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Map of Vietnam



Chapter 1 Profile

Introduction

Shaped like a seahorse that stretches southeast into the Pacific Ocean, Vietnam has been referred to as the “balcony of the Pacific.” Via its water transportation links that were developed prior to road and rail networks, Vietnamese migration pressed southward (*Nam Tien*) along the coast. Distinct regions meant that trade was more than a means to establish national unity within a dispersed settler society. A geographical division of resources meant the North contained most of the raw materials while the South served as the bread basket.¹ The two-decade partition during the Cold War forced both the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN) in the North and the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) in the South to rely on outside assistance. This continued after reunification in 1975 until the effects from the market reforms (*doi moi*), which were implemented in 1986, spread throughout the economy.



Courtesy of Wikipedia
Boats on Ha Long Bay

Climate

Vietnam encompasses a broad expanse of latitudes and altitudes, meaning different parts of the country confront disparate seasonal weather. In the subtropical north, temperatures range from 5°C (41°F) in December to 37°C (99°F) in July. In the tropical south, the annual temperature has a much narrower span from 21–28°C (70–82°F).² The winter monsoon, which comes from the northeast between October and March, delivers rain and drizzle to all areas north of Nha Trang, while areas to the south enjoy dry, cool weather. From April or May to October, the more powerful southwestern monsoon, which blows across the Gulf of Thailand, brings warm, humid weather and copious rainfall. Heavy summer monsoons can almost completely submerge parts of the Mekong Delta, except those areas sheltered by mountains.

Major Cities

Hanoi

In 2010, Hanoi will celebrate its millennium anniversary, making it one of the oldest capitals in Southeast Asia. It became the capital of Vietnam under the first emperor of the Ly Dynasty (1009–1225) who named it *Thang Long* (Rising Dragon). It underwent several other name changes before becoming Hanoi, “the city amid waters,” owing to its location on the Red River Delta. In the 19th century when the country was unified under the Nguyen Dynasty, the capital was moved from Hanoi to Hue. The French, however, reaffirmed Hanoi’s status as the country’s political center when they chose it over Saigon

¹ *Vietnam*. Tucker, Spencer. “Chapter One: The Background [p. 2].” 1999. http://books.google.com/books?id=WZry2NaH2_sC&pg=PA2&lpg=PA2&dq=vietnam+pole+shape&source=bl&ots=Yguv2puC_S&sig=rTz-m863V14R_LhkidNPR0IewMo&hl=en&ei=s52xSf7eEpmMsQOAU5SNAQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=10&ct=result#PPA2,M1

² About.com. Aquino, Michael. “Weather in Vietnam—Climate, Local Conditions, and Recommended Clothing.” 2009. <http://goseasia.about.com/od/vietnam/a/wvietnam.htm>

to be the capital of the new Indochinese Union in 1887. Hanoi contains more than 1,000 historical buildings, including 676 pagodas and 261 temples, which reflect the importance of Buddhism in imperial history.³

Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon)

Saigon, as Ho Chi Minh City remains better known, was historically part of Cambodia. First named Prey Nokor, it started as a small Khmer fishing village built in the midst of swamplands.⁴ It was not until the 17th century that it became part of Vietnam.⁵ Captured by the French in 1859, it became the capital of Cochinchina, a protectorate, before they established a formal colony. Under the French, Saigon became a center of commerce.



Once repatriated, it was left with an extensive amalgamation of Vietnamese and classic French architecture, which has distinguished it ever since. Commerce was briefly disrupted after the country was reunified but it has again become a boom town, attracting migrants from all over the country, making it Vietnam's largest city. A mere 19 meters (63 ft) above sea level, the major impediment to Ho Chi Minh City's expansion is its proximity to swamp.

Haiphong

Haiphong became a seaport in 1874. It subsequently became the site of heavy industry powered by locally mined coal. Under French colonial rule it became the southeastern terminus of the rail line coming through Kunming (in southwestern China), through Hanoi, and to the Gulf of Tonkin where goods could be transported via water.⁶ The French bombardment of the port in 1946 began the First Indochina War.⁷ Later, during the Vietnam War, it was again heavily bombed to disrupt supply lines delivering munitions and materials from the Soviet Union and China for the Northern cause.

Hue

By the early 19th century, Hue had already served as the political center of the country for many decades under the Tay Song Dynasty.⁸ As the capital of Vietnam's final dynasty, the House of Nguyen, Hue houses the royal tombs of the Nguyen monarchs, which have been restored as a tourist attraction.⁹ Nestled close to the Perfume River, Hue is near the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) and was subsequently the site of some of the bloodiest fighting during the 1968 Tet Offensive. Communist forces were able to hold the

³ *Hanoi: City of the Rising Dragon*. Boudarel, Georges and Nguyen Van Ky. "Chapter 1: A City that Remembers [p. 16]." 2002. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield.

⁴ Vietnam Pathfinder. "Saigon-HoChiMinh City." 2007. http://vietnampathfinder.com/Vietnam_Tours-Vietnam_Travel-e-KnowingVietnam_803-Saigon-Hochiminh_City.html

⁵ Encyclopædia Britannica. "Ho Chi Minh City." 2009. <http://search.eb.com/eb/article-9040630>

⁶ Encyclopædia Britannica. "Haiphong." 2009. <http://search.eb.com/eb/article-9038816>

⁷ Q and A Encyclopedia.com. "...Brief History of Haiphong." 2009. <http://qanda.encyclopedia.com/question/brief-history-haiphong-88397.html>

⁸ AsiaRooms.com. "History of Hue." 2009. <http://www.asiarooms.com/travel-guide/vietnam/hue/hue-overview/history-of-hue.html>

⁹ Vietnam Royal Tourism. "Hue City." 2006. http://www.relaxindochina.com/hue_vietnam.htm

city for 25 days, flying their flag from atop the Citadel, which had served as the imperial palace.

Danang

Danang is a major port in the central region and was developed by the French to also serve landlocked Laos. Danang played a prominent role during the Vietnam War due to the presence of a large American airbase. In 1975, the city was the scene of utter confusion after the Saigon government ordered its troops to abandon Hue to Northern forces. Simultaneously, Quang Ngai, to the south of Danang, had already fallen to the communists, effectively cutting the beleaguered Republic of Vietnam (RVN) in two. After the war, sales of scrap metal from the base helped revive the local economy.¹⁰ Since then, the city has been restored as a regional port.

History

The Origins of the Vietnamese People

Some 5,000 years ago much of what is present-day northern Vietnam was underwater. As the sea receded, the area was settled by humans. According to ancient myth, Vietnamese are descended from dragons and fairies.¹¹ The patriarch was the Dragon Lord, who fathered a hundred children with a mountain princess named Au Co, half of whom went back to sea to live in their father's water palace while the land-based half returned to the mountains with their mother. Sometime in the 7th century B.C.E., one of these children became the first king of the Vietnamese people, the first of the 18 kings who figure in myths and are venerated in village temples. The last of the Hung Kings is said to have committed suicide after being vanquished by a local rival, the new king An Duong, who then established the Kingdom of An Lac. According to lore, he prevailed with the aid of a Golden Turtle God who would reappear later when his assistance in defending the Vietnamese people was required.¹²



Emperor's reading room, Hue

In 208 B.C.E., An Lac was conquered by a kingdom in southern China known as Nan Yueh in Chinese and Nam Viet in Vietnam. The plains of the Red River Delta became a colonial province of this kingdom, although initially it had a limited affect on daily life and local leadership. As Chinese administrators became more numerous, the demands for conformity multiplied, sparking revolts, including one led by the Trung sisters who

¹⁰ *Vietnam in Pictures*. Taus-Bolstad, Stacy. 2003. Twentieth Century Books.
http://books.google.com/books?id=3U014Ik_cvAC&pg=PT20&lpg=PT20&dq=danang+population&source=bl&ots=i3nB0WZqxR&sig=Rkk82pnd9i2-TsfpH6UGdcGfIGk&hl=en&ei=vKa1SYrTKZm0sQPHeDsCA&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=1&ct=result

¹¹ Haivenu. "Vietnam: Myths and Legends." 16 August 2007. <http://www.haivenu-vietnam.com/vietnam-culture-myths.htm>

¹² University of Richmond. "Vietnam's Ancient Past: Co-Loa and its Legend." No date. <http://facultystaff.richmond.edu/~ebolt/history398/Co-LoaAndItsLegend.html>

committed suicide rather than live under Chinese rule. This act immortalized them in story and legend.¹³

When China plunged into chaos during the Tang Dynasty, the Vietnamese were able to assert their independence in 939 B.C.E. They were still required to pay tribute to the Chinese emperor but the Chinese administrators were withdrawn. The Chinese would continue to make incursions into Vietnam and those who resisted, like the Trung Sisters, would be similarly lauded as cultural heroes. In the early 13th century, Genghis Khan's Mongol army was driven back by Tran Hung Dao, whose name has been memorialized by major thoroughfares and monuments.¹⁴

System of Imperial Governance Adopted

Leadership in traditional Vietnam rested on two distinct concepts: the indigenous tradition of spirit mediation, and a heavily Sinicized (Chinese-influenced) system of imperial government headed by an emperor whose legitimacy derived from his ability to provide peace and prosperity, signaling satisfaction from the spirit world. The court was staffed by those who had passed through a series of rigorous exams.¹⁵ Most early monarchs were soldiers whose leadership was based largely on battlefield prowess. This is embodied in the tale told to children of Le Loi, the 15th-century emperor whose encounter with the Turtle God (*Kim Qui*), said to live in Hoan Kiem Lake in downtown Hanoi, blessed him with a magic sword to slay the Chinese invaders.¹⁶



Population pressure drove southward expansion and expanded the boundaries of the kingdom. In the latter decades of the 18th century, Vietnam was nominally ruled by rival dynasties, the Trins in the North and the Nguyens in the South. During this time, Vietnam was dominated by the Tay Son Rebellion. Led by three brothers, the Tay Son movement reflected peasant dissatisfaction with the prevailing order, particularly high levels of taxation. The leaders developed a following through the slogan, "Seize the property of the rich and distribute it to the poor."¹⁷ They also created rights for women and a new tax system, which was perceived as fairer by their followers, thus resurrecting attributes of a pre-Sinicized Vietnam.¹⁸ The movement was eventually weakened by internal conflicts over who should succeed the original leaders.

¹³ Look at Vietnam. "Two Trung Sisters' Uprising Marked." 1 February 2009. <http://www.lookatvietnam.com/2009/02/two-trung-sisters-uprising-marked.html>

¹⁴ AsiaRooms.com. "Tran Hung Dao Street Hue." 2009. <http://www.asiarooms.com/travel-guide/vietnam/hue/things-to-do-in-hue/shopping-in-hue/tran-hung-dao-street-hue.html>

¹⁵ *Understanding Vietnam*. Jamieson, Neil. "Chapter 1: How the Vietnamese See the World [p. 9]." 1993. Berkeley: University of California Press.

¹⁶ Asian Turtle Conservation Network. "The Legend of the Hoan Kiem Turtle." No date. http://www.asianturtlenetwork.org/library/news_articles/The_legend_of_the_Hoan_Kiem_Turtle.html

¹⁷ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. "The Tay Son Rebellion." 1987. <http://countrystudies.us/vietnam/13.htm>

¹⁸ *Comparative Sociology*. Dalton, Russell et al. "Social Relations and Social Capital in Vietnam: The 2001 World Values Survey. [p. 8]." 2007.

<http://www.democ.uci.edu/resources/virtuallibrary/vietnam/vietnam02.pdf>

In 1802, Nguyen Anh, the sole member of the ruling Nguyen family who had not been killed by members of the Tay Son movement, enlisted the assistance of French mercenaries to proclaim himself emperor. An extension of the already actively growing French missionary and commercial presence, this strategic move was one that neither the Tay Son rebels nor the Trinh in the North were able to challenge.¹⁹ His immediate goal was the restoration of an absolute monarchy governed through an imperial bureaucracy in the central city of Hue.

In effect, this represented a revival of Confucianism as the means to reestablish order in an unruly land. Confucius viewed deference to moral authority as the means to create a stable society, a philosophy that deeply influenced earlier monarchs. Nguyen scholars envisaged the reemergence of Confucian values as a tool to diminish the military's role and consolidate power as well as an ideological bulwark against the growth of Buddhism and Christianity.²⁰ Yet officials in the Nguyen court had to deal with disparate problems such as “[c]lan loyalty, spirit worship and patron-client relations,” which all served to muddy the waters of Confucianism.²¹

French Colonial Rule

The 19th century brought Vietnam into the world economy. Nguyen Anh's successors were too weak to resist French demands and Paris colonized Vietnam in stages, incorporating it as “Indochine” which included Cambodia and Laos. In the South, where the French influence was most deeply felt, colonial authorities sought to reduce costs by imposing a system of commercial property rights. This included the privatization of land into large tract holdings, effectively disenfranchising farmers who had presumptive tenure. By 1930, 57% of the rural population in the South consisted of landless peasants employed as wage laborers on large estates.²²

Spurred further by the French abolition of the indigenous education system, clandestine resistance began to gain momentum. There were a number of nationalist groups whose numbers swelled as the French administrative bureaucracy expanded. The communists had the advantage of being able to slip across the border into China, then undergoing its own communist revolution, when they faced arrest in Vietnam.²³ Ho Chi Minh, who would come to prominence as leader of the communist effort, spent the final years of his lengthy exile in Hong Kong and mainland China.

¹⁹ Windows on Asia. “Vietnamese Independence (950–1859).” No date.

