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**NEW TITLES**


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*History*

**THE BIRTH OF VIETNAM**  
 by Keith Weller Taylor  
 Univ. of Calif., 1983  
 397 pp. \$38.50



The story of early Vietnam is, for many historians, the story of a province on the periphery of the Chinese empire. Taylor, a historian at the National University of Singapore, paints a picture of a less assimilated Vietnam existing from around 300 B.C., the start of its recorded history, to the 10th century, when it threw off the Chinese yoke. The ancient nation was a "meeting place" for several cultures. Its language even now resembles such Austronesian and Austroasiatic tongues as Thai, Cham, and Jarai. So extensive were Vietnam's overseas borrowings (including weaponry and musical instruments) that one early myth held that the sea was the source of sovereign power. Ironically, the first great figure in Vietnamese history was King An Duong, a third century B.C. invader from the north, probably a native of the Shu province of China, and the first of a series of northern conquerors. In 111 B.C., the Chinese Han dynasty expanded its empire to include Vietnam, becoming one of several dynasties to rule the region. Unwilling to accept cultural differences, the conquering Chinese deemed barbaric the Vietnamese habit of going barefooted and the custom of "levirate" (which gave a widowed woman the right to marry her husband's younger brother). But the persistence of such practices—many of which, like levirate, ran directly counter to Chinese notions of a patriarchal society—proves that Vietnam resisted total assimilation. With the collapse of the T'ang dynasty in A.D. 880, Chinese domination ended, and the Vietnamese began asserting openly their identity in such matters as art and architecture. This cultural revival was possible, writes Taylor, only because the Vietnamese "never broke faith with their past and its heritage."