

## Hue – 1945: A Number of Noteworthy Facts

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To the people who considered themselves sons and daughters of Hue, born in Hue, growing up in Hue, and maturing in Hue, the year 1945 could be considered as a great “dividing line” separating their life: the pre-1945 and post-1945 periods are two distinctive and very different eras; these two periods could not be compared because they belonged to two different worlds. Before 1945, the Hue inhabitants were able to live their life peacefully and enjoyably in an age-old landscape which was equally picturesque and regal within a world of reverence and order with ethical principles and the rule of laws, a world which recognized compassion, civility and justice, acknowledged sincerity and honesty, appreciated the intellect and bravery, and valued benevolence and clemency. After 1945, the Hue inhabitants had to live day and night in a world where everyone had to be in distress and fearful as they would not know when they could become victims of bombs, bullets, violence, and stupidity, and in a society that was moving further away from humanity on a daily basis and assuming a heavily bestial characteristic.

Because of the above reasons, what happened in 1945 always accounted for a majority of my memories of Hue. Moreover, looking back to this period as a historian, for me the year 1945 was the most important year in the history of Vietnam in the last half century, because the decisions taken in that year by powerful countries, either the winners – the U.S., China, France, the United Kingdom and Russia – or the loser – Japan -- and by those in power in Vietnam were the reasons for the events that rendered the Vietnamese people despondent during that period, and especially from 1975 to the present.

In 1945, I was 21 years old. I did not hold any high-ranking position, but was lucky to be close to a number of personages with important responsibilities for Vietnam, so I knew or was able to witness a number of facts with a certain degree of importance.

I passed the second Baccalaureate (high school diploma) in the summer of 1944 and in September that year, I had to go to Hanoi to start university. This fact happened before 1945, but I thought I needed to mention it because it went in tandem with the events that happened not too long after. Going to Hanoi then was to directly face the reality of war. First, to buy a train ticket to Hanoi was very difficult. One had to wait around and engage in a few street smart maneuvers before one could obtain a ticket. The reason: limited number of seats because of a restricted number of cars, and this was because many bridges had been destroyed by American bombs. From Hue to Hanoi, there was the Do Luong Bridge, in the Nghe An area. Because the train could not pass, one had to cross the river by boat and then one had to overnight in Vinh. Going by boat was no problem, but then I had a bicycle to carry in order to have transportation means in Hanoi, and I also had to take care of Doctor Ton That Tung’s mother. At the time, Dr. Tung had no connections with the Ho government. He was my neighbor in Hue, and at the same time a relative and a close personal friend. When in Hanoi I usually stayed at his house.

This trip was also the first time in my life when I got “admonished” by a “bà đằm” (“Lady Dame” - Vietnamese transliteration of the French word “dame” – translator’s note). Upon reaching Vinh, I had to telephone Mr. Tung to let him know that his mother would not arrive until the next day because she was still stranded in Vinh. Once I was able to get the phone connection, I got admonished by the responsible “bà đằm” as to why I did not

say “méc xi” (merci – translator’s note). At the time, making a phone call required one to go through the central phone exchange office and request a call, and only French-Vietnamese womenfolk could work as phone operators because they had to know the two languages, as this was the way for them to get employment. Many French-Vietnamese women did not have much education (like American-Vietnamese women in South Vietnam later); so, beside these jobs, it was difficult for them to find other employment. But because they were French-Vietnamese, they thought that they themselves were entitled to be domineering toward “An na mít” (Annamite – French term for Vietnamese, translator’s note). I recall this incident because the year 1945 was the first time and also the only time in my lifetime that I was a direct “victim” of the domineering attitude of the French colonialists.

During my time of studies in Hanoi, I stayed in the student dormitory which had just been built. My older brother and I shared one room with people who were – I only learnt of it later – all “Viet Minh”, and would later hold important positions in the communist government; but during that period of shared accommodations, they were all students and friends of my brother; a number of them were studying in Hue earlier and were also students of the clandestine military school “Young Men of the Front” founded by Messrs. Phan Anh and Ta Quang Buu in the Tran Trong Kim government; so they were all a happy group with no problem whatsoever. They did not speak about “Viet Minh” or “Communism”, and they did not discuss politics. They only requested two things from me: cook sticky rice for breakfast in the morning for the whole group and read English to them each day so that they could get used listening to it.