<http://www.asia.msu.edu/seasia/Vietnam/History/VietnameseIndependence.html>

²⁰ *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*. Tarling, Nicholas. 1999. Cambridge University Press.

http://books.google.com/books?id=wvaQU3lj4IC&pg=PA198&lpg=PA198&dq=vietnam+confucian+nguyen+court&source=bl&ots=aM2aU8wcQl&sig=PXp5SPuMgxIWWTM5ztD1MSPPeOA&hl=en&ei=4BwoSgOfhJQH1fWU3gc&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=4

²¹ *Shadows and Winds: A View of Modern Vietnam*. Templer, Robert. “Chapter 14: China Lite [p. 292].” 1999. New York: Penguin Books.

²² Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. “Vietnam: Colonial Administration.” 1987.

<http://countrystudies.us/vietnam/16.htm>

²³ Center for Southeast Asia Studies, Northern Illinois University. Wilson, Constance. “Colonialism and Nationalism in Southeast Asia.” 1999. <http://www.seasite.niu.edu/crossroads/wilson/colonialism.htm>

World War II and the Japanese occupation had a profound effect on Vietnam, although the Japanese left the French in control of day-to-day affairs and no major battles took place on Vietnamese soil. Yet France was badly weakened by the war and unable to assert the degree of authority it had imposed earlier. Thus, the French sought to encourage patriotic²⁴ loyalty in order to combat encroaching Thai, Chinese, and Japanese forces.



Courtesy of Wikipedia
French paratroopers at Dien Bien Phu

For the first time, the French brought Vietnamese citizens into the civil services as equals. After the war, the Vietnamese proved reluctant to return to their earlier subordinate status. The repressive French policies during this pivotal period turned patriotism into an invigorated nationalist movement under the championship of Ho Chi Minh.²⁵ Under his leadership, the communists were able to challenge French authority. The Viet Minh, a revolutionary organization established by Ho Chi Minh in China, was the conduit for change. By allowing its communist ideology to take a backseat to the call for national liberation, it was able to gain support. The Viet Minh prevailed against French forces at Dien Bien Phu in the spring of 1954, a victory credited to General Vo Nguyen Giap, who would remain the North's chief military strategist.

Vietnam Divided Into North and South

While the final battle raged at Dien Bien Phu, an international conference was convening in Geneva to end the fighting. The subsequent agreement partitioned the country between a communist North and a non-communist South. Partisans chose to live in the place that reflected their ideological convictions, creating what has been described as competing “clusters of hostility” that would not be resolved by the ballot box as stipulated at Geneva.²⁶ In the North, Ho Chi Minh and his communist comrades set about creating a socialist society known as the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN). A brutal but effective land reform program left the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), which succeeded the Viet Minh, firmly in control and sent an estimated half a million Northern inhabitants, disproportionately Catholics, south.

In the South, however, there was no single source of authority. The fledgling state of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) found itself competing with a communist insurgency named National Liberation Front (NLF), informally known as the Viet Cong. The NLF's goal was to reunify the country under Hanoi's leadership. Ngo Dinh Diem, a devout Catholic and staunch anti-communist who had returned from a lengthy exile after the war, was the first president. The U.S. committed itself to providing his government with the resources necessary for the peasantry to have a stake in defending the RVN from a communist

²⁴ Patriotism is defined here as “the civic duties of subjects and citizens to the colonial empire.”

²⁵ *Youth Mobilization in Vichy Indochina and its Legacies, 1940–1970*. Raffin, Anne. “Introduction and Overview [p. 3].” 2005. Lexington Books.

²⁶ *Understanding Vietnam*. Jamieson, Neil. “Chapter 4: The End of Colonialism and the Emergence of Two Competing Models for Building a Modern Nation, 1940–1954 [p. 233].” 1993. Berkeley: University of California Press.

takeover. Vietnam, in effect, became a type of test case in which the U.S. would demonstrate its ability to create noncommunist allies among newly independent states.²⁷

Counterinsurgency and the Strategic Hamlet Program

Southern Vietnam was wracked by inequalities in land ownership. In 1954, 1% of the population owned approximately 40% of the paddy land.²⁸ The efforts of the Diem government to address this problem paled in comparison to the NLF's practice of redistributing landlord holdings. To deny the NLF access to the peasantry from which it was drawing recruits, in late 1961 the U.S. initiated the Strategic Hamlet Program. The



Houses in southern Vietnam

program was described as “a comprehensive combination of coercive, organizational, and assistance measures that would simultaneously drive the Front away, reestablish government control and provide the peasants with a better material life.”²⁹

Members of the Kennedy administration saw this as a way to win the war without a large troop deployment. From the point of view of President Diem, who placed his brother in charge of the program, it would give his government more control over the rural populace and the ability to develop patronage networks. This illuminated the essential contradiction that would dog the U.S. effort: Saigonese officials were encouraged to carry out programs intended to bring social and economic reform and thus garner popular support. However, these efforts were undertaken to perpetuate the flow of American aid in order to maintain control over it.³⁰

Hamlets were the lowest administrative level, comprised of several houses within an agricultural settlement. Between three and five hamlets made up one village. In 1962, there were approximately 12,000 hamlets in South Vietnam.³¹ Saigon set benchmarks in

²⁷ *Inventing Vietnam: The United States and State Building, 1954–1968*. Carter, James. “Chapter 2: The Cold War, Colonialism, and the Origins of the American Commitment to Vietnam, 1945–1954 [p. 37].” 2008. New York: Cambridge University Press.

²⁸ *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and “Nation Building” in the Kennedy Era*. Latham, Michael. “Modernization at War: Counterinsurgency and the Strategic Hamlet Program in Vietnam [p. 161].” 2000. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

²⁹ *Dynamics of Defeat: The Vietnam War in Hau Nghia Province*. Bergerud, Eric. “Chapter 2: The Front Victorious: Hau Nghia Province Through 1965 [p. 50].” 1993. Boulder: Westview Press.

http://books.google.com/books?id=UcL6Y-9Ua84C&pg=PA50&lpg=PA50&dq=strategic+hamlet+program&source=bl&ots=uHU_i9lrdz&sig=KCrhZ6BTSokemcVrGU21NrihwMo&hl=en&ei=JdLxScDHEYaMtgPe3K36Cg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=10#PPA50,M1

³⁰ *New York Review of Books*. “Common Sense: An Exchange Between Authors.” 8 February 1973. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/9959>

³¹ *A Clash of Cultures: Civil-Military Relations During the Vietnam War*. Schwab, Orrin. “Chapter 2: Intervention [p. 20].” 2006. CT: Greenwood Press.

http://books.google.com/books?id=JSGoDkqP9zUC&pg=PA20&lpg=PA20&dq=strategic+hamlet+program+vietnam&source=bl&ots=mHepLNiuJv&sig=cikAEnFCYXAT2U-j7oI9RCekdRU&hl=en&ei=mvDwSb_ACJC6tgPWt_HTCg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=4

which the rate of construction was prioritized over effectively functioning units.³² Farmers were put to work fortifying hamlets. Contrary to what they had been led to expect, they were not paid for their labor. Moreover, traditional living patterns were disrupted; farmers in the South did not live in concentrated settlements. They were dispersed along the rice paddies and irrigation dikes.³³ Farmers who were forced to move into the fortified hamlets were allocated no land and had to travel back to their original homes to farm and maintain their ancestral graves. While checkpoints were manned during the day, residents found themselves exposed to NLF attacks after dark. Other hamlets fell under NLF control, reflecting the sympathies of residents.³⁴

The Republic of Vietnam Under Siege

By 1963 Diem, whose government had become increasingly repressive, had lost the confidence of Washington. Shortly thereafter the South Vietnamese military (ARVN), which was never happy with Diem's leadership, carried out a coup in which Diem and his brother were killed. His departure from the scene, however, did not temper the insurgency or usher in more competent leadership. Instead, his assassination set off a power struggle in which rivals within the Saigon government were more concerned with besting each other than addressing the communist threat.³⁵

Vietnam, after all, had no tradition of democracy. The emperor had relied on his moral authority to rule and the French comprised a primarily Catholic and French-speaking elite who served as a go-between with the local populace. There were no institutions through which a loyal opposition could make its voice heard in policy debates. As a historian observed, "[D]issent...expressed itself, instead, in conspiracies of small, clandestine groups distrustful of each other and the government."³⁶ Coup after coup followed.

The failure of the Strategic Hamlet Program portended a military response in the face of a strengthening communist insurgency. Military escalation disrupted rural life. Village rice stockpiles were destroyed to deny the enemy food. Many residents fled the bombings and took up residence in Saigon or other southern cities ill equipped to handle the influx of

³² eHistoryarchive, Ohio State University. "Why Did the Strategic Hamlet Project Fail?" 2009.

<http://ehistory.osu.edu/vietnam/essays/hamlets/0156.cfm>

³³ *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam*. Fitzgerald, Frances. "Chapter 3: The Sovereign of Discord [p. 123–24]." 1972 (reprint edition 2002). Boston: Back Bay Books.

[http://books.google.com/books?id=CSP2lQtoPFoC&pg=PA123&lpg=PA123&dq=strategic+hamlet+program+frances+fitzgerald&source=bl&ots=2ul1zdGq61&sig=wN-](http://books.google.com/books?id=CSP2lQtoPFoC&pg=PA123&lpg=PA123&dq=strategic+hamlet+program+frances+fitzgerald&source=bl&ots=2ul1zdGq61&sig=wN-_IUD3EbnRuuLFO6ZtXArWn40&hl=en&ei=F-)

[_IUD3EbnRuuLFO6ZtXArWn40&hl=en&ei=F-bxSbTNEJa6tgOs8uD7Cg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=6#PPA123,M1](http://books.google.com/books?id=CSP2lQtoPFoC&pg=PA123&lpg=PA123&dq=strategic+hamlet+program+frances+fitzgerald&source=bl&ots=2ul1zdGq61&sig=wN-_IUD3EbnRuuLFO6ZtXArWn40&hl=en&ei=F-bxSbTNEJa6tgOs8uD7Cg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=6#PPA123,M1)

³⁴ Freedom Daily, Future of Freedom Foundation. McElroy, Wendy. "A Lesson From Vietnam, Part 3."

March 2004. <http://www.fff.org/freedom/fd0403e.asp>

³⁵ HistoryNet.com. "The Assassination of Ngo Dinh Diem." 2008. <http://www.historynet.com/the-assassination-of-ngo-dinh-diem.htm>

³⁶ *Into the Quagmire: Lyndon Johnson and the Escalation of the Vietnam*. VanDerMark, Brian. "Chapter 1: To the Crossroads in Vietnam [p. 14]." 1995. New York: Oxford University Press.

http://books.google.com/books?id=vyTRW2_kV9cC&dq=vietnam+war+johnson+escalation&printsec=frontcover&source=bl&ots=EK1SKFfERf&sig=9GbesMpBWOeKp9PZ4tedaPzZYvI&hl=en&ei=jCjyScvJEYP8swProMTYCg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=3#PPA14,M1

people who had never ventured far from their village homes. Successive governments in the South proved unable to address the people's needs as they battled the insurgency.

The Saigon government was toppled in April 1975 by the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN). Leaders in Hanoi later expressed surprise at how quickly they were able to take control of the South as ARVN forces simply melted away.³⁷ Many high-ranking officials of the fallen regime and their families fled; the last U.S. helicopter departed only two hours before North Vietnamese tanks crashed through the gates of the Presidential Palace. The leadership that remained to greet them simply disappeared from view. Hanoi did not allow any type of transfer of power ceremony since it never regarded the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) as an autonomous entity.³⁸ Henceforth, in Vietnamese history books, it would be referred to as the Saigon puppet government.

The Establishment of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam

Northerners were entrusted with the enormous task of reunification. Southerners who had fought for the NLF and who were familiar with conditions in the South found themselves marginalized and removed from the decision-making process.³⁹ Initially, the communist leadership was concerned with identifying those who had collaborated with the Americans and those who had benefitted economically from their presence. Some 400,000 of the former were sent to reeducation camps while the latter, mainly prostitutes and their families, were sent to live in new economic zones where conditions were harsh.



© a14gtoplug / flickr.com
Vietnamese tank

There was also an ethnic cleansing campaign against the Chinese, who dominated commerce in Saigon. They were suspect both because of their ethnicity and dubious loyalty as Vietnam's relations with China worsened. Some were relocated to new economic zones, serving as an ethnic buffer along the Cambodian border, a move that enabled the new government to attack the unemployment problem by re-staffing their businesses with Vietnamese.⁴⁰ Others fled, either northward or via boat after being relieved of their valuables.⁴¹ The latter group was followed by ethnic Vietnamese who had been stripped of their property through a comprehensive collectivization campaign.

³⁷ Cold War International History Project. The Cold War Files. "People: Meet the decision-makers and major players." 2005.

<http://www.wilsoncenter.org/coldwarfiles/index.cfm?fuseaction=people.details&thisunit=0&peopleid=73>

³⁸ *Ending the Vietnam War: A History of America's Involvement in and Extradition from the Vietnam War*. Kissinger, Henry. "Chapter 14: The End of Vietnam [p. 554]." 2003. New York: Simon and Schuster.

³⁹ PBS. "The City: After Liberation." No date. <http://www.pbs.org/vietnampassage/City/city.after.html>

⁴⁰ *Vietnam: Past and Present*. SarDesai, D.R. 1998. "Chapter 9: Vietnam Relations with China [p. 148]." 1998. Boulder: Westview Press.

http://books.google.com/books?id=kuV2267_KDUC&pg=PA148&lpg=PA148&dq=ethnic+chinese+flee+saigon&source=bl&ots=oEj1gmRcOr&sig=zxB38pSVcSkpM2EaXvd79bXN0kY&hl=en&ei=65T4SYONHZKAtgOJm6DnDg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=10

⁴¹ *Growing up American: How Vietnamese Children Adapt to Life in the United States*. Zhou, Min and Carl Leon Bankston. "Chapter 1: The Scatterings of War [p. 27]." 1998. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

The government responded to repeated incursions into Vietnamese territory by Khmer Rouge forces with an invasion of Cambodia in late 1978 that toppled Pol Pot's regime and initiated a ten-year occupation. These decisions explain how reunified Vietnam's per capita gross national product (GNP) plunged from USD 241 in 1975 to USD 151 by 1981.⁴² Goods were rationed and queuing became a way of life for urban residents. Rice, the staple food item, was often of poor quality. As one Vietnamese man recollected, "After I brought the rice home, I opened the sack immediately. If it was not smelly, I felt so happy that full day."⁴³ By 1986 the economic situation had become so dire the economy was at risk of collapse. Confronting starvation, the government was forced to initiate market reforms of the agricultural sector in a policy known as "renovation" (*doi moi*) that subsequently expanded to other sectors of the economy.

