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Research Notes on  
HUE  
as a traditional city of  
VIET NAM



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AMERICAN UNIVERSITY, WASHINGTON, D.C. SPECIAL OPERATIONS RESEARCH  
" OFFICE.

RESEARCH NOTES ON  
HUE  
AS A TRADITIONAL CITY OF VIETNAM

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21 December 1964

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|                                                                |    |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| INTRODUCTION .....                                             | 1  |
| HISTORICAL BACKGROUND .....                                    | 1  |
| THE CONTEMPORARY HUE .....                                     | 5  |
| FOOTNOTES .....                                                | 8  |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY .....                                             | 10 |
| APPENDIX - A Comparison of Modern Hue with Saigon and Hanoi... | 12 |

## INTRODUCTION

This compilation of research notes is in response to a telephonic request received on 16 December 1964 from Mr. Seymour J. Deitchman, OSD DDR&E, for background information on the city of Hue in South Vietnam as a traditional capital and cultural center of Vietnam. In the context of this report the word "traditional" is used to mean cultural continuity in social attitudes and in political and religious institutions.

Hue is perhaps the most characteristically Vietnamese city in all of Vietnam. The area is rich in Vietnamese history, as reflected by the walled Imperial City, the tombs of the deceased emperors, and the presence of Central Vietnam's governmental administrative apparatus, all reminders of dynastic days of the past. The influence of the mandarins still pervades life in Hue, as evidenced by the still frequent donning of the quon ao dai,<sup>1/</sup> the mandarin robes, by the men of Hue.

To the tourist, a trip to the Central Area and especially Hue "is indispensable to a full picture of present day Vietnam", "a city where tradition is strong" and "the city where the richness of Vietnam's cultural heritage is most apparent." "Hue- the home of emperors and their burial site- offers an embarrassment of riches" and is in the "traditional heartland of Vietnam".<sup>2/</sup>

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The city of Hue, situated about five miles from the South China Sea coast and fifty miles south of the 17th parallel, is the

capital of central Vietnam and its Thu'a-thien province.<sup>3/</sup> It ranks as one of the three most significant cities in the country, in addition to Saigon and Hanoi. It is older than Saigon but newer than Hanoi. However, Hue's reputation as the traditional political and cultural center of Vietnam is derived primarily from its historical role as the ancient capital of Vietnam or the former capital of the Empire of Annam.<sup>4/</sup>

The origins of the city are not definitely known, it is believed, however, that Hue was founded by the Chinese sometime during the third century, B.C.<sup>5/</sup> and is first mentioned as the seat of Chinese military command, around 200 B.C..<sup>6/</sup> Since that time the city has changed hands several times. It was conquered by the Chams in around 200 A.D., recaptured by the Chinese on several occasions and finally annexed by Annam in 1312.<sup>7/</sup>

In 1635, Hue became the seat of the Annamese Nguyen line, which ruled over South Annam and modern Cochin China.<sup>8/</sup> Nguyen-Anh made Hue the capital of the Empire of Annam in 1802.<sup>9/</sup> As such, the Imperial City of Hue was the residence of the emperor, the royal court and the administration of the empire.<sup>10/</sup> Hue has been described by contemporary Vietnamese as "a living repository of Viet-Nam's dynastic past. Being the capital of the Emperors of the last dynasty, Hue contains all the symbols of bygone days".<sup>11/</sup>

Although, technically, Hue remained the Imperial City until 1954 when the two political power centers officially became Hanoi and Saigon, its political importance began to decline with the French capture of Hue in 1883.<sup>12/</sup> Under the French, Annam<sup>13/</sup> acquired the special

status of a protectorate and not that of a colony, as in the case of Cochin China. Thus, in name only, Annam was still under the jurisdiction of the Emperor who resided in Hue, but the real power was in the hands of the French who made Hanoi the capital of the Union of Indochina from 1902 until the end of World War II.