My period of studies at the university of Hanoi was very short, because on the 9<sup>th</sup> of March that year, the Japanese overthrew the French. During this period, there were three notable facts. First, in the week that followed the coup d’état, the dormitory became an important place. The General Student Association was the only organization allowed by the Japanese to operate formally (in order to help provide medical assistance services, because of the frequent bombing by the Americans); and that was why so many inhabitants came to ask for our intervention on this or that issue like a government (they addressed us as “mandarins”). Second, it was at that time that Mr. Luu Huu Phuoc (the modern music composer – translator’s note) wrote the song “Call to the Youth” (later it became the national anthem of South Vietnam) and I was the one typing the lyrics to disseminate it because I was skilled with the typewriter. Third, there was an important event directly related to what happened in Hue, so I am retelling it separately with more details below.

About a week after the Japanese coup d’état, myself and another student (Mr. Le Dinh Tao, from Hue, a boy scout, older brother of my classmate friend Mr. Le Dinh Du) were asked by Mr. Hoang Dao Thuy (Head of the Boy Scout Organization in North Vietnam) to take a secret letter to Mr. Ta Quang Buu in Hue. Since the Japanese had stopped all the trains, the mode of transportation was bicycles. Being young at the time, bicycling 654 km for me was nothing, and it also gave me the opportunity to go back to Hue to meet Mr. Buu, so I did not hesitate at all. The only concern was the secret letter which could be discovered during the trip by anybody (by whoever) or by the Japanese; and the next concern was robbers (Deo Ngang Pass, the Nha Ho Bay were places famous for robberies). Therefore, I had to hide the letter carefully. For self-defense, each person was issued a knife, and each person was given one paper piece of “con rong” (dragon) (equivalent then to 500 piastres) for trip expenses.

Mr. Tao and I happily began the trip, cycling during the day, resting at night in Nam Dinh, Thanh Hoa, Vinh, Dong Hoi, Quang Tri, and reached Hue Friday morning. Except for Nam Dinh, there were friends everywhere else so everything was smooth. Following the Vietnamese tradition, there was no need to inform ahead (no need to phone in advance, and back then in Vietnam nobody had a phone to do so anyhow), one just arrived and leaned the bicycle against the wall and then got a simple but warm welcome.

We arrived in Hue safely. We were stopped only once at the Bridge Pho Trach, near Hue, but the guarding Japanese soldiers heard me say “seito”, understood that we were students and so let us through with no problem. I felt relieved because if they inspected us and found the knife, there could be trouble. Much later, only when reading books on this period, I knew that it was also at the very same place where, two weeks previously, Emperor Bao Dai, returning from hunting in Quang Tri, was stopped by the Japanese to inform him that the French had been overthrown.

Reaching Hue at about 10 in the morning, Mr. Tao stopped near Hue because his house was on the route to Quang Tri, about 6-7 km from Hue; as for me, I went straight to Mr. Buu’s house to deliver the letter. The letter was probably a message for Emperor Bao Dai (perhaps sent as propaganda for the Viet Minh or to discuss the Emperor’s abdication); so after reading the letter, Mr. Buu said: “Thien, you cannot really go see Mr. Bao Dai (to deliver this letter?). Let me do it.” I told Mr. Buu: “Could you please tell his Majesty that the Viet Minh does not possess real power, they are only good at propaganda.” So then it was the end of the mission. I cycled home, and jumped into the river to swim right away. My parents were not surprised at all, because they were used to my brothers and myself coming and going like that all the time.

Three days later, Mr. Buu called me and asked me to return to Hanoi with a response letter. So Mr. Tao and I re-bicycled 654 km to go back to Hanoi. Naturally, I didn’t know what the letter said.

In Hanoi, I delivered the letter to the representative of Mr. Thuy. After resting a few days, my brother and a few other friends decided to return to Hue, and once more, I pedaled 654 km on my bicycle. So, in the period of less than three weeks, I bicycled Hanoi-Hue three times, nearly 2000 km! The special mission was to deliver and redeliver letters between politicians in Hue and Hanoi. I didn’t know what the letters said, but later when researching the history of this period, I guessed that they were related to the abdication of Emperor Bao Dai in August 1945 and the power turnover to Ho Chi Minh.