The adoption of *doi moi* has made the free-wheeling South the engine of national economic growth. But it has done little to foster reconciliation between combatants on opposite sides of the ideological divide.⁴⁴ Those on the losing end remain bitter over Hanoi's efforts to eradicate symbols of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN). The national cemetery, which contains the coffins of South



Vietnamese military (ARVN) troops killed in action after 1966, for example, was vandalized and left in extreme disrepair.⁴⁵ Given the traditional Vietnamese emphasis on veneration of ancestors, this is a source of deep anguish for those with relatives buried there, particularly within the exiled community.⁴⁶ Vietnam has changed by jettisoning its command economy. However, under the Marxist ideology which remains the source of official legitimacy for single-party leadership, there is no way to view Southerners who fought against reunification under the communist government as anything other than puppets or bandits, relegating them, even in death, to the margins of society.⁴⁷

Government

The government of Vietnam has retained the features of a Marxist-Leninist state, in which the communist party has equal status with the government, encompassing central, provincial, district, and village levels.⁴⁸ At the central level, the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) is represented by the Politburo. Its 15 members are selected by the

⁴² *Communism and Development*. Bideleux, Robert. "Chapter 2: The Case for Village Communism: From Herzen and Bakunin to Chayanov and Gandhi [p. 69]." 1985. New York: Routledge.

⁴³ Asian Development Bank. "Economic Transition in Vietnam: *Doi Moi* to WTO [p. 7]." <http://www.adb.org/documents/reports/consultant/economic-transition-in-vietnam/default.asp>

⁴⁴ *New York Times*. Mydans, Seth. "A War Story's Missing Pages: Vietnam Forgets Those Who Lost." 24 April 2000. <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/04/24/world/a-war-story-s-missing-pages-vietnam-forgets-those-who-lost.html>

⁴⁵ *Vietnam Now: A Reporter Returns*. Lamb, David. 2003. New York: Public Affairs.

⁴⁶ The Returning Casualty Blog. "Bien Hoa Cemetery: The Last of its Kind in Vietnam." 7 January 2009. <http://vietremains.org/blog/?p=152>

⁴⁷ International Studies and Overseas Programs, UCLA. Intercom. Rambo, Terry. "Dilemmas of Development in Vietnam." January 1996. No URL.

⁴⁸ Globalex, New York University School of Law. Luu, Anh. "Update: Vietnam Legal Research." May/June 2008. <http://www.nyulawglobal.org/globalex/vietnam1.htm>

party's central committee, which is comprised of approximately 200 members. The government's National Assembly is the law-making body, staffed through elections every five years in which voters choose four out of five names on the ballot to fill approximately 500 seats. Candidates are typically nominated by official bodies and a small number may be non-party members.⁴⁹ In theory, the division of labor puts government officials in charge of administrative matters while the party is responsible for anything falling into the ideological realm. In reality, the government defers to the party on all matters.

Economy

Until the 2008 global economic downturn, Vietnam ranked only behind China as Asia's fastest growing economy. Market reforms created incentives for hard work and entrepreneurship while reducing official interference in the economy. Vietnam has become self-sufficient in food production and is the second biggest rice exporter in the world.⁵⁰ Aquaculture has also been a source of employment and export revenues along with textiles and clothing. The lack of an independent judiciary creates incentives for investment in quick return activities, although Vietnam's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in early 2007 has made the country more attractive to long-term investors. To off-set Vietnam's enormous trade imbalance with China, Hanoi is encouraging investment from its historic nemesis to the north. However, this is igniting internal fears that Beijing has a long-term strategy to re-colonize Vietnam through investment.⁵¹

Media

The media remains firmly under government control. Yet the media has been used by officials to enlist the general public in support of reforms in the face of bureaucratic opposition.⁵² While reporting on the wrongdoings of low-level officials is tolerated, discussing the wrongdoings of those closer to the top is much riskier. Recently, some reporters who covered one of the biggest corruption scandals in Vietnam found themselves jailed. After reporting that millions of dollars of public money was used to bet on European soccer matches, they were subsequently arrested after a high-ranking member of the government was cleared of charges.⁵³



⁴⁹ Reuters. "FACTBOX: National assembly elections in Vietnam." 17 May 2007. <http://www.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUSKUA72197320070517>

⁵⁰ Flexnews. Reuters. "Vietnam 2008 Rice Exports Set to Top Forecasts." 12 March 2008. <http://www.flex-news-food.com/pages/20791/rice/Vietnam/vietnam-2008-rice-exports-set-top-forecasts.html>

⁵¹ Time. Overland, Martha Ann. "In Vietnam, New Fears of a Chinese 'Invasion.'" 16 April 2009. <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1891668,00.html>

⁵² *Renovating Politics in Contemporary Vietnam*. Abuza, Zachary. "Chapter 4: The Battle Over Intellectual Freedom and Freedom of the Press [p. 133]." 2001. Boulder: Lynne Rienner. http://books.google.com/books?id=KXu4dQg3dXUC&pg=RA1-PA131&lpg=RA1-PA131&dq=freedom+of+the+press+vietnam&source=bl&ots=chrFH-U2GI&sig=DPGrJfkH0YjsuTmCzLVD9JyNpkE&hl=en&ei=0xXySf2DBJf0tAO8uKDnCc&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=3#PRA1-PA133,M1

⁵³ BBC News. Pham, Nga. "Focus on Vietnam's Press Freedom." 6 June 2008. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7437343.stm>

Doi moi has forced print media to recoup costs rather than relying on state subsidies to cover printing and circulation costs.⁵⁴ This has led to an expansion of tabloid-type coverage and fashion and decorating tips, which people are willing to pay for in either print or pay-per-view formats. Profiles of those who have prospered in the private economy are popular with those looking to replicate their success.⁵⁵

Ethnic Groups and Languages

Vietnamese

Ethnic Vietnamese (*Kinh*) are the dominant group in Vietnam, comprising approximately 86% of the population while the rest is divided among 53 officially recognized minority groups.⁵⁶ Their lives traditionally revolved around the cultivation of wet rice, which did not necessitate travel outside the village except in times of conflict. As a Vietnamese-American observed about his ancestral village in the Red River Delta, “What riches it had, it yielded solely to sweat and toil. It had known centuries of peasant hands.”⁵⁷



The honorable path out of the village entailed passing exams to enter government service which conferred social prestige and larger tracts of land. This required knowledge of *chu nom*, Vietnam’s original script that used Chinese characters. Words directly imported from Chinese were borrowed without modification. Vietnamese words used two characters: one to convey the meaning and the other to convey the pronunciation.⁵⁸

Chu nom was banned in 1920 by the French colonial government. It was officially replaced by a Roman script known as *chu ngoc nom*, based on the French pronunciation of the Latin alphabet supplemented by diacritics to mark tones and certain vowels. It had been developed by Alexander de Rhodes, a French missionary, in the 17th century.⁵⁹ While the adoption of *chu ngoc nom* made it easier to increase literacy levels, it also cut the people off from their archival past since few Vietnamese continue to study *chu nom*.

⁵⁴ ASEAN Mass Communication and Studies Center. “Sailing the Reform Boat Since Doi Moi: The Case of the Press in Ho Chi Minh City.” 24–27 January 2002.

<http://utcc2.utcc.ac.th/localuser/amsar/about/document24.htm>

⁵⁵ Urban Studies. Turner, Sarah and Phuong An Nguyen. “Young Entrepreneurs, Social Capital and Doi Moi in Hanoi, Vietnam [p. 7].” March 2005.

<http://www.geog.mcgill.ca/faculty/turner/Urban%20Studies%202005%20Final%20full%20text%20as%20published.pdf>

⁵⁶ United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR). “Vietnam: Situation of Indigenous Minority Groups in the Central Highlands [p. 6].” June 2006. <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/pdfid/44c0f55a4.pdf>

⁵⁷ *The Eaves of Heaven: A Life in Three Wars*. Pham, Andrew. “Prologue: Ancestors [p. 1].” 2008. New York: Harmony Books.

⁵⁸ Suite101.com. Tran, Minh. “Nom Script: The Ancient Writing System of Vietnam.” 9 October 2007. http://east-asian-history.suite101.com/article.cfm/nom_script

⁵⁹ *New York Times*, Hanoi Journal. Perlez, Jane. “Deciphering the Code to Vietnam’s Old Literary Treasures.” 15 June 2006.

http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/15/world/asia/15hanoi.html?_r=1&oref=slogin

Chinese

The Chinese (*Hoa*), as elsewhere in Southeast Asia, are the backbone of commerce in Vietnam, making them handy scapegoats during economic downturns. They tend to keep their money liquid by investing in quick-return activities befitting their status as outsiders. Within Saigon's Cholon "Chinatown" District, they historically segregated themselves into smaller enclaves reflecting differences between those who had emigrated from Guangdong Province and those who had emigrated from neighboring Fujian Province, where different dialects were spoken.

Transplanted Chinese enjoyed a set of well-established organizations through which social capital was developed and used as a source of finance. In effect, members traded on the honor of their ancestry, rendering outsiders ineligible for membership and making full assimilation into Vietnamese society unnecessary despite intermarriage. While many Chinese immigrants have lived in Vietnam for generations, there has been a more recent influx of *Hoa* contractors, including support staff, to work on Chinese-invested projects. In early 2009, sources estimated there were 1–2 million Chinese living in Vietnam, or just over 1% of the population.⁶⁰ Although the growth rate has not significantly increased, fears have arisen that imported labor might not leave once the work is done.

Khmer

The Khmer community, known as Khmer Khrom, live in the lower reaches of the Mekong Delta and can claim deeper roots there than the Vietnamese. Originally, the area was part of Cambodia. Tensions between the two groups have built on historic differences and animosities. The Khmer practice Theravada Buddhism whereas *Kinh* Buddhists are adherents of the Mahayana Buddhist school. Khmer monks have lobbied for fairer treatment in resource distribution and have been detained by the government.⁶¹

The densely populated Mekong Delta has a large number of low-income people, many of whom are landless farmers, as well as a high rate of students dropping out of school. The Khmer Khrom are disproportionately poverty-stricken despite the national government's emphasis on providing opportunities to ethnic minorities for economic betterment.⁶² As of late spring 2009, reports indicated that significant human rights violations continued against the Khmer Khrom in the delta region.⁶³

⁶⁰ Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, U.S. Department of State. "Background Note: Vietnam." March 2009. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/4130.htm>

⁶¹ Voice of America. Heng Reaksmey. "Vietnam Urged to Respect Rights of Khmer Krom." 21 January 2009. <http://www.voanews.com/Khmer/archive/2009-01/2009-01-21-voa1.cfm?CFID=184924561&CFTOKEN=70259633&jsessionid=de30149a38fb8c7565ff1e154e761b375950>

⁶² Human Rights Watch. "On the Margins: Rights Abuses of Ethnic Khmer in Vietnam's Mekong Delta [p. 5]." January 2009. <http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/vietnam0109web.pdf>

⁶³ VOA News.com. "Vietnam Assailed Over Khmer Krom Rights." Sarada, Taing. 8 April 2009. <http://www.voanews.com/khmer/2009-04-08-voa2.cfm>

Montagnards

This name collectively refers to ethnic tribal people who live in the Central Highlands, not a specific ethnic tribe. Montagnards were recruited during times of conflict owing to their ability to survive in any type of terrain.

Those who fought for the RVN during the Vietnam War faced harsh consequences after the country was reunified under communist rule. More recently, the settlement of *Kinh* lowlanders in the Central Highlands has caused ethnic tensions and periodic violence.⁶⁴ The *Kinh* have greatly expanded coffee plantations introduced by the French while the Montagnards rely on the forest for their livelihood. Outsiders have viewed the conflict as largely a matter of control over resources, while Hanoi has claimed religious agitators are behind the unrest.⁶⁵ Many of the Montagnards are Protestants and their freedom of worship has been curtailed since demonstrations occurred in 2001.⁶⁶



Hmong

The Hmong reside in the mountains of northwest Vietnam as well as in neighboring Laos. They are believed to have originated in Siberia, before migrating through China, where they are known as Miao. They fled south to escape the predatory taxation of the imperial Chinese government.⁶⁷ Hmong are subdivided into a number of distinct tribes such as the Black Hmong and the Flower Hmong who wear different types of attire. Collectively, they are the largest tribal minority in the area around the town of Sapa, in northern Vietnam. Sapa has become a huge tourist draw since the Hmong, along with others ethnic minorities, continue to lead traditional lives, relying on slash-and-burn agriculture and hunting for their livelihood along with limited rice terracing.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ *New York Times*. "Vietnam Admits to More Unrest Among Minorities in Highlands." 9 February 2001. <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/02/09/world/vietnam-admits-to-more-unrest-among-minorities-in-highlands.html?n=Top/Reference/Times%20Topics/Subjects/F/Freedom%20of%20Religion>

⁶⁵ BBC News, Asia-Pacific. "Religion Blamed for Vietnam Unrest." 17 March 2001. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/1225790.stm>

⁶⁶ Human Rights Watch Briefing Paper. "New Assault on Rights in Vietnam's Central Highlands: Crackdown on Indigenous Montagnards Intensifies." January 2003. http://www.hawaii.edu/hivandaids/New_Assault_on_Rights_in_Vietnam_s_Central_Highlands_Crackdown.pdf

⁶⁷ Asia Pacific Viewpoint. "From Southwest China into Upper Indochina: An Overview of Hmong (Miao) Migrations [pp.119-130]" Michaud, Jean. Vol. 32, No.2. August 1997. http://www.caac.umontreal.ca/globalmedia/docs/publications/Michaud_APV-38-2-1997.pdf

⁶⁸ UCLA International Institute. Meneses, Rashaan. "Hmong: An Endangered People." 7 July 2004. <http://www.international.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=12590>

Chapter 2 Religion

Introduction

Vietnam's religious synthesis reflects the country's mixed cultural heritage. Its multiplicity of religious traditions is related more to the imperial and colonial eras than to ethnic diversity. The Kinh (Viet) people comprise over 80% of the population and have been the majority since ancient times.⁶⁹ However, Vietnam's network of water and land trade routes, in conjunction with its history as a tributary state and later as a colony, meant significant importation of foreign influence. This is evident in the widespread practice of what is known as the three religions (*Tam Giao*). An eclectic mix of Mahayana Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism along with animistic rites that include spirit cults and ancestral veneration rituals, elements of Tam Giao are visible in relics found countrywide.



