CHAPTER TWO

UPLAND NORTHERN VIETNAM

This chapter is a general introduction to colonial highland Tonkin and its populations intended to set the cultural background of the ethnographies presented in this book. It begins with an outline of the history of the northern highlands from imperial times to French colonial rule. A picture is then drawn of the highland ethnic situation during the French watch, using the French ethnic categories. Finally, the situation as it stands today is exposed, this time using the official Vietnamese categories. This last section gives a measure of the demographic significance of the region and the 5 million or so mountain dwellers found today in this part of northern Vietnam.

The Red River delta and its mountainous periphery correspond, by and large, to the former French protectorate of Tonkin. It is a fan-shaped territory centred on the capital city, Hanoi, which sits at sea level, with a gradual altitude increase as one proceeds along the rays of the fan. At its highest point, close to the Chinese border, this territory peaks at just over 3000 metres.

Today, the ethnic diversity there compares with what it was when the French arrived in the late 19th century, and the locations where the various ethnic groups dwell have remained largely unchanged. This is not to say though, that these ethnic groups have always inhabited the area. History and archaeology tell us that of the actual indigenous societies of northern Vietnam, very little remains. The bulk of the lowland population today is formed of Viet migrants who arrived from China a few centuries B.C. The Proto- and Deutero-Malay migratory waves that preceded the Viet have been virtually wiped off the lowlands and the coastal areas and pushed to the highlands where they are still represented today by Austronesian and Austro-Asiatic speakers. Then, in the highlands, came the Tibeto-Burman and the Tai-Kadai speakers from central-eastern China between 1000–2000 years ago on their way to today’s Thailand. Over the last five centuries came the Miao-Yao speakers, that is, the Yao and, within the last 300 years, the Hmong. Any such substantial in-migrations practically ceased with the closure of the international borders when the French took over Tonkin in the
1880s, quickly followed by territorial and population control even in the remotest parts of the Annam Range.

Prior to the late 19th century, archives in Vietnamese and Chinese languages or what has been written about them in English or French, show very few traces of these politically minor peoples, except when addressing ad hoc administrative and trade problems, whilst modern historians such as Lê or Ngo rarely touch on them.1 Without significant home-grown written records produced by these highland societies and without a sufficient number of decisive archaeological studies, what is left of their early history in upper northern Vietnam is scarce.

Since the foundation of the early lowland kingdom of Van Lang in Vietnam in the 7th Century B.C., interactions with the hinterland and the kingdoms to the north and the west, beyond the Vietnamese portion of the Southeast Asian massif, were either defensive when an attack was launched, offensive when a neighbour was to be subsumed, or commercial in times of peace. By the start of the second Lê dynasty in the 15th century A.D., nearly all of the Black River (Sông Đàng) catchments and part of the upper Red River (Sông Hồng) bore the generic label of Hưng Hóa, while Tháp-châu was the name for the 10 châu of An-tây prefecture, covering a large portion of the remaining area on both sides of the Sino-Vietnamese border. Sub-prefectures bore either the name of huyện or châu. In the huyện, the head was a mandarin sent from Hanoi; in the châu, indigenous chiefs were kept in place, reporting directly to the provincial governor. In a way, one could say that ethnic differences were thus known, yet as long as the state’s objectives were met in terms of taxation and military draft in the châu, the ethnic identity of the local leader was considered irrelevant.

In his study of Vietnamese public institutions in the 18th century, Dang stresses that at the time, the northern frontier and the peoples inhabiting it were, at least nominally, under the responsibility of the Vietnamese Ministry of the Armies (Binh Bô). The peripheral and mountainous districts they occupied still bore the names châu and huyện.