My brother and I returned to Hue around the end of March. At that time, Emperor Bao Dai, who could not contact Mr. Diem, had already invited Mr. Tran Trong Kim to form a government. In this government, Mr. Phan Anh was invited to be Minister of Youth with Mr. Ta Quang Buu as Special Advisor. Then, Mr. Buu told me two things. First, he met Emperor Bao Dai before accepting the post and the Emperor told him: “I am going to play the American card. The French only seek to fill their pockets.” This sentence was quite interesting and quite meaningful. I thought this was the right path. I was encouraged by this strategy.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, he said that he had nominated me to be the secretary to Mr. Phan Anh, who had agreed. So, I had to prepare to accept the job once the Cabinet was established in about two to three weeks, meaning after Easter. I thought that my studies and Boy Scout activities, if not ended, were to be postponed. But I also wanted to use my last few days of freedom to do one thing that I considered very interesting one last time; so I asked Mr. Bach van Que, who was also going to work in the Ministry of Youth, to go to Bach Ma, meaning to climb the Bach Ma mountain and stayed in the boy scout camp up there. Mr. Que agreed right away; as the manager of the Bach Ma Boy Scout Camp, he wanted to take a look at the camp before a long absence. Since then, I have resumed my studies, but have never had the pleasure of climbing Mount Bach Ma again, although after 1954 and after 1975 some of my friends had been lucky enough to do so.

A few days after the Bach Ma trip, I assumed the post of secretary to Mr. Phan Anh. This was the opportunity for me to learn and to acquire experiences in politics and diplomacy. During my time at the Ministry of Youth,

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<sup>1</sup> However, according to the revelation of Mr. Tran Thuyen, in 1947 in Hong Kong, Emperor Bao Dai cancelled the idea of going to the U.S. despite the fact that the U.S. was ready to provide an aircraft for him to go. At that time, Mr. Tran Thuyen was at the Emperor’s side. I mentioned Mr. Tran Thuyen in a previous article discussing in which occasion I had met Mr. Ngo Dinh Diem (Tieng Song Huong, 1992).

there were three facts that I considered worth recording. First, I was the youngest staff in the Ministry, and together with Messrs. Phan Anh and Ta Quang Buu, were not members of the Communist Party, while other staff were either member or connected to that party. I learned of this fact later when they emerged to operate publicly after the month of August. Many were in the top leadership of the Communist Party and later on held important positions.

The second fact was that the Ministry of Youth was a clandestine Ministry of Defense. Mr. Buu was responsible for the “Front Youth School”. This school actually was a school to train military officers. This had to be done undercover because at the time Japan did not allow the Tran Trong Kim government to have a ministry of defense nor an army. It is opportune and worth emphasizing here that Japan had unintentionally provided the opportunity for the Communist Party to take over the government easily after the Japanese surrender, because at the time the Bao Dai government did not have any military forces at all. The ten-thousand strong French army was still under confinement by the Japanese, and only Ho Chi Minh had the armed forces and moreover he got the OSS (later the CIA) to provide a few hundred modern guns and ammunitions. Besides, before going to Hanoi to negotiate with the Allies, Mr. Phan Anh had cabled all the heads of youth organizations in the country to prepare weapons to fight the French. This was his last decision and also the last one of the Ministry, and I was responsible for typing and sending out this very cable.

The third fact was that the Ministry of Youth acted in some capacity as a Ministry of Foreign Affairs thanks to the prestige of Messrs. Phan Anh and Ta Quang Buu. This Ministry was the starting point of all cables from Emperor Bao Dai to the heads of state of the Allied powers: Truman, Stalin, Churchill, de Gaulle, and Chiang Kai Shek. These cables were probably drafted by Mr. Phan Anh, because I had to translate them into English before sending them, and if it had been Mr. Buu who had drafted them, he would have drafted them directly in English. In addition, on the 19th of August, Mr. Buu told me that the next day, he and Mr. Phan Anh would go to Hanoi to fly to Chungking to meet the Allied powers. Therefore, this would mean that if this trip had been this fact, if not discussed with Mr. Tran Van Chuong, then formal Minister of Foreign Affairs, then at the very least, it had to have been discussed with Emperor Bao Dai for his approval, because these two were going as special envoys of the Emperor. Mr. Buu did not tell me whether Japan had agreed to this or not, and whether they had agreed to provide a plane for them (i.e., Messrs. Phan Anh and Ta Quang Buu) to go or not. I think that there must have been some agreement with the Japanese for this plan to go ahead; otherwise upon reaching Hanoi they would be stranded with no plane.

The plan that Mr. Phan Anh and Ta Quang Buu had, to go to Chungking to meet with the Allies, did not materialize because it was executed too late. They were only half way, at Quynh Luu, Nghe An when their car was stopped and detained by “revolutionaries”. Subsequently, after the abdication of Emperor Bao Dai, the two had no other choice, and since they knew Mr. Vo Nguyen Giap, they agreed to cooperate with the Ho Chi Minh government.

Four days later, on the 23rd of August, Emperor Bao Dai decided to abdicate, and on the 25th he handed over the imperial seal and sword to Tran Huy Lieu, representative of Ho Chi Minh, at the Noon Gate.