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Pagoda in Cholon

Although traditional Confucianism has no fundamental spiritual component, its rituals serve to solidify the core of Tam Giao. Further, it provides a practical model for benevolent behavior and good governance. At the local level, dedication to self-cultivation—right action, right thought, and right relationships—serves to better the individual and thus society. Honoring hierarchal relationships reduces moral turpitude and facilitates harmony between individuals. One's proper place is learned in the relationship between father and son,⁷⁰ and this serves as the basis for all societal roles.⁷¹ By contrast, Buddhism offers adherents the prospect of worshipping as equals in a universe where everyone must prepare for rebirth. As one scholar summarizes, "Confucianism was a social order defined by culture and history; Buddhism was a faith relevant to all times and to all men, no matter what their circumstances."⁷² Taoism stresses the importance of living in harmony with nature and is compatible with existing animist beliefs.

During the Ly (1010–1225) and Chen (1225–1400) Dynasties, all three Tam Giao religions were incorporated into imperial exams administered to select court officials.⁷³

⁶⁹ Central Intelligence Agency. *The World Factbook*. "Vietnam." 14 May 2009. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/print/vm.html>

⁷⁰ The "Father and Son" relationship denotes the explicit sense of hierarchy and implicit subservient role of women in Confucianism.

⁷¹ Deakin Law Review. Gillespie, John. "Globalisation and Legal Transplantation: Lessons From the Past." 2001. <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/DeakinLRev/2001/5.html>

⁷² *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and Americans in Vietnam*. Fitzgerald, Frances. "Chapter 3: The Sovereign of Discord [p. 132]." 1972 (2002 reprint). Boston: Back Bay Books.

⁷³ Google Books. *Southeast Asia: A Historical Encyclopedia, from Angkor Wat to East Timor* [p. 1297]. Ooi, Keat Gin. 2004. New York: Clio Books. http://books.google.com/books?id=QKgraWbb7yoC&pg=PA1297&lpg=PA1297&dq=tam+giao+imperial+exams&source=bl&ots=3VsSKb7aW_&sig=JvyQFr-ee3uKyDfYiWT7jJPb8gk&hl=en&ei=rVAASob1MKG8tAOvsaD5BQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1#PPA1295,M1

Throughout the imperial period, Buddhism and Confucianism competed for imperial favor. Initially Buddhism had the upper hand. In the 11th century a Ly Emperor decreed that a temple be built in every new village established as a result of *Nam Tien*, or the southward migration.⁷⁴ The temple became a symbol of territorial integration. However, as the empire expanded, Buddhism was displaced by Confucianism, which offered the means to organize an administrative hierarchy.

Influence of Religion on Daily Life

Ancestral altars are found in almost all ethnic Vietnamese (*Kinh*) homes, as well as those of ethnic Chinese (*Hoa*). This has been attributed to the influence of Confucianism with its emphasis on filial piety (*hieu*).⁷⁵ Other contributions of Confucianism still can be seen in the social context. Various festivals and anniversaries require acts of reverence in memorial of the deceased. However, some Vietnamese scholars believe this practice relegates Vietnamese women to subordinate social status. In Confucian households, a woman has traditionally been expected to be obedient throughout her life—to her father, husband, and even her eldest son if she outlives her husband.⁷⁶



© remittance girl flickr.com
Small street altar in Saigon

Vietnamese pay regular homage to their forebears through prayer, and conduct elaborate ceremonies to commemorate the anniversary of someone's passing (*gio*). The purpose of ancestor veneration (*tho cung ong ba*) is to ensure the continued well-being of the departed as well as their favorable disposition toward descendants whose lives they have the ability to influence.⁷⁷ Toward this end food morsels, fruit, and tiny cups of tea are refreshed on a daily basis in front of photographs of the deceased and ancestral tablets. Many households also place a Taoist eight-symbol diagram by the front door, which is believed to keep evil forces at bay.

Modern Vietnamese history has been characterized by a confluence of expanding market relations, migration, urbanization, and warfare. This enabled folk religion to flourish as symbols took on new meanings in different contexts. The Goddess of Mercy known as Quan Am, for example, was historically rendered as a Madonna and child, embodying the

⁷⁴ Ask Asia, Asia Society. Hue-Tam Ho Tai. "Background Essay: Religion in Vietnam: A World of Ghosts and Spirits." March 1985. <http://www.askasia.org/teachers/essays/essay.php?no=5>

⁷⁵ Bates College, Reflective Journal by Chloe. "A Short Reflection Essay on Vietnam Understanding." 2008. <http://www.bates.edu/x176572.xml>

⁷⁶ Bureau of Naval Personnel, Chaplains Division, U.S. Department of the Navy. 1967. *The Religions of South Vietnam in Faith and Fact*. "Chapter 3: Confucianism in Vietnam [p. 12]." <http://sacred-texts.com/asia/rsv/rsv06.htm>

⁷⁷ *San Jose Mercury News*. Arnett, Elsa. "Spirit Callers Help Deceased Guide the Living." 25 February 2001. <http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/Den/5908/custom/goihon.html>

hopes of women without male children.⁷⁸ Yet she is also worshipped for her ability to protect children, such as those separated from their parents.⁷⁹

Mahayana Buddhism

Buddhism spread from India to China before migrating from China to Vietnam's Red River Delta region in approximately the 2nd century C.E. It spread from India to the southern Mekong Delta area some time between the 3rd and 6th centuries. The Chinese version, Mahayana Buddhism, established itself in Vietnam, whereas the Indian version, Theravada Buddhism, was confined mostly to the Khmer-controlled southern delta region.

Their difference lies in their views of Gautama Buddha: the Mahayana school teaches that Siddhartha Gautama was only one of many enlightened *Bodhisattvas*,⁸⁰ while Theravada adherents believe that Gautama was the one-and-only enlightened one. The Mahayana school offers laypeople the prospect of attaining nirvana whereas Theravadans believe that only ordained monks and nuns can do so.⁸¹ Thus the distinction between the monastic community (*sangha*) and society is much less pronounced in Vietnam than in countries where Theravada Buddhism dominates.

Mahayanists have an ethic of compassionate service. Those who have achieved enlightenment will choose to not selfishly abandon humanity, but instead remain to assist others. This occurs when they are about to enter nirvana and glance at the world they have left behind. Overcome with compassion for human suffering, they feel compelled to remain to work for the salvation of humanity.⁸² They become a *Bodhisattva*; in statues they are depicted as having many arms, to help others.

Within Mahayana Buddhism, two schools exerted the greatest influence on the Vietnamese: Pure Land (*Tinh Do*) on the average person and Zen (*Thien*) on the monastic

⁷⁸ Center for Southeast Asian Studies, UCLA. Tran, Nung Tuyet. "Feminizing the Orthodox: Images of Quan Am and the Virgin Mary in Seventeenth Century Nom Texts." 18 May 2004.

<http://www.international.ucla.edu/cseas/events/showevent.asp?eventid=1719>

⁷⁹ Bureau of Naval Personnel, Chaplains Division, U.S. Department of the Navy. 1967. "Legend of Quan Am." <http://www.sacred-texts.com/asia/rsv/rsv27.htm>

⁸⁰ The term *Bodhisattva* has various definitions as there are various gradations of distance along the path toward enlightenment. The *Mahayana* sense is of one who has achieved a certain level of enlightenment but has not completely shed attachment to this incarnation for purposes of aiding others. For a further discussion see: *Sources of Chinese Tradition: From Earliest Times to 1600*. by William Theodore de Bary, et al. "Introduction to Buddhism [pp. 418–419]." Columbia University Press. 2000.

⁸¹ Google Books. *Encyclopedia of Religion and War*. Palmer-Fernandez, Gabriel. "Buddhism, Mahayana [p.47]." 2004. Taylor and Francis. http://books.google.com/books?id=WZdDbmxe_a4C&pg=PA47&lpg=PA47&dq=mahayana+buddhist+lay+person+nirvana&source=bl&ots=yaYd-MyBby&sig=tpafQhHsy0P4I1ASS7uHH11I2n0&hl=en&ei=0Rb_Sc6YLqiUtgPsqsTIAQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=4

⁸² Ask Asia, Asia Society. Hue-Tam Ho Tai. "Background Essay: Religion in Vietnam: A World of Ghosts and Spirits." March 1985. <http://www.askasia.org/teachers/essays/essay.php?no=5>

community.⁸³ More than any other schools of Buddhism, Zen stresses the importance of the enlightenment experience and encourages intellectual analysis of religious scripture.⁸⁴ Pure Land emphasizes prayer and faith, not rigorous textual study or meditation. As a result, few Vietnamese outside the *sangha* are versed in Buddhism's elaborate cosmology.

Taoism

Taoism as a religion originated in China and is based on the philosophy of Lao-Tze, a reputed contemporary of Confucius who lived during the 6th century B.C.E. Practitioners of Taoism the religion believe that harmony is achieved by finding one's place in the natural world—comprised of the opposite forces of yin and yang—rather than constructing an artificial world, which disturbs the five elements of metal, wood, earth, water, and fire.



© Charles Kelley
Taoist temple in the Mekong Delta region

Humans are not born for the purpose of finding pleasure by creating a world to satisfy their individual desires. Rather, if one is physically present in this world, there has been some discord in the natural flow or “The Way” (*Tao*). They must atone for sins committed during previous incarnations to lead lives compatible with the Cycle of Existence in which the five elements are in harmony. To do so, adherents must minimize their desire to exploit nature for material gain.

According to Taoists, the Emperor of Jade (*Ngoc Hoang*) presides over a world in which divinities, genies, and spirits are reincarnated forces of nature. Nature itself undergoes a continuous process of change driven by the dynamic tension between yin (*am*) and yang (*duong*).⁸⁵ As a result, Taoism relies heavily on divination, seeking the guidance of supernatural sources to help them decide when to initiate major changes in their lives without disturbing nature. Taoists believe that, ultimately, transcendence of religion, science, and all endeavors of human activity will leave only the immanence of Tao.

Catholicism

Catholicism was introduced in the 16th century by European missionaries. Pope Alexander II established two provisional administrations in Vietnam in 1659 and the first Vietnamese priests were ordained nine years later.⁸⁶ The missionaries were able to establish Catholicism despite the indigenous practice of ancestor worship. Such outward expressions of native spirituality were at odds with Church doctrine. Catholicism differed

⁸³ *Print and Power: Confucianism, Communism, and Buddhism in the Making of Modern Vietnam*. McHale, Shawn. “Chapter 5: From Popular Visions of Paradise in the Buddhist Revival [p. 146].” 2004. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

⁸⁴ The Art Institute of Chicago. “Taoism and the Arts of China.” 2000. <http://www.artic.edu/taoism/glossary.php>

⁸⁵ United Communities of Spirit. Chung, Douglas. “Taoism: A Portrait.” Revised 1995. <http://origin.org/ucs/sbcr/taoism.cfm>

⁸⁶ Union of Catholic Asian News. O’Connell, Gerard. “Cardinal Man Says 2010 Papal Visit To Vietnam Would Be ‘Good Idea.’” 5 June 2008. <http://www.ucanews.com/2008/06/05/cardinal-man-says-2010-papal-visit-to-vietnam-would-be-good-idea/>

from Tam Giao in other ways; its cohesive organizational structure, liturgy, and accumulated wealth, which is visible in places of worship.⁸⁷

Exchange 1: When do you pray?

Soldier:	When do you pray?	Khee now tay kow nguen?
Local:	We pray at noon.	choong toy kow nguen vow boo oy choo ah

The neo-Romanesque style Notre Dame Cathedral in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) is one such urban landmark. Hanoi’s St. Joseph’s Cathedral, built in 1886, is another structure that remains at the center of the main northern diocese.⁸⁸ Other cathedrals, particularly those in rural areas, incorporated elements of Buddhist architecture such as carved stone pillars and pagoda-style overhanging curved roofs. Rural worshippers continue to include the practices of Buddhists as well, burning incense and making offerings of fruit, flowers, and candy to Catholic saints.



