of the 1000 years of national construction and over 50 years of national liberation under the leadership of the Vietnam Communist Party. The success of the Congress was given in detail:

1/ The Congress was considered a "Diễn Hồng Congress," where people were brought together from all over the country to decide whether or not they should act. A democratic process was stressed during the congress. Opinions from all citizens and all Party members were considered, and amendments were added to the draft of the Party Political Report. The report was therefore of a higher value and was approved by the Party and all citizens.

2/ The success of the Congress was based on ideological renewal. The new feature of the Congress was the complete change of the people's mindsets, which first came in economic ideology. The fundamental principle was "facing the facts, making right assessments, publicizing the facts."

3/ The Congress marked a transition of generations. Some of the Party's high-ranking leaders volunteered to withdraw from the candidacy in order to enable more youth to take on leadership roles. It was still important, however, for the young politicians to maintain traditions and to learn from the older, retired leaders.

4/ The Congress was a step toward the country's transitional stage. Lenin had explained that the move to Socialism involves a number of stages, and the Congress was only the first.

In addition to the above information, the author also makes a detailed analysis of some current strategic requirements necessary to promote the success of the Congress:

1/ Improving the position and role of the working class in the present renewal.

2/ Promoting "democracy and legality" to gain "stability and development"

3/ Promoting the role of Vietnamese intellectuals in the new era

4/ Building a model for cultured Vietnamese people in this period

5/ Perfecting social mechanisms, implementing more social conventions, improving Party organizations and the State's administrative structure

The last part of the book is references and an appendix. In the appendix, the author encloses the scan of eleven theses, which consist of the English versions of the summaries of all ten reforms and renewals in Vietnam. These theses were taken from eleven issues of Outlook magazine, published by the Vietnamese News Agency. The original versions are now stored in the United Nation's Library in New York.

In general, the book succeeds in clarifying the role and the importance of the ten reforms and renewals in Vietnam, enabling readers to "have a great pride in the nation's precious traditions." It is therefore a great contribution to the current renewal being carried out by the Communist Party in Vietnam.

From all perspectives, the book is a valuable material for those in the circle of research and leadership.