I was one of the several thousand people who witnessed the above –mentioned so-called “ceremony”. Standing on the grass lawn in front of the Noon Gate, as a youth of 21 years old, what emotion was I feeling? Like all the people in the crowd, I was strongly touched and emotional. While I did not whimper, I did mumble a few words: “That is the end”.

It was the truth: After 420 years of struggle and building, after 9 reigns of lords and 10 reigns of emperors, the Nguyen Dynasty had ended. From now, Vietnam no longer had king, Emperor Bao Dai was just an ex-Emperor, or “Vinh Thuy”. Hue was no longer the “Capital” but had become the “old capital”.

The abdication of ex-Emperor Bao Dai had an enormous impact that, even today, after half a century, could still not be completely measured. One part of this impact has been discussed in books on Vietnam. Another part cannot be seen completely yet because the Vietnamese people, both those in exile and those now living in the country, are still gradually discovering in their daily life.

In his memoir, *Le Dragon d'Annam* (The Vietnam Dragon),<sup>2</sup> the ex-Emperor also retold in details the facts and thinking that had pushed him to this decision and it is not necessary to recap them here. I only list a few observations regarding the backdrop for the attitudes and actions of the national leaders and especially of the international leaders in the year 1945 or related to 1945 that I thought might have some decisive bearings on the history of Vietnam during the past 50 years.

Ex-Emperor Bao Dai made two great and damaging mistakes. First, on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of August 1945, when Japan sent a colonel to inform him that following the order of the Allied Commands, Japan had to keep the status quo until an Allied representative came, and as such they had the duty to provide security for him. Instead of telling them to follow and carry out the Allies' orders, he refused it and signed and sealed the form relieving the Japanese of this responsibility. This decision nullified the only armed forces that could have maintained the status quo north of the 17th parallel and prevented the forces directed by the communists to take over the government before the Allies came; while south of the 17th parallel, not only did the Japanese keep the power until the arrival of the Allied representatives, but they also conducted military campaigns to help the Allies push the communist controlled armed forces out of the Saigon area.

The second great and damaging mistake of the ex-Emperor was his decision to abdicate and hand over the imperial seal and sword – meaning his formal power – to Mr. Ho on the 25<sup>th</sup> of August 1945. This fact created a very powerful domestic and international stand for Mr. Ho without any cost to the later. The ironic thing was that at that same time Mr. Ho was also “playing the American card” and had succeeded thanks to the abdication of Emperor Bao Dai, but later Mr. Ho accused the ex-Emperor of being a “lackey to the Americans”! Domestically, once the Emperor had exited and already handed over formally and publicly his powers to Mr. Ho, the hands of any one who did not follow or were against the communists were tied and they had no other roads to take except to cooperate with the government of Mr. Ho if they wanted to fight for the independence of the country. These people could not remain unengaged because at that time, being inactive meant being indifferent to the homeland's calling. On the international side, representatives of the Allies coming to Vietnam could not refuse any dealings with the government of Mr. Ho or public recognition of Mr. Ho, at least de facto, because he (Mr. Ho) held the real power, at least in Hanoi, and this not only without protest from, but also with the acquiescence of Emperor Bao Dai.

The ex-Emperor explained that he wanted to avoid bloodshed and observed that when he sent cables to the international head of states, no one responded while Mr. Ho enjoyed the support from the U.S. and the Allies. Later, the ex-Emperor realized he had been duped. As he wrote in his memoir, “all the people around Mr. Ho Chi Minh were duping themselves or were mistaken. The Americans, and Sainteny, and in addition myself (Bao Dai)...” (Con Rong Vietnam, p. 243). It was too late then, and the undertakings to disentangle the results of this mistake led to much more bloodshed and went nowhere in the end.

As the Head of State with full powers then, the ex-Emperor naturally bore his own responsibilities for what happened to Vietnam. However, if one examined closely, he (Emperor Bao Dai) as well as the whole

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<sup>2</sup> S. M. Bao Dai, *Le Dragon d'Annam*, Plon, Paris, 1980. Vietnamese version: Bao Dai, *Con Rong Viet Nam*, Xuan Thu Publishing, Los Alamitos, CA, 1992.

Vietnamese people, on “this side” or on “the other side” – except the fanatic communists – were only victims of the mistakes made by international powers, especially Japan and the U.S. in 1945.