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Notre Dame Cathedral,
Ho Chi Minh City

Buddhist Sects

Cao Dai

The Cao Dai sect was founded by Ngo Van Chieu, a civil servant of the French Cochinchina colonial administration. He is said to have received messages from the spirit referred to by the Taoist name, Duc Cao Dai, or “High Tower,” named as such to avoid imposing human characteristics on the Supreme Being.⁸⁹ After three years of study and prayer, he shared his spiritual revelations with others who began to worship with him. At the end of 1926, Duc Cao Dai purportedly instructed a small group of mediums to form a new religion. Of the mediums, Le Van Trung was appointed to serve as acting pope (*Giao Tong*).⁹⁰

Cao Dai’s structure is based on that of the Catholic Church, with a defined ecclesiastical hierarchy. Adherents believe all religions are one and worship a variety of Vietnamese and foreign deities—evident in the religion’s center, the ornate Great Divine Temple, where Lao-Tze, Gautama Buddha, and Confucius share altar space with Jesus Christ. Under the *doi moi* economic reforms, the temple, which is once again an active place of worship, has become a tourist draw as well. In the larger Danang area alone, there are an

⁸⁷ Google Books. *Religions and Society, Asia and the Middle East*. Calderola, Carlo, ed. Rambo, Terry. “Chapter 12: Vietnam: Searching for Integration [p. 421].” 1982. New York: Walter de Gruyter. http://books.google.com/books?id=R1ME01zxL98C&pg=PA424&lpg=PA424&dq=catholicism+vietnam+ancestor+worship&source=bl&ots=QVVh3wjTcQ&sig=rtbBCrrKu0ByI90HR2scoMDhExM&hl=en&ei=DpkJSrSIJ5mEtAPQvbytCQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1

⁸⁸ Lonely Planet Publications. *Asia: Vietnam*. “Hanoi Sights.” 2009. <http://www.lonelyplanet.com/vietnam/hanoi/sights>

⁸⁹ Religion Facts. Religions A–Z. “Cao Dai.” 2004–2009. http://www.religionfacts.com/a-z-religion-index/cao_dai.htm

⁹⁰ Religious Tolerance. “Caodaim (‘High Palace’): A Vietnamese-Centered Religion.” 20 October 2006. <http://www.religioustolerance.org/caodaim.htm>

estimated 50,000 Cao Dai adherents who worship amid a constant flow of tourists in the religion's second-largest temple in Vietnam.⁹¹

Hoa Hao

The Hoa Hao Buddhist sect was founded in 1939 by Huynh Pho So in the Mekong Delta, where Theravada Buddhism continued to command a following among the ethnic Khmer. He predicted the end of the world would come within a few years, a prediction that had credence since he had correctly predicted France would fall to Germany. Huynh was a charismatic individual whose followers attributed his survival of a deathly illness to special powers. He produced four volumes known as the Oracles (*Sam Giang*), which were written in vernacular Vietnamese and easily accessible to farmers with limited formal education.



Courtesy of Wikipedia
Huynh Phu So, founder
of Hoa Hao

The French colonial government looked upon the Hoa Hao as a cult, and attempted to imprison Huynh. He was later killed by the Viet Minh, the resistance group that prevented the restoration of French colonial authority after World War II.⁹² Hoa Hao village, ancestral home of Huynh Pho So, is referred to as the Holy Land (*Thanh Dia*) by adherents. It continues to attract pilgrims from the estimated three million followers who expect him to return to earth.

Religion and the Modern State

Cognizant of the role religious organizations could play in fomenting nationalist movements, the French colonial government restricted indigenous religious groups. Christian denominations were exempt from the active suppression. There was little resistance from the Buddhist *sangha*; each temple was essentially a self-contained community oriented toward celebrating Buddhist holidays, and the colonial government did not interfere with their activities.⁹³ These selective restrictions also remained in place in the South after the establishment of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN). Conversely, the Southern government closely monitored “public associations” to prevent the emergence of subversive communist organizations.

In 1957, the Saigon government, under the leadership of devout Catholic Ngo Dinh Diem, struck the annual commemoration of Buddha's birthday from the list of official RVN public holidays. This enraged Buddhists who responded with a much larger

⁹¹ Lonely Planet Publications. *Asia: Central Vietnam*. “Cao Dai Temple.” 2009.
<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/vietnam/central-vietnam/danang/sights/482088>

⁹² Google Books. *Southeast Asia: A Historical Encyclopedia From Angkor Wat to East Timor*. Kit Gin Ooi, ed. My Van-Tran, “Hoa Hao [p. 603].” 2004. ABC-Clio.
http://books.google.com/books?id=QKgraWbb7yoC&pg=PA603&lpg=PA603&dq=hoa+hao+buddhism&source=bl&ots=3VsTGdac-X&sig=5Xjn52vkxxMTDzZ_J7aS-EkRjN8&hl=en&ei=VtMjStnCBqiCtgOGteziCA&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=3

⁹³ Google Books. *Vietnam: Past and Present*. SarDesai, D.R. “Chapter 5: Roots of the Second Indochina War [p. 78.]” 2005. Boulder: Westview Press.
http://books.google.com/books?id=kuV2267_KDUC&pg=PA78&lpg=PA78&dq=buddhist+holidays+vietnam&source=bl&ots=oEj2grR7Vi&sig=hDHvsjg1orxzVjuS5bwb5cWQBx4&hl=en&ei=xJgISqbxJp6ktAPgpNzrCA&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1

celebration than in the past.⁹⁴ When Buddhist crowds assembled in Hue to celebrate the unrecognized birthday in 1963, the Catholic deputy chief of the province invoked a presidential decree that prohibited flying the Buddhist flags.⁹⁵ Police were dispatched to disperse the angry crowd and opened fire. Nine bystanders—one woman and eight children—were killed.

The Buddhist community was well aware that their peaceful protests against the Diem regime had little impact on their grievances, which only received modest mention in the international press. Many in Washington who were involved in bolstering the RVN dismissed Buddhists as passive and detached from worldly concerns.⁹⁶ Setting the wheels of change in motion, a 73-year old monk named Thich Quang Duc committed self-immolation on a busy Saigon street in front of an assembled crowd. The image of his body being engulfed in flames, after fellow monks had poured gasoline over him, shook the world. A witness observed, “As he burned he never moved a muscle, never uttered a sound, his outward composure in sharp contrast to the wailing people around him.”⁹⁷

The attention precipitated the overthrow of Diem and the rise of Buddhist activism during the war, which would include 36 other incidents of self-immolation by monks.⁹⁸ Suicide is considered immoral by Theravada Buddhists, but not by the Mahayana for whom the ancient Lotus Sutra remains one of the holiest texts.⁹⁹ In Chapter 23, the Bodhisattva Medicine King offers his own body to the Buddha by performing various acts of self-mutilation, included burning himself to underscore the importance of his message. Thich Quang Duc’s act was seen as one of self-sacrifice on behalf of the Vietnamese people.

To Marxists, religion is a response to material deprivation and social domination. Therefore many members of the government viewed it as a relic of a bygone era, and memorialized the incident in that way.¹⁰⁰ To those who came from the North to oversee the process of reunification in 1975, the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao sects were evidence of

⁹⁴ *Buddhism and Politics in Twentieth Century Asia*. Harris, Ian, ed. Do, Thien. “The Quest for Enlightenment and Cultural Identity [p. 271].” 1999. New York: Continuum Press.

⁹⁵ Google Books. *Vietnam, Past and Present*. SarDesai, D.R. “Chapter 5: Roots of the Second Indochina War [p. 84].” 2005. Boulder: Westview Press.

http://books.google.com/books?id=9MzMCqmGpdAC&pg=PA84&lpg=PA84&dq=buddha's+birth+hue+1963&source=bl&ots=k0UHSgdqzo&sig=QwE3xrT8rScj7u7Aw6-uGrrFtOE&hl=en&ei=8jn7SYJ_luClA9HkyfEB&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=4

⁹⁶ *America’s Miracle Man Saigon: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia*. Jacobs, Seth. “Introduction [p. 12].” 2004. Durham: Duke University Press.

⁹⁷ Spartacus International. “Karen Armstrong: Buddha.” No date.

<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/VNbuddhism.htm>

⁹⁸ Buddhism and Self-Immolation, UCLA. Slosberg, Aaron Romeo. “A Question of Violence: Buddhism and Acts of Self-Immolation during the Vietnam War.” 2004.

<http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/history/undergrad/pat/Journal2004/Slosberg.pdf>

⁹⁹ Massachusetts Institute of Technology. St. Clair, Richard. “The Wonderful Law of the Lotus Sutra.” 6 October 1989. <http://www.mit.edu/~stclair/lotus.html>

¹⁰⁰ Google Books. *Modernity and Re-Enchantment: Religion in Post-Revolutionary Vietnam*. Taylor, Philip. “Introduction [p. 9].” 2008. Lexington Books.

http://books.google.com/books?id=hxgoF9d80fUC&dq=religion+vietnam&printsec=frontcover&source=bl&ots=8gYwDZlhv1&sig=Gckp1fKb8g5xo2fS_TQ_e_VPpjs&hl=en&ei=Hnf_Se6_PJO6sgPA8_H8BQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=9#PPA12,M1

South Vietnam's decadence and drift beyond the Vietnamese cultural sphere. The government attributed the origins and tenure of these religious movements to decades under the control of a foreign-backed government. These two groups in particular were viewed as remnants of a feudal (*phong kien*) sociopolitical order rather than organizations that addressed spiritual needs.¹⁰¹

Although Hanoi displays the car that transported Thich Quang Duc to Saigon at the Thich Hue Monastery in Hue, it has always been leery of Buddhist activism, and therefore keeps the *sangha* on a tight leash.¹⁰² Monks are required to be part of the Vietnamese Buddhist Church (VBS), rather than the outlawed Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) that encompassed Theravada and Mahayana priests and had been established in the South in the aftermath of the public self-immolation. Leaders of the UBCV have been placed under temple arrest and even imprisoned for taking issue with official control over religious affairs. There have been splits within the leadership over whether to work with the government or resist it.



Thich Quang Duc car on display in Saigon

Catholics who remained active in-country after the abrupt end to French colonialism found life much more difficult. With the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in 1945, many Northern Catholics fled south to avoid persecution. The Catholic Church had 870 parishes in 15 dioceses in the South. In Ho Chi Minh City alone there were a half million adherents ministered to by 600 priests and 4,000 lay brothers and nuns.¹⁰³ The Vietnamese government then severed diplomatic ties with the Holy See and official church operations were shut down.¹⁰⁴ The government subsequently appropriated church property and priests were sent to be reeducated in the labor camps.¹⁰⁵

Through the conclusion of the Vietnam war, and the rise of the communist government, Catholics faced discrimination when seeking university enrollment and government appointments.¹⁰⁶ As a foreign expert observed, "As long as you play by the rules and are loyal to the regime, they'll leave you alone."¹⁰⁷ Religious groups found their ability to

¹⁰¹ *Goddess on the Rise: Pilgrimage and Popular Religion in Vietnam*. Taylor, Philip. "Chapter 1: Spiritualizing the Borders [39]." 2004. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

¹⁰² Swarthmore College. "Exploring the Wonders of Vietnam." January 2006. <http://www.swarthmore.edu/alumni/vietnam/0120.html>

¹⁰³ Encyclopedia of the Nations. Federal Research Division, U.S. Library of Congress. "Vietnam: Catholicism." 1987. <http://www.country-data.com/cgi-bin/query/r-14661.html>

¹⁰⁴ EWTN Global Catholic Network. "Benedict XVI Welcomes Vietnamese Prime Minister." 25 January 2007. http://origin.ewtn.com/news/blog.asp?blog_ID=1&blogposts_ID=158

¹⁰⁵ Christian Science Monitor. Montlake, Simon. "In Vietnam, Christianity Gains Quietly." 22 February 2006. <http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/0222/p06s01-woap.html>

¹⁰⁶ BBC News, International Version. Montlake, Simon. "Catholics find more freedom in Vietnam." 2 February 2006. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/4670614.stm>

¹⁰⁷ Time. Johnson, Kay. "The Fighting Monks of Vietnam." 2 March 2007. <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1595721,00.html>

provide social services to the poor severely circumscribed.¹⁰⁸ Hanoi has maintained its vigilance against the exploitation of religion to destabilize its authority.¹⁰⁹ This was evident as recently as the 2008 funeral of Thich Huyen Quang, leader of the UBCV, where attendance was restricted.¹¹⁰

Persecution notwithstanding, a number of developments indicate a shift in governmental policy. Vietnamese priests have once again been trained for the priesthood and numerous churches have re-opened. The number of Catholics is now second only to the Philippines in Asia.¹¹¹ Supported publicly by parishioners, the Hanoi Diocese has appealed to the government to cede back property confiscated over 60 years ago.¹¹² Perhaps most noteworthy, in early 2007 Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung’s delegation visited Pope Benedict XVI for a meeting in which they discussed restoring diplomatic relations.¹¹³

Buddhist Places of Worship

The difference between pagodas and temples is that pagodas were not constructed to worship Buddha and therefore contain no Buddhist statues. The One Pillar Pagoda in Hanoi, often used as a symbol of the country, is a shrine to the Goddess of Mercy, Quan Am.¹¹⁴

The layout of Buddhist temples (*Chua Viet*) typically are as single-story structures rather than multi-tiered towers. There is typically lavish use of dragon (*long*) imagery, as opposed to the snakes (*naga*) found in Theravada temples. Out in front there is usually a statue of Quan Am standing on a lotus leaf.



© Howe Winters
Monastery decorated for
Buddha's Birthday

Exchange 2: May I enter the pagoda?