In the words of one Vietnamese scholar "the emperor, the royal court and the hierarchy of mandarins were allowed to continue, but complete overall authority was vested in a French resident superieur."<sup>14/</sup> The seat of the Superior Residency of France in Annam was in Hue. The shift in political power from the Emperor in Hue to the French administrators in Hanoi and Saigon is picturesquely and accurately summed up in the following passage:

"The Emperor continued to live in Hue, which lay somnolent behind the protective mountain called the Emperor's Screen, an old city of gardens and pagodas crowned with memories of the Vietnamese past. ... From 1884 to the pre-World War II years, by a series of more or less diplomatic encroachments, the French authorities had gradually stripped the Emperor and his court of ministers of all traces of real political power. There were left to him only such duties as conferring honorary titles on a variety of celebrities ranging from Governors General to sacred elephants." <sup>15/</sup>

Before the Japanese invasion, Hanoi was the capital of French Indochina and Saigon was the commercial capital to the south in Cochin China.

Even during the Japanese occupation of Indochina between 1940-1945, the French colonial administration continued in its established manner, as agreed upon between Japan and the French Vichy Government. This diplomatic agreement was in force until March 1945 when the Japanese forces supplanted French authority in Indochina.



On March 11, 1945 Emperor Bao Dai proclaimed the independence of Vietnam under the "protection" of Japan. Bao Dai, who had become emperor in 1925 at the age of 12, but did not ascend to the throne until 1932, attempted unsuccessfully to fill the vacuum left by the French colonial administrators. "He formed a government at Hue, <sup>16/</sup> the traditional capital of Vietnam". <sup>17/</sup> His administration was short-lived since he was forced to abdicate in August 1945, in favor of the Viet-Minh government of Ho Chi Minh. To the tradition-minded Vietnamese this clearly indicated that a great and historical shift of power had taken place and henceforth the political centers would be Saigon and Hanoi.

Until recently Hue seemed to have lost much of its former significance as a political and cultural capital, despite its many historical shrines, royal tombs, a national museum and a university. The last which is referred to as "the first purely Vietnamese university" <sup>18/</sup> was founded in 1957 by a native of that city who had reached national acclaim namely, President Diem. <sup>19/</sup> The university in Hue was opened in 1959 and had an enrollment of 1,431 students in 1961. <sup>20/</sup> However, it is regarded as being inferior to the university at Saigon which has better qualified teachers and more complete facilities.

From a religious point of view, Hue is considered to be the center for the Buddhists in Vietnam and has also been the seat of the Roman Catholic Apostolic delegate. The Tu-Dam pagoda in Hue is one of the major Buddhist training centers (in addition to the Xa Loi and An Quang padodas and the newly established Institute for the



propagation of the Buddhist Faith (Vien Hoa Dao) in Saigon). Cognizance should be taken of the fact that it is not until recently that the Buddhists have established a hierarchy. Historically, the Buddhist pagodas throughout the country have operated as independent units without one central authority as compared to the Roman Catholic church. Consequently, the Buddhists do not regard Hue in the same manner as Roman Catholics regard Rome, although Hue is known as "the brain center which produces most of the Buddhist thinkers."<sup>21/</sup>

Thus while Hue still stands as a living monument of Vietnam's past, on the whole, the loyalties and attachments to Hue are generally from those residing in the Central Area or are personal in character. Currently, the majority of the Vietnamese people consider Saigon in the south and Hanoi in the North as the political and cultural capitals of the divided country.<sup>22/</sup>

Nevertheless, Hue is of tremendous psychological importance in the struggle between North and South Vietnam. The fact that Hue is regarded as one of the three major cities in Vietnam means that, if Hue would fall within the orbit of the communists in North Vietnam, they would have possession of two parts (i.e., Hanoi and Hue) in contrast to the one part (Saigon) of the South Vietnamese. Although the territory involved is only a question of 50 miles from the 17th parallel, the psychological impact of such loss would be far out of proportion.<sup>23/</sup>

