

八十

From Xingyi to Nanning
and west to Hanoi
a Friendship Pass opened
bringing sorrow and joy
in the midst of the war
a banana peel
discarded by Gonggong
became one family's meal



Chapter 80 – Hanoi to Hainan

My father-in-law, who we all called “Gonggong” came from a family of traders and merchants. China was a scary place to live in the 1930’s and 40’s. By December of 1938, much of the province of Guangdong had been occupied by Japanese forces. All Chinese males between the ages of 15 and 60 were suspected by the Japanese to be enemies or “enemies pretending to be local people.” Survival in southern China meant a lot of “out-of-the-box” thinking and creative problem solving. Gonggong left his home village in the Nanhai district of Guangdong to seek his fortune and help support his family by traveling south and west eventually ending up in Vietnam. Like his forefathers who had made their ways to San Francisco and then south to El Salvador 100 years earlier, Gonggong was a keen observer and was able to connect dots between what was available in certain areas and what was sought after in others. He saw possible business opportunities opening up in French controlled Vietnam, so he sought out distant relatives in Hanoi. There, he learned the lay of the land and was able to consider his options. Sometimes he would take the southern route, staying on the coast to Beihai – even taking the slow boat to Hainan Dao. I have no idea how many times Gonggong crossed the 500 odd miles between Hanoi and Jiujiang, Guangdong, but I do know that there were enough trips for him to develop a familiarity with the region. From Hanoi he would head north and east to Nanning before traveling the remaining 350 miles east to Jiujiang. There was the 530 mile narrow-gage railway line built by the French between Hanoi and Nanning called the Yunnan–Haiphong Railway (滇越铁路 Diānyuè Tiělù) which was completed in 1910. Goods were transported on that line to both the KMT and others in China in need of European goods during the early days of WWII, but once Nanning was taken and the Japanese occupied Vietnam, this line was severed. From that point on “the Hump” air route was the only way of getting supplies into China.

Two thousand years ago, during the Han Dynasty, Emperor Hàn Wǔ Dì (漢武帝) conquered Vietnam which was then called Nányuè 南越, and for 1,000 years, Vietnam was effectively a part of China. Many Chinese migrated to Viet Nam, drawn by the rich farmland and fishing of the Red River Delta. Scholars and government officials also alighted and set up a Chinese state. Like Korea and Japan, Viet Nam adopted the Chinese writing system – until they recognized it was inadequate for their own linguistic needs. About 1,000 years ago, Vietnam developed a system of writing called Chử Nôm which included ideograms, similar to Chinese. In addition to language, ideas from Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism also seemed to be a good fit for the Vietnamese.



Barely two hundred years into Chinese occupation, there was a famous rebellion started by two sisters by the surname of Trú'ng. Trú'ng Trac and Trú'ng Nhi came from a military family where they learned the arts of war. After Trú'ng Trac's husband was killed, and Trú'ng Trac was raped by Chinese for resisting Chinese rule, Trú'ng Nhi convinced Trú'ng Trac to avenge their treatment and liberate Vietnam from the Chinese. In 43 CE, the Trú'ng sisters led an independence revolt against the Chinese government which nearly succeeded, but after three years of fierce fighting, their revolt was ultimately crushed by the Chinese forces and the Trú'ng sisters drowned themselves to avoid capture. To this day, the Trú'ng sisters are national heroes in Vietnam. Chinese Premier Zhou En Lai visited a temple dedicated to the Trú'ng sisters as a show of respect during his first state visit to Viet Nam in 1956. Towards the end of the Tang Dynasty in the 10th century CE, however, the Vietnamese took advantage of the weakened Chinese government and upon prevailing in the Battle of Bach Dang River, they declared Vietnam free of the Chinese yolk, and secured independence for Vietnam - which they called Annam.

The Friendship Pass 友誼關 Yǒuyì Guān aka Ải Nam Quan (隘南關) was actually first established between Viet Nam and China during the Ming Dynasty in the 17th century. Then, it was called South Suppressing Pass 鎮南關 Zhèn Nán Guān, and the pass itself actually served as the border between Viet Nam and China. This pass was later used by China and Vietnam during the early 1970's to help the Vietnamese fight "American Aggression" in Vietnam. During that period, the Friendship Pass was anything but friendly. All along the pass were land mines, bamboo spikes, and barbed wire meant to prevent disruptions to the flow of goods.

When the initial clashes between China and Vietnam began in 1977, the Vietnamese government put pressure on its ethnic Chinese population and many of them fled north across the border. In 1979, 400,000 PLA troops suddenly appeared on that same border to teach the Vietnamese a lesson for their assistance in bringing down the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia, who had been a close ally of the PRC. That was the last “border war” between the two countries. Vietnam and China began patching things up in the 1990’s as they worked together for common economic interests. Today, there remains a love-hate relationship between Vietnam and China, not unlike the scars the still exist in many families as the results of unresolved family feuds.

The one story I remember Gonggong telling about his traveling over Friendship Pass was when he felt hungry while walking along the road near present day Lang Son. He reached into his travel bag and pulled out a banana. As soon as he did, he noticed a small group of people following him. As he walked, the number grew. When he finally finished his snack, he tossed his banana peel into the road. Before it even hit the ground it was snatched up and torn apart by people desperate for anything to eat. Such was southern China in the early 1940’s.