Soldier:	May I enter the pagoda?	toy dok fep vow choo a Khong?
Local:	Yes.	vang

Buddhist temple grounds are usually adorned with gardens and a bell tower. Also present are sacred ponds containing live or sculpted turtles. Exterior temple walls may also be adorned with a Buddhist symbol that resembles a Nazi swastika. Though it looks the

¹⁰⁸ United Nations Public Administration Network. Abuza, Zachary. “Vietnam.” No date. <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/NISPAcee/UNPAN016211.pdf>

¹⁰⁹ Center for Religious Freedom, Hudson Institute. “Vietnam Still Pressuring Hmong Christians.” 4 April 2006.

http://crf.hudson.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=publication_details&id=4842&pubType=CRF_PressReleases

¹¹⁰ Human Rights Watch. “Government Attempt to Take Over Funeral Risks Confrontation.” 7 July 2008. <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2008/07/07/vietnam-don-t-interfere-buddhist-patriarch-s-funeral>

¹¹¹ EWTN Global Catholic Network. “Benedict XVI Welcomes Vietnamese Prime Minister.” 25 January 2007. http://origin.ewtn.com/news/blog.asp?blog_ID=1&blogposts_ID=158

¹¹² International Business Times. Politics and Policy: Asia-Pacific. “Catholic-Communist Landfight in Vietnam.” 24 January 2008. http://www.ibtimes.com/articles/20080124/catholic-communist-land-fight-in-vietnam_1.htm

¹¹³ EWTN Global Catholic Network. “Benedict XVI Welcomes Vietnamese Prime Minister.” 25 January 2007. http://origin.ewtn.com/news/blog.asp?blog_ID=1&blogposts_ID=158

¹¹⁴ Bluffton University. Sullivan, Mary Ann. “One Pillar Pagoda.” 2004. <http://www.bluffton.edu/~sullivanm/vietnam/hanoi/pillarpagoda/onepillar.html>

same from a distance, upon closer examination the swastika is a mirror image of an ancient Buddhist symbol that is almost always clockwise in orientation as opposed to the counterclockwise Nazi insignia.¹¹⁵

Exchange 3: Do I need to cover my head?

Soldier:	Do I need to cover my head?	toy kun faay cher daw Khong?
Local:	No.	Khong

Inside the main sanctuary there are three large Buddha statues depicting incarnations of the past, present, and future Buddha. Those who come to worship may also pray to other Gods. Mahayana’s enlightened deities are often venerated alongside various animist spirits.¹¹⁶ In addition, there may be an altar designated to worship the Emperor of Jade.



Exchange 4: Must I take off my shoes?

Soldier:	Must I take off my shoes inside the pagoda?	toy faay koo ee zaay zad Khee dee vow choo a Khong?
Local:	Yes.	vang

Unless it is a religious holiday, or the 1st or 15th day of the lunar month, worshippers may be sparse. Senior monks, who use the honorific *Thich* before their names, are less visible than young monks who are generally happy to give visitors a tour if their duties permit. If a monk answers your questions or gives you a tour, a donation to the temple is appreciated. Donation boxes are evident in worship areas.

Religious Holidays and Festivals

Buddha’s Birthday

Known internationally as Vesak and in Vietnamese as *Phong Sinh*, this public holiday falls on a full moon in either April or May and commemorates the life, enlightenment, and death of the Buddha.¹¹⁷ It is celebrated at temples across Vietnam where worshippers set free birds and release fish in the South and doves in the North, as a show of respect for Buddha.

Buddha’s birthday has been recognized by the UN as an international holiday since 1999. In 2008 Vietnam was selected to host the UN-sponsored Vesak Day celebrations. This

¹¹⁵ Religion Facts. The Swastika Symbol in Buddhism. 2004–2009. <http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/symbols/swastika.htm>

¹¹⁶ Encyclopedia of the Nations. Federal Research Division, U.S. Library of Congress. “Vietnam: Buddhism.” 1987. <http://www.country-data.com/cgi-bin/query/r-14660.html>

¹¹⁷ The Mahayana notion of *Mahaparinirvana* pertains to the final escape and disposition of the earth-bound vessel or body. See: Indopedia: *Mahayana_Mahaparinirvana_Sutra*. December 2004. http://www.indopedia.org/Mahayana_Mahaparinirvana_Sutra

decision elicited criticism due to the Hanoi government's restrictions on freedom of worship and harassment of monks affiliated with the banned UBCV organization.¹¹⁸

Ghost Festival

This holiday (*Vu Lan*) was inspired by one of Buddha's disciples after seeing his deceased mother suffering in the Buddhist equivalent of hell, where she had nothing to eat but fire while he was mediating. He attempted to give her a bowl of rice but it turned to ash before she could touch it. He asked Buddha's guidance on how to help his mother. Buddha advised him to gather others to pray for her. Their prayers proved so powerful that she, along with everyone else consigned to hell (including those who died violently), were released for the day and free to roam. Out of this came a tradition of feeding deceased ancestors, along with venerating mothers, on the 15th day of the 7th lunar month, which typically falls in August.¹¹⁹ While burning goods for the deceased, those whose mothers are living adorn their attire with a piece of red cloth, and those whose mothers are deceased affix a white one.



Courtesy of Wikipedia
Food offerings at the Ghost Festival

As personal income in Vietnam has risen and restrictions on religious celebrations have been lifted, festivities have expanded.¹²⁰ Descendants now honor their ancestors with paper models or votive merchandise of the things money can buy—cars, motorbikes, luxury homes, and brand-name clothing—in extravagant displays of filial piety.¹²¹ This trend cannot please the government, which wants people to invest their hard-earned money in productive activities. Nor does it sit well with members of the *sangha*, who feel worshippers have lost sight of the purpose of *Vu Lan*: to feed souls let out of hell for a day.¹²²

Christmas

The French introduced Christmas (*Giang Sinh*) when Catholicism had free reign prior to the First Indochina War. In the post-war era, the Vietnamese government's *doi moi* market reforms of the mid 1980s stimulated new interest in the seasonal observance. December 25th has since become a government-sanctioned public holiday.¹²³ Although Christmas is observed as a religious holiday by the Catholic minorities in Ho Chi Minh

¹¹⁸ Human Rights Watch. "Buddhists Remain Behind Bars While Vietnam Hosts UN Buddhist Celebration." 7 May 2008. <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2008/05/07/vietnam-religious-freedom-denied>

¹¹⁹ Asian Observer. "Ghost Month—Part 1." 5 August 2008. <http://www.asian-observer.com/2008/08/ghost-month.html>

¹²⁰ Samuel Popkin, based on fieldwork in Vietnam during the 1960s, was the first to observe that holidays and festivals, far from being quaint rituals, provide opportunities to demonstrate wealth and improve a family's social status. *The Rational Peasant: The Political Economy of Rural Society in Vietnam*. 1979. Berkeley: University of California Press.

¹²¹ *New York Times*. Mydans, Seth. "Inflation Delivers a Blow to Vietnam's Spirits." 23 August 2008. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/24/world/asia/24viet.html>

¹²² Luxury Travel Blog. "The Vu Lan Festival." 13 August 2008. <http://luxurytravelvietnam.com/blog/?p=537>

¹²³ AsiaRooms. "Christmas in Vietnam." 2009. <http://www.asiarooms.com/travel-guide/vietnam/vietnam-festivals-&-events/christmas-in-vietnam.html>

City and Hanoi, the government welcomes the revenue it generates. The non-Christian middle class increasingly partakes in the associated secular commercialism. Activities such as having children photographed with Santa and exchanging gifts with family and friends have made the holiday increasingly popular with younger generations.¹²⁴

¹²⁴ *Washington Post*, Associated Press. Stocking, Ben. "Vietnam Spends Christmas With Santa More." 21 December 2006. http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/12/21/AR2006122100714_pf.html

Chapter 3 Traditions

Introduction

Vietnamese traditions reflect the Confucian principle that social harmony can be achieved through deference to authority. The Vietnamese synthesis of diverse ethnicities and religious influences has incorporated the Taoist emphasis on finding harmony with the natural world. Thus, there is a sense that timely avoidance of or engagement in certain behaviors affect luck and fate. In January 2009, after an overloaded ferry sank on the eve of Tet (the Lunar New Year holiday), foreign reporters had difficulty confirming the details. Government officials did not want to make such a disaster the first topic of discussion for the new year, fearing it would cast a shadow over the year.¹²⁵

Numerous holidays are accompanied by secular traditions that have flourished in recent peacetime years. The Vietnamese propensity for singing, even spontaneously on occasion, may be connected to the tonal inflections of their language.¹²⁶ Thus karaoke, performed by individuals and small groups who croon to pop songs usually in rented small rooms, has become a hugely popular pastime in Vietnam. Unfortunately, the vices associated with nightlife have raised the concerns of authorities. Alarmed over increases in drug addiction and prostitution, the government asked for public input in March 2009 as it considered a ban on dancing, to reduce lawless behavior associated with all-night discos and karaoke venues.¹²⁷ By contrast, films depicting women singing folk songs—which they learned as children while they worked outdoors—are used to evoke nostalgia for a simpler past.¹²⁸



© Martha de Jong-Lambrie
Tourists visit the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum

Honor and Values

Vietnamese view their own history as one of repelling foreign armies and ensuring harmony across the land. In effect, every Vietnamese is a soldier and no death is more deeply revered than those made on behalf of the fatherland. This view springs not from a cultural predisposition toward militarism, but rather the spirit of *chinh nghĩa* (just cause), “which connotes highly moral behavior rooted in rationality, compassion, and responsibility.”¹²⁹ For the Vietnamese, it explains why they were able to prevail repeatedly against enemies with superior firepower who outnumbered them.

¹²⁵ Global Post. Steinglass, Matt. “Drowning on Tet: Very Bad Luck.” 26 January 2009.

<http://www.globalpost.com/notebook/vietnam/090125/drowning-tet-very-bad-luck>

¹²⁶ George Mason University. Pham, Andrew. “Before the Sound of War: Exploring the Musical Traditions of Vietnam.” 3 May 2008. <http://www.jmu.edu/writeon/documents/2008/Pham.pdf>

¹²⁷ Global Post. Steinglass, Matt. “Footloose in Hanoi.” 9 May 2009.

<http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/vietnam/090428/footloose-hanoi>

¹²⁸ In the films *Three Seasons* (1999) and *Red River* (2009) the lone voice of a girl singing a folk song proves haunting to the men who hear it.

¹²⁹ Federal Research Division, U.S. Library of Congress. “Vietnam: The Tradition of Militancy.” December 1987. <http://www.country-data.com/cgi-bin/query/r-14724.html>

In the late 18th century, the leaders of the Tay Son Rebellion invoked *chinh nghĩa* to motivate the peasantry to rise up against the Le Dynasty.¹³⁰ While this effort was unsuccessful, *chinh nghĩa* was resurrected by the communist-led government. Specifically, Ho Chi Minh was able to fashion a national narrative that created continuity with past resistance figures like the Trung Sisters to mobilize support to drive out 20th century foreign invaders, first the French and then the Americans.¹³¹ Many northern villages had long worshipped deities that were associated with repelling the Chinese. It was easy to expand that to include the heroism of the war dead who had sacrificed themselves in the more recent quest for independence.¹³² After reunification, the Hanoi government created a monument at the site of the My Lai massacre intended to link the victims to the “great heroes of Vietnam’s centuries of battles with foreign invaders.”¹³³

Greetings

The expression *xin chào* can be used in all circumstances; it is not time-specific. It can also be used to say good-bye. What varies is the vocabulary used to address the other party.

Exchange 5: Good morning.

Soldier:	Good morning.	sin chow.
Local:	Good morning.	sin chow.

As someone observed, “[American] people put emphasis on friendliness in interpersonal relationships while in Vietnamese society the emphasis is more on respect.”¹³⁴ Three major factors determine the appropriate degree of respect: age, social status, and social relations (defined as family, acquaintances, or professional).¹³⁵

¹³⁰ Google Books. *Propaganda and Mass Persuasion: A Historical Encyclopedia, 1500 to the Present*. Cull, Nicholas John, David H. Culbert and David Welch. 2003. ABC-CLIO. [http://books.google.com/books?id=Byzv7rf6gL8C&pg=PA417&lpg=PA417&dq=chinh+nghia+\(just+cause\)+origin&source=bl&ots=Wk29ssF512&sig=ISjEcbUNIQg2P9BXRIoheIOO20&hl=en&ei=B9QvSruKNYvqtQOamJTACA&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=10](http://books.google.com/books?id=Byzv7rf6gL8C&pg=PA417&lpg=PA417&dq=chinh+nghia+(just+cause)+origin&source=bl&ots=Wk29ssF512&sig=ISjEcbUNIQg2P9BXRIoheIOO20&hl=en&ei=B9QvSruKNYvqtQOamJTACA&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=10)

¹³¹ Google Books. *Political Legitimacy in Southeast Asia: The Quest for Moral Authority*. Alagappa, Muthiah, ed. Vasavakul, Thaveeporn. “Chapter 10: Vietnam: The Changing Models of Legitimation [p. 265].” 1995. Stanford: Stanford University Press. http://books.google.com/books?id=rkO7somAQdEC&pg=PA265&lpg=PA265&dq=chinh+nghia+spirit+vietnam&source=bl&ots=qph5zK-HZo&sig=xLjF9536hlbx_eDZGh992bXztJ0&hl=en&ei=zSMUSubABJstQP7xIHxDQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=9

¹³² *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam*. Hue Tam Ho-Tai, ed. Marlarny, Shawn. “Chapter 2: ‘The Fatherland Remembers Your Sacrifice’: Commemorating War Dead in North Vietnam [pp. 46-76].” 2001. Berkeley: University of California Press.

¹³³ New York Review of Books. Mirsky, Jonathan. “Vietnam: Dead Souls.” 20 November 2008. http://www.viet-studies.info/Mirsky_VN_books_NYRB.pdf

¹³⁴ Geocities. Huynh Dinh Te, “Social Relations.” 19 September 1999. <http://www.geocities.com/soho/den/5908/values/social.html>

¹³⁵ Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University. Tran, Bac Hoi. “The Vietnamese Language Learning Framework—Part Two: Pragmatics and Culture.” 28 July 2006. <http://www.seasite.niu.edu/jsealt/past%20issues/volume%2010/VN%20LLF%20Part%20II.pdf>

Older people should be greeted first. This may, however, necessitate asking questions considered invasive by Westerners (such as a foreign guest’s age) in order to use the correct terms of respect. *Ong* is used for an older man, while *Ba* is the correct term for addressing an older woman. *Anh* is used for either a contemporary or a younger male, and *Co* for a female.



Exchange 6: Good evening!

Soldier:	Good evening!	sin chow!
Local:	Good evening!	sin chow!