The person who bore the heaviest responsibility for what happened to the Vietnamese (and the Americans) from 1945 to the present was the late President Roosevelt. Next was the late President Truman. Mr. Roosevelt was the person who had decided not to allow the return of the French to Vietnam, and wanted to put Vietnam for a certain time under the trusteeship of the United Nation, but he had no actual plan to practically formalize this intention. His intentions were only disclosed through some announcements of a private nature, only during discussions with his closest aides, and were not at all recorded on paper as instructions for the U.S. State Department. Therefore, at the meeting of the United Nations in San Francisco in May 1945, when the French government asked about the view point of the American government on Vietnam, the U.S. State Department did not have any instructions from President Roosevelt. In the meantime, agents of the OSS (later CIA) in Chungking, Kunming and Hanoi still alleged that they “continued to follow instructions of President Roosevelt” (verbally transmitted through General Donovan, head of OSS and a close aide of Roosevelt) of not allowing the French return to Vietnam and as such, creating the condition for Mr. Ho to take over the government easily.

Until August, when Truman met de Gaulle and accepted the French as replacement for Chinese troops in Vietnam, he had the authority and power to demand the French to guarantee before the United Nations that they would allow Vietnam to be independent after a certain period, but he did not bring up this solution because he had to confront Stalin in Europe and already knew that Ho Chi Minh was communist! If there was such guarantee, then certainly there would have been very few people accepting the communist decision to go to war to secure independence for Vietnam.

On the Japanese side, there were two decisions that were damaging to Vietnam. First, in 1943 at the Conference on Southeast Asia in Tokyo, the Japanese government decided to allow independence only for Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Burma, while Vietnam and Malaysia would keep their status as colonial territories. The result was that the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, and Burma, although forced to be in the Co-Prosperity Sphere under Japanese power, had the right to form a government and *especially to form an army*. Thanks to this, after the Japanese surrendered, they had their government and *especially had their army* to crush the communist forces, while coping with the returning colonialist army, and then succeeded in their demand for independence with international support in the United Nations.

The second decision was in March 1945: after overthrowing the French, Japan did not allow the government of Vietnam to have a Ministry of Defense and an army, and did not allow Mr. Diem to be Prime Minister. The result of this decision was that the hands of the Bao Dai government were completely tied after Japan surrendered, and he no longer had the will to hold on to power in Vietnam.

Concerning the mistakes by the French, especially caused by the naïveté of Sainteny, there are many books covering this subject, and it is well known and not worth repeating here. As for China, it did not have any capability to carry out any effective policies, and their decision was dependent on the U.S.

Domestically, the above can also be said (i.e. and already covered extensively in the literature), except one point that was seldom noted, that is the fact that the non-communist politicians were too rigid and this was the reason for their momentous failure in their overall struggle for Vietnam. Mr. Diem’s nature was very rigid. This was well known. But other leaders, for example the leaders of the Vietnam Quoc Dan Dang (QDD), were equally rigid.

The rigidity of Mr. Diem created many difficulties for him and led to his death in the end. But in 1945, it had a different result. Because he was determined to demand Japan to restore sovereignty to South Vietnam, and

because he demanded real and complete independence for Vietnam, Japan did not want to have him as Prime Minister, under the pretext that he could not be found (!) and Emperor Bao Dai had to invite Mr. Tran Trong Kim. If Mr. Diem had been the Prime Minister in August 1945, there would certainly have been no abdication of Emperor Bao Dai. Mr. Diem, like Sokarno in Indonesia, would have crushed the communists immediately and enjoyed international support, at that time even from Russia, and the Vietnam issue could have been presented at the U.N and resolved quickly and satisfactorily like the Indonesia issue.

As for the Vietnam Quoc Dan Dang (QDD), Sainteny recounted the story in his memoir, *Histoire d'une Paix Manquee*, when he was in Van Nam and contacted the representative of QDD, Mr. Nguyen Tuong Tam; Sainteny was discouraged because of his rigid demand (he used the term "farouche") while the Viet Minh demanded very little.<sup>3</sup> Therefore Sainteny was more comfortable dealing with Mr. Ho ... until Mr. Ho felt himself that he became strong enough, meaning at the end of 1949. But this story, which also happened in 1945, is pulling us far away from Hue.

I only discussed a number of facts that happened in Hue in 1945 in the above essay, but did not go further into what happened in Hanoi or other places.

Nevertheless, the overall collective results from all those events and facts were that what happened to Vietnam and especially to the sons and daughters of Hue in the past 50 years could be considered as originating from a few key decisions by a number of Vietnamese and international figures in 1945.

Hue is no longer the "Capital" of Vietnam. Luckily however, the spirit and the "Phu Xuan" dignity/nobility of the people of Hue will still endure for a long time to come.

Ottawa, February 1995

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<sup>3</sup> Jean Sainteny, *Histoire d'une Paix Manquee, Indochine 1945-1947*, Paris, Fayard, 1967 (1948). See Chapter 5.