#### THE CONTEMPORARY HUE

The pattern emerging is one in which Hue, ancient Annameese

capital long bereft of real political power, may again be asserting itself, perhaps to play a significant or even decisive role in the future of the Republic of Vietnam. As the center of traditional Buddhist culture and scholarship, it is reported that Hue today is also the seat of organization of a series of "People's Salvation Committees" which, having spread along the entire length of Vietnam's eastern coast, are the focal points for unrelenting pressure against the Catholics and the Government.<sup>24/</sup> It is alleged also to contain the headquarters of the anti-Government and anti-American, Buddhist lay organization known as the National Salvation Council.<sup>25/</sup> Home of the militantly anti-Government and possibly pro-Communist Buddhist leader Thich Tri Quang, Hue appears to be a sort of remote control nerve center directing the increasingly violent and spectacular Buddhist agitation against the Government in Saigon.<sup>26/</sup> In fact, the National Buddhist Center in Saigon operates largely as a propaganda agency and staging area for demonstrations directed by top Buddhist leaders who move back and forth between Saigon and Hue as circumstances dictate. When Government pressure is severe, the Saigon Center can be closed down without hindering the overall thrust of Buddhist agitation emanating from Hue.

Although most of the publicity surrounding the South Vietnamese Government's attempts to control mushrooming Buddhist dissidence focuses upon Saigon, Hue becomes more and more prominent as events unfold. There is some reason to believe that the so-called "Young Turks" of the Vietnamese Army may decide to meet the

situation head-on. Among those arrested by the Army during the purge of the High National Council on December 20, 1964 were Professor Ton That Hanh, University of Hue professor and editor of a Buddhist newspaper, and the Dean of the University Medical school and leader of the National Salvation Council, Dr. Le Khac Quyen.<sup>28/</sup> The repercussions of these and other arrests may be quick and possibly dramatic. The form and content of this drama is, however, something which only time will reveal in the next critical weeks and one must continually guard against the oversimplification of a complex military-political-religious situation.



# FOOTNOTES

1. U.S. Department of State, Post Report from Hue, Vietnam dated 2 May 1963, p.1.
2. "Hue: The Quiet Beauty of Vietnam's Imperial City", The Times of Vietnam Magazine, VN 10, Vol. III, No. 15, (April 22, 1961), p. 4,7,22.
3. The Columbia Lippincott Gazetteer of the World, New York: Columbia University Press, 1962, p. 810. See also, The Encyclopaedia Britannica, vol. 11, (1958) p. 861; and SORO-FASD, U.S. Army Area Handbook for Vietnam, Washington, D.C., GPO, 1962, p. 51.
4. Annam is the name the Chinese gave to entire Vietnam as a symbol of humiliation and defeat. The word is derived from the Chinese An-Nam meaning "Pacified South." Bernard B. Fall, The Two Viet-Nams; A Political and Military Analysis, New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1963, p. 12.
5. The Columbia Encyclopedia, New York: Columbia University Press, 1950, p. 926.
6. Columbia Lippincott Gazetteer, op. cit., p. 810.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Alan H. Broderick, Little China: The Annamese Lands, London: Oxford University Press, 1942, p. 148.
10. Ibid., p. 199.
11. Embassy of Viet Nam, Press and Information Office, A Guide to Viet-Nam, Washington, D.C., (n.d.), p. 34.
12. Columbia Lippincott Gazetteer, op. cit., p. 810.
13. The French designation of Annam referred only to the territory in the central part of Vietnam and not to the entire country as in the days of Chinese rule. See note 4, supra.
14. Hoang Van Chi, From Colonialism to Communism: A Case History of North Vietnam, London: Pall Mall Press, 1964, p. 11.
15. Ellen J. Hammer, The Struggle for Indochina, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1954, p. 12.