Males might shake hands, but women generally do not—particularly with members of the opposite sex. Physical contact in public between men and women is frowned upon. By contrast, physical contact between people of the same sex is quite common in Vietnam. While strolling, male or female friends might hold hands—a behavior devoid of sexual overtones.

When exchanging business cards, the proper etiquette is to present yours with both hands. To receive someone’s card, hold it by both hands and examine it before putting it away.

Exchange 7: How are you?

Soldier:	How are you?	an Khweya Khong?
Local:	Fine, very well.	Khweya, zut Khweya

In order to express respect for a non-family member, Vietnamese will say *Thua* (please) before a person’s name or honorific.¹³⁶ Thus Mr. Nguyen becomes “Thua Nguyen” or, more likely, “Thua Ong.” Names are only used by kin or close friends. Even children typically address themselves to their siblings by rank rather than by name.¹³⁷

Exchange 8: Hi, Mr. Nguyen.

Soldier:	Hi, Mr. Nguyen.	chow oong nguen.
Local:	Hello!	sin chow
Soldier:	Are you doing well?	an Khweya Khong?
Local:	Yes.	vang

Modesty is considered a virtue by the Vietnamese. When someone is praised, they will smile and look down. Personal compliments are to be avoided, although you may admire someone’s car or home and ask after their family.

Exchange 9: How is your family?

Soldier:	How is your family?	zah din an tey now?
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¹³⁶ Harborview Medical Center, University of Washington. “Vietnamese Cultural Profile.” July 1996. http://ethnomed.org/ethnomed/cultures/vietnamese/vietnamese_cp.html

¹³⁷ In his 1999 memoir *Catfish and Mandala*, Vietnamese-American writer Andrew Pham refers to his older sister as Chi. Readers might assume that is her name, when in fact it means “Older Sister.”

Local:	They are doing fine, thank you.	zah din toy Khweya, karm ern
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When the guest asks a question of a Vietnamese person, it may be met with an evasive response to avoid answering in the negative, particularly if the request cannot be fulfilled. This is to save face for both parties.



© Oliver Frank
Serving tea in Sapa

Dress Codes

Vietnamese are a modest people. Despite the heat, both sexes should avoid shorts. Female visitors should also avoid tank tops, short skirts, and sleeveless attire, particularly if they intend to visit places of worship.

Exchange 10: How should I dress?

Soldier:	How should I dress?	toy nen muk zee?
Local:	Wear loose fitting clothes which cover your body.	muk kuan aw rong vur va chea ngwee an

Pale skin has traditionally been associated with feminine beauty in Asia, including Vietnam, where it signifies higher social class.¹³⁸ Those with darker complexions are assumed to spend their days toiling under the hot sun. As a result, Vietnamese women who work outside often cover up all exposed flesh including their hands. A scarf is tied across the face under the conical hat (*non la*) leaving only the eyes visible. Recent awareness about skin cancer and a rise in air pollution have encouraged this trend.¹³⁹

Exchange 11: Is this acceptable to wear?

Soldier:	Is this acceptable to wear?	kuan aw naay muk dok Khong?
Local:	Yes.	vang

Hospitality and Gift Giving

When entering a home, you should remove your shoes. Wealthier households and urbanites will have indoor sandals for guests. All Vietnamese will offer visitors at least a cup of tea to make them feel welcome. Drinking it, or at least taking a sip, is the way a guest expresses gratitude.¹⁴⁰ Not to do so risks making the host lose face.

Exchange 12: I appreciate your hospitality.

Soldier:	I really appreciate your hospitality.	toy darn zar kow su hur Khak koo a an
Local:	It is nothing.	Khong kor chee

¹³⁸ Uniorb. Lee, Diana. "Beauty Lies in Asian with White Skin." 26 February 2007.

<http://uniorb.com/ATREND/asianwhite.html>

¹³⁹ Chao-Vietnam. "White Skin for Vietnamese Women." 13 May 2006. <http://chao-vietnam.blogspot.com/2006/05/white-skin-for-vietnamese-women.html>

¹⁴⁰ Vietnam-Beauty.com. "One Cup of Tea, Please!" 24 September 2008. <http://www.vietnam-beauty.com/food-a-drink/vietnamese-drink/23-vietnamese-drink-/119-qone-cup-of-tea-pleaseq.html>

It is advisable to bring a gift to your host, but if you bring multiple gifts there should be an even number of them. Odd numbers are considered bad luck. Typically the recipients will initially refuse the gift. The giver should insist they accept it. Once they do, it will be put away to be opened later.

Exchange 13: This gift is for you.

Soldier:	This gift is for you.	kwar nay choo ann.
Local:	I cannot accept this.	toy Khong tee nun kwar koo a an.

Vietnamese typically entertain visitors in lavish style despite the hardship it may impose on the family budget. It is best not to emphasize that they should not have gone to the trouble and expense, but instead express gratitude for the effort.¹⁴¹ Try to eat a little of everything and use communal chop sticks to serve yourself.

The dishes will have been selected carefully. Bitter melon soup (*canh kho qua*), for example, is considered reconciliation food. It is served in lieu of asking for forgiveness or when the host has not seen the visitor for a long time.¹⁴²

Exchange 14: The food tastes so good.

Soldier:	The food tastes so good.	mun an naay kwar ngorn
Local:	Thank you.	karm ern

Vietnamese cuisine is low in fat and high in antioxidant vegetables. Flavors and textures of various dishes, in which cooked and raw ingredients are mixed, may be juxtaposed for dramatic effect and to achieve balance. Wrapping food at the table in lettuce or rice paper with an abundance of uncooked herbs distinguishes Vietnamese cuisine from those of its neighbors—so be prepared to use your fingers.



Exchange 15: This food is very good.

Soldier:	This food is very good.	tiuk an nay kwar ngorn
Local:	It's <i>pho</i> .	karm earn

Pho (noodle soup) is Vietnam's signature dish. It was created in the North during the 19th century after Vietnam was colonized by the French. A staple of the French diet, beef was imported and later incorporated into Vietnamese noodle soup. It is served countrywide with many regional variations.

Exchange 16: What ingredients are used?

Soldier:	What ingredients are used to make	nurng tarn fun now dok zoong dee now
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¹⁴¹ Company of Grace. "Customs of Vietnam." 5 February 2009.

http://www.houseofgrace.com.au/before_going_to_vietnam/vietnamese_customs.doc

¹⁴² *Secrets of the Red Lantern: Stories and Vietnamese Recipes from the Heart*. Nguyen, Pauline. "Chapter 1: Skin, Bones and the Basics [p. 13]." 2008. Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing.

	<i>pho?</i>	<i>faa?</i>
Local:	One kilo of beef, dried rice noodles, anise, cloves, one piece of fresh ginger, black pepper or white pepper, green onion, and thin sliced onions.	mot kee teet bor, barn fo Khoo, hoy hew urn, deen hew urn, mot lat gung toy, tee yoh den hay la tee yoh chaarng, han lar, han tay tey morn

Good broth should be rich and dense from the gelatin of long-boiled beef bones and contain a subtle sweetness and fragrance from char-roasted onions and ginger. Like the Vietnamese people’s journey, Pho originated in the North and migrated south. Southern cooks may add many other ingredients including chicken (*ga*) as a substitute for beef (*bo*).



Exchange 17: What is the name of this dish?

Soldier:	What is the name of this dish?	day lar mon zee?
Local:	These are spring rolls.	day lar char zor.

Spring rolls come in two forms: fresh (*goi cuon*) and deep fried (*cha gio*). These are a popular snack eaten with a dipping sauce (*nuoc cham*), made partly of fish sauce, to bring out the flavors. According to a cook, the farther south one goes, the sweeter, hotter, and more garlicky the *nuoc cham* becomes.¹⁴³

Social Events

Marriage

For major life events, Vietnamese families have rituals that involve the entire family, including deceased members. People with a common paternal ancestor are part of a clan. Marriage traditionally had three functions: 1) to perpetuate the clan’s name; 2) to maintain and improve its human capital; and 3) to provide descendents to worship the ancestors.¹⁴⁴ For these reasons, marriages were arranged by elders without regard for the feelings of the betrothed couple. Traditionally, to balk at such arrangements would be a loss of face and source of shame.

Arranged marriages have given way to mate self-selection, although the two families remain involved. The engagement takes place approximately six months prior to the ceremony. Each family chooses someone—typically a happily married couple—to represent them in negotiations in which the outcome is not in doubt. The man’s family prepares gifts and takes them to the home of his intended bride where they are met by representatives of her family. The male’s representative asks his counterpart for the woman’s hand in marriage. Once accepted, the betrothed couple prays in front of her

¹⁴³ Sunday Nite Dinner. “Vietnam Dipping Sauce (Nuoc Cham).” 28 January 2008. <http://sundaynitedinner.com/vietnamese-dipping-sauce-nuoc-cham/>

¹⁴⁴ Haivenu. Vietnam Culture. “Traditional Vietnamese Weddings, Circa 1900.” 16 August 2008. <http://www.haivenu-vietnam.com/vietnam-culture-wedding-1900.htm>

family’s ancestral altar and the groom gives her a ring. Each of them will henceforth refer to their in-laws by their familial titles, so the bride will refer to her mother-in-law as “Mom.” The wedding date is also set at the engagement by the couple’s parents, with the assistance of a spiritual leader, a Buddhist monk, or fortune teller whose expertise is needed to select an auspicious day.

On the day of the wedding the groom’s family goes to the bride’s home bearing *qua*, round red trays loaded with gifts covered in red satin that has been adorned with the Chinese character 囍 (*song hy*), which means “double happiness.”¹⁴⁵ The number of trays must total either six or nine since seven and eight are considered unlucky. The trays contain specialty foods such as wine, fruit, meat, traditional and Western-style cake, *trau cau* (leaves with fruit to be used as an ancestral offering), and most importantly, jewelry for the bride’s dowry.¹⁴⁶



© Lisa and Alec Rick.com
Red trays with wedding gifts

The bride wears a traditional Vietnamese pantsuit dress (*ao dai*) and a headdress (*khan dong*). This combination may be either red or pink. The groom wears the equivalent except in the color blue. The couple asks her ancestors for permission to be married and for blessings for their future family. After praying, they are presented with cups of tea that they and the bride’s parents drink, while the groom expresses gratitude to his in-laws for raising her.¹⁴⁷

Exchange 18: I wish you happiness.

Soldier:	I wish you both happiness.	toy chook an chee harnq fook
Local:	We are honored.	choong toy tut veeng zu.

They then depart for the groom’s home where they ask his ancestors for permission to be married. The mother and mother-in-law put earrings on the bride that are considered more important than rings. Some of the food that the groom’s family brought will be returned, as a gesture of goodwill to reflect the bond between the two families. At that point, the couple is considered married by the two families.

Afterward, the bride and groom will change into another set of clothing before the family goes to a banquet hall to host a large party. Arriving guests place envelopes containing even amounts of money in a gift basket. Guests typically will have a photo taken with the newly married couple during the party.



© Mark Robertson
Wedding reception in the Red River Delta region

¹⁴⁵ Foreign Press Center, Vietnam. “Cultural Values of Traditional Vietnamese Wedding.” 31 December 2008. <http://www.presscenter.org.vn/en/content/view/147/45/>

¹⁴⁶ Salem State University. “Buddhist Wedding Ceremony.” 1998. <http://www.salemstate.edu/imc/vietnam/ceremony.html>

¹⁴⁷ Getting Married, Migration Heritage Centre. “Marrying in the Buddhist Tradition.” 15 January 2008. http://www.migrationheritage.nsw.gov.au/exhibitions/gettingmarried/michelle_vinh.html

Exchange 19: Congratulations on your wedding!

Soldier:	Congratulations on your wedding!	chook munk darm kwee koo a an!
Local:	We are honored you could attend.	su hen zen koo a an lar nem ven zu chor choong toy

Once the guests are seated, the couple toasts each other before moving from table to table, where guests toast them and enjoy a lavish meal. Karaoke follows, though guests may leave when they wish—but they should say good-bye to the newlyweds first.

Funerals

Funerals entail two years of rites on behalf of the deceased to complete a process that in Vietnamese means “to move on to another existence” (*qua do*).¹⁴⁸ The rituals also provide a structure for the grief process, enabling family members to adjust to their loss and achieve peace of mind that the deceased has joined the family’s ancestors.

Exchange 20: I would like to give my condolences.

Soldier:	I would like to give my condolences to you and your family.	toy moo an goo ee lee ee cheer boo an den ya an va zar den an
Local:	Thank you.	karm ern

It is considered unlucky to die away from home and unlucky to carry a corpse. If possible, it is preferable to die at home surrounded by family and friends.¹⁴⁹ Hospital patients who are terminally ill can be rushed home to die under their own roof.¹⁵⁰ When death is imminent, those who have come to pay their respects must refrain from emotional outbursts that might interfere with a peaceful departure. Instead, the person is coaxed to speak by their oldest child one last time. If the family is religious, a monk or priest may be present.

The children of the deceased do not immediately accept their parent’s passing. In an effort to bring back the deceased, the body is placed on a mat and a chopstick inserted into the teeth. The eldest child of the same sex waves around a shirt of the deceased in an

¹⁴⁸ Google Books. *Cultural Diversity and Suicide: Ethnic, Religious, Gender and Sexual Orientation Perspectives*. Leach, Mark. “Chapter 4: Asian Americans [p. 158].” 2006. Haworth Press. http://books.google.com/books?id=B0adJtO-oOwC&dq=Cultural+Diversity+and+Suicide:+Ethnic,+Religious,+Gender+and+Sexual+Orientation+Perspectives&printsec=frontcover&source=bl&ots=EADYn0MSAO&sig=AjA-4HhQUDWXJpsivY4XXJvF3N8&hl=en&ei=6kIUStiRMIT8swO24oXzDQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1#PPA158,M1

¹⁴⁹ Harbor Medical Center, University of Washington. Hoang, Dieu-Hien, T. “Death Rituals in Vietnam.” December 2000. http://ethnomed.org/ethnomed/cultures/vietnamese/viet_death.html

¹⁵⁰ Google Books. *Ethnic Variations in Death, Dying and Grief*. Irish, Donald P., Kathleen F. Lundquist and Vivian Jenkins Nelsen. “Chapter 9: Death and Dying in Buddhism [p. 131].” 1993. Francis Taylor. http://books.google.com/books?id=oFeREN9iMZgC&pg=PA131&lpg=PA131&dq=vietnam+funeral+customs&source=bl&ots=ymVF2bg26m&sig=Xcjcw2ZFXwLRDhaM-J5_hgc4ro&hl=en&ei=GMUSStGDB9SLtge3uL2eBA&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=9#PPA131,M1

effort to call the person back. When that does not bring them back, the child washes the body to remove the dust of this world. Money and other precious objects are inserted into the mouth to indicate the person has left this world without want. The body is then wrapped in white cloth and placed in a coffin for burial.

The date and time when a funeral procession (*le dua tang*) embarks for the cemetery is selected carefully to ensure it is a propitious time to bury the deceased. Mourners wear white, the color of bone, as well as mourning turbans, a white cloth that is tied around the forehead. The specific style reflects the mourner's relationship to the deceased. As the mourners make their way to the cemetery, they scatter paper money to pay a "road toll." This is done so the deceased reaches the burial ground unharmed by evil spirits. It is permissible for mourners to display emotion as the coffin is lowered into the ground. The family will return in three days for *le mo cua ma*, when they tidy up the grave to facilitate the deceased's journey into the afterlife.



© californaAmyl flickr.com
Funeral procession

Exchange 21: Please be strong.

Soldier:	Please be strong.	sin marnng mair.
Local:	We will try.	choong toy ser ko gan.

For 49 consecutive days after the death, the family will place rice for the deceased on the family altar. After 100 days, the family will celebrate *tot khoc* (the end of the tears) marking the conclusion of emotional displays of grief. The relative's death is acknowledged on the first anniversary and the period of mourning ends with the second anniversary of the death.

During this two-year period, immediate family members traditionally wear mourning attire. This custom dates from the days when "Confucianism was still a dominant influence in life [and] mourning the dead was considered more important than the affairs of the living."¹⁵¹ Today, most people simply wear a black armband to convey the fact an immediate member of the family has died. Yet few would schedule a marriage during this two-year period for fear the spirit of the deceased would see it as a sign of disrespect and might cause trouble for the couple.

If they are unable to carry out these funeral rituals, the living family members become deeply distressed because they have not fulfilled their filial duties. This was the case for those who lost relatives in "the American War." When the combatants are unaccounted for and presumed dead, the body is not buried in the ritual way. No matter which side they fought for, these dead are considered "wandering souls."

Ironically, it is the economic reforms (*doi moi*) that have brought closure to many families. The construction



© Christopher flickr.com
Cemetery in Saigon

¹⁵¹ Geocities. Ngan, Van. "Funeral Rites in Vietnam." 1 June 1999. <http://www.geocities.com/soho/den/5908/custom/funeral.html>

frenzy of recent years, has not only transformed the landscape, it has also led to the recovery of the remains of many soldiers. To ensure that they take their rightful place in the afterlife, bodies that are identified are reburied in family ancestral tombs which have often undergone costly renovation. Such an investment reflects the belief that the improved circumstances of most Vietnamese as a result of *doi moi* must be shared with the departed.

Non-Religious Holidays

Lunar New Year

Tet, the Vietnamese Lunar New Year, is the country’s major holiday. While observance extends for 15 days, workers are typically accorded a three-day holiday. It usually falls between late January and the middle of February, but preparations begin well in advance. Each home must acquire a Tet kumquat tree (*tac*) and a peach blossom (*hoa dao*) to adorn a thoroughly cleaned home. Enough food must be purchased to feed the family before the stores close. The signature Tet food dish, sticky rice cakes (*banh chung*) were invented by an ancient monarch to welcome spring. The rice cakes must be soaked in water for one or two nights to achieve the desired gelatinous and chewy texture.¹⁵²

Exchange 22: Will you be celebrating?

Soldier:	Will you be celebrating the Lunar New Year?	an ser arn teet faay Khong?
Local:	Yes!	vang!

At the stroke of midnight, when winter and spring meet, families stand before their ancestral altars to offer incense prayers and to recount the outgoing year’s rites of passage and ask for a prosperous new year.¹⁵³ Special food offerings are placed on the altar for the ancestors whom they believe return to spend the holiday with their living descendants.

In the morning, the normally bustling streets are deserted as virtually everyone stays at home. The first visitor of the new year is supposed to be an omen of the family’s fortunes for the coming year. Not wanting to leave that to chance, the Vietnamese arrange for a healthy and successful acquaintance to call on them that morning.¹⁵⁴ Mostly, it is a family day when children are congratulated and given red envelopes (*li xi*) containing money in recognition of being a year older. This is because birthdays are not traditionally celebrated.

¹⁵² *Monterey County Weekly*. Marcus, Anina. “As Tet Celebrations Draw to a Close, Look for Ways to Keep the Great Food Coming.” 21 February 2008. <http://www.montereycountyweekly.com/archives/2008/2008-Feb-21/as-tet-celebrations-draw-to-a-close-a-look-at-ways-to-keep-the-great-food-coming/1/@@index>

¹⁵³ Louisiana’s Living Traditions. Carlin, Kathleen and Cam-Thahn Tran. “**Chúc mừng nam moi!** Happy New Year!” 1999. http://www.louisianafolklife.org/LT/Articles_Essays/VietnameseNewYear.html

¹⁵⁴ Department of Elementary Education, Utah State University. “Sub-Topic: Tet, the Vietnamese New Year.” 20 August 1999. 1996. <http://teacherlink.ed.usu.edu/tlresources/units/Byrnes-celebrations/wardtet.html>

The second day of the new year is for visits to extended family and on the third day, friends and neighbors are called upon and wished a prosperous new year (*chuc mung nam moi*). Since these early days of the new year are considered to be the most auspicious time, card games are popular entertainment and even those who do not normally gamble might place a bet.¹⁵⁵ By the same token, houses are not cleaned because that might sweep away the family's good luck and bathers fear that by washing they might wash away their good luck.

Hai Ba Trung Day

On the sixth day of the second lunar month, which usually falls in March, Vietnamese commemorate the revolt led by two women against Chinese rule. According to legend, in 40 C.E. a Chinese official decided to demonstrate his power by assassinating prominent Vietnamese who posed a challenge to his authority. One of those killed was the husband of Trung Trac, who was skilled in martial arts. She enlisted her sister, Trung Nhi, and together they organized an army to repel the Chinese rulers. This was the first recorded revolt in Vietnamese history and remains one of the most celebrated. When their defense against the Chinese proved short-lived, the Trung sisters committed suicide rather than live under foreign rule.¹⁵⁶



Courtesy of Wikimedia
Trung Sisters Festival, 1950s

It is said that soldiers going into battle carry pictures of the Trung sisters to emulate their patriotism and bravery. On this holiday there may be locally organized commemorative activities in which school children participate.

Tomb Sweeping Day

Tomb Sweeping Day, known as *Thanh Minh* in Vietnamese and *Qing Ming* in China where it originated, is normally observed in early April. At one time, it was a ritual performed at court by the Emperor who paid homage to his ancestors, with his subjects following his example. From this evolved a holiday when families pay homage to their deceased ancestors by making pilgrimages to their graves with food offerings, flowers, and incense.¹⁵⁷ Ancestral graves are typically cleaned and tidied a few days prior to placement of the offerings.

This holiday provides the families an opportunity to reunite and enjoy a picnic at the site of the tomb—the location where they themselves expect to one day be buried. In addition, they are demonstrating their duty to the deceased. In memory of those who

¹⁵⁵ Google Books. *The Vietnamese Americans*. Hien Duc Do. "Chapter 4: The Impact of Vietnamese Americans [p. 100]." 1999. CT: Greenwood Publishing.
http://books.google.com/books?id=kJG7dg7NdE0C&pg=PA100&lpg=PA100&dq=gambling+tet+vietnamese&source=bl&ots=ZviYRJWbJO&sig=S0ZyYcL-DrhAlqedaOO5WBj8CfA&hl=en&ei=m0YUSsu6L5a6tgO4o6z1DQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=8

¹⁵⁶ History Department, King's College. "Hai Ba Trung (39–43 A.D.)" 18 December 2001.
http://departments.kings.edu/womens_history/htrung.html

¹⁵⁷ Gala Tourist. "Festivals in Vietnam." 2009.
<http://www.galaturist.com/Vietnam+Overview+Guide/Tet+in+Vietnam/Festivals+in+Vietnam>

have died far away from home and are not buried in the family plot, people leave offerings at roadside altars.

Reunification Day

The 30th of April commemorates the liberation of Saigon in 1975 and the final victory of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA). The celebration is larger on five- and ten-year anniversaries. It may include military parades and a reenactment of the NVA entering Saigon and marching to the Presidential Palace, the Republic of Vietnam's (RVN) seat of government. This site is now known as the Reunification Palace and is open for tours in sections that have preserved rooms.



© hddharpeski/ Flickr.com
North Vietnamese veteran

The Hanoi government considers this holiday important for its legitimacy. It remains a solemn occasion for the Vietnamese to reflect on the sacrifices of those who made it all possible. Because a majority of the Vietnamese populace was born after 1975 and may have little memory of life before the economic reforms, schools devote several days to educating students about the immediate past. According to the national narrative, there was no civil war, but rather the RVN was a puppet regime of the U.S. that was toppled.¹⁵⁸

Ho Chi Minh's Birthday

Ho Chi Minh's birthday is celebrated on 19 May when a ranking member of the government lays a wreath at his mausoleum and people reflect on his life. In addition, it is customary for outstanding citizens to have their contributions to national development acknowledged at their places of work.

While the country has moved away from socialism, Ho Chi Minh remains revered for his sacrifices on behalf of the nation in its war for independence. The modest home where he worked in Hanoi draws visitors throughout the year. "Uncle Ho," as he is known, wanted his ashes spread in the three regions of Vietnam. This wish was not honored; instead an austere mausoleum was built in Hanoi's Ba Dinh Square, where Vietnam's independence was proclaimed in 1945. It is open to the public and, for part of the year, contains his embalmed body which is displayed under glass.

National Day

The celebration occurs on the second of September to commemorate the founding of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in Hanoi. The country was renamed the Socialist Republic of Vietnam after reunification. Since Ho Chi Minh remains popular, official speeches emphasize his contributions to national independence. This serves to deflect attention away from the current government's shortcomings.

In proclaiming his country's independence, Ho Chi Minh declared: "All men are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights; among these

¹⁵⁸ U.S. Army Combined Arms Center. "Thiet Giap! The Battle of An Loc..." Wilbanks, Lieutenant Colonel James H. September 1993. <http://www-cgsc.army.mil/carl/resources/csi/willbanks/willbanks.asp>

are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.” This was of course taken from the U.S. Declaration of Independence address in 1776. It reflected Ho’s view that his country was engaged in a struggle similar to the revolution waged to make the U.S. independent.

Ho Chi Minh closed his speech in a similar fashion: “For these reasons, we, members of the Provisional Government of the Democratic Republic of Viet-Nam, solemnly declare to the world that Viet-Nam has the right to be a free and independent country—and in fact it is so already. The entire Vietnamese people are determined to mobilize all their physical and mental strength, to sacrifice their lives and property in order to safe guard their independence and liberty.”¹⁵⁹

Mid-Autumn Festival

This holiday, known as Tet Trung Thu in Vietnamese, occurs on a harvest moon in late September or early October close to the autumn equinox. Moon cakes (*banh trung thu*), round cakes filled with red bean and lotus paste, are baked. They have a bright yellow center to symbolize the moon and appear in shop windows during the holiday. People exchange and eat these.



Children celebrate the Tet Festival

In Vietnam the festivities are noteworthy for being child-centered.¹⁶⁰ Children traditionally wore masks made of paper-mâché but now they may be store-bought, pop-culture likenesses of Superman models intended for Halloween. The purpose of the mask is to scare off Ra Hu, a tiger-like demon. The story goes that he attempted to eat the moon during the period of celestial creation—and this explains the phases of the moon. Since Ra Hu might be tempted to return to eat up the moon, which on this holiday appears larger than at any other time of the year, the children remain vigilant. After dark their efforts are aided by lanterns.

¹⁵⁹ American Chamber of Commerce, Vietnam. “National Foundation Day 2009 (VN Holiday).” 2009. <http://www.amchamvietnam.com/event/1074/detail>

¹⁶⁰ Things Asian. Cohen, Barbara. “Mid-Autumn Children’s Festival.” 1 October 1995. <http://www.thingsasian.com/stories-photos/1055>

Do's and Don'ts

Do take off your shoes before entering a home or temple.

Do dress down and leave expensive jewelry at home to avoid flaunting your wealth in public.

Do show deference toward the elderly by bowing your head slightly in their presence.

Do use both hands when passing an object to someone.

Do examine business cards you receive before putting them away.

Do ask before photographing people or their children.

Do take, at least, a sip of tea when it is offered in a home or at a reception.

Don't make comparisons between Vietnam and China.

Don't joke about Ho Chi Minh who is considered the father of the country.

Don't beckon anyone with your hands and fingers pointed upward.

Don't lose your temper in public. This is viewed as a loss of face for all involved.

Don't put your hands in clothing pockets or on your hips while talking which is considered disrespectful body language.

Don't let the soles of your feet point at anything sacred, including a family's ancestral altar.

Don't leave chop sticks upright in a bowl after finishing a meal. Vietnamese believe this