16. Emphasis added.
17. Bert Cooper et. al., Case Studies in Insurgency and Revolutionary Warfare: Vietnam 1941-1954, Washington, D.C.: SORO, 1964, p. 42, n.
18. John O. Sutter, Scientific Facilities and Information Services of the Republic of Viet-Nam, Honolulu: Pacific Scientific Information Center, 1961, p. 5.
19. Education in Vietnam, Saigon: Review Horizons, (n.d.), p. 11.
20. Worldmark Encyclopedia of Nations: Asia and Australasia, New York: Worldmark Press Inc., 1963, p. 379.
21. Based on an interview with Mr. Nguyen Dinh Thuan, former Secretary of State for the Presidency and Deputy Minister of Defense during the Diem regime, at SORO on December 17, 1964.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. The Washington Post, December 20, 1964. p. A-13
25. The Evening Star, Washington, D.C., December 16, 1964. p. A-9
26. Ibid.
27. The Washington Post, December 4, 1964. p. A-41
28. The Washington Post, December 21, 1964. p. A-1, A-12.

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## APPENDIX

### A COMPARISON OF MODERN HUE WITH SAIGON AND HANOI\*

#### HUE

Hue, situated 50 miles south of the 17th parallel, is perhaps the most interesting and picturesque city in the country. The imperial capital for two centuries, it is noted for the royal palace and tombs and for the old citadel constructed by the French. It has become an administrative and agricultural center. It has no industrial plants although its population is 100,000. Its neighboring port of Lai An cannot accommodate ocean-going ships. The city is served by the coastal road and the Trans-Vietnam Railroad, and it also has a commercial airfield.

#### SAIGON

Saigon, located in the Mekong Delta area, is the largest city in the entire country. The capital of the Republic of Vietnam, it is a modern city with beautiful parks, fine boulevards and imposing public buildings. Developed by the French to provide adequate port facilities for the then rapidly increasing exports of rice from the Mekong Delta, by 1936 it was a modern city of 110,000. In 1962 it was estimated to have grown to 1,200,000 a figure which did not include the 700,000 inhabitants of the adjacent city of Cho Lon.

Saigon is the focus of all overseas trade for the entire South. The important rubber plantations are easily accessible from the city. All rice for export is collected there and constitutes 50 percent

\*This information extracted from SORO-FASD, U.S. Army Handbook for Vietnam, Washington, D.C., GPO, 1962, pp. 50-52.

of the export tonnage. Saigon is the terminus of the Trans-Vietnam Railroad which has been completely renovated as far as Hue. There is a modern international airport with runways up to 8,000 feet long. Saigon is also the main industrial center of South Vietnam. Textile mills, sugar factories, paper mills, cement plants and glass works are taking on increasing importance.

Port facilities are ample for a trade which amounts to 1,300 overseas vessels a year and thousands of small river and coastal craft. The city is situated well inland, and seagoing ships must proceed 50 miles through an adequate but circuitous channel to reach the docks along the Song Sai Gon in the city proper. The channel varies from 29 to 39 feet in depth; the river-front docks are designed to take ships with a draft of no more than 19 feet, although larger ships can be accommodated on favorable tides.

#### HANOI

Hanoi, the capital and most important city of North Vietnam, was the capital of the country from the tenth to the seventeenth centuries. In 1900 the French made it the capital of Indochina and transformed it into a French city. Located on the Red River about 100 miles inland, it is the center of all transportation in the North. Rail lines connect it with the port of Haiphong and with KunMing and other rail points in southeastern China. The railroad to Saigon is interdicted. Hanoi is also a center of the river and canal traffic which carries most of the rice crop of the Red River Delta. An extensive system of motor roads also converges there. It has a modern commercial airport.

Hanoi has a population of 643,000 people and is situated in one of the most densely populated areas in the country. It is the most important industrial city in the North, and the authorities have been developing it further in this direction since the end of the Indo-china War. Power plants, paper mills, sugar distilleries and match factories have all been constructed or enlarged, and a recently completed machine-tool plant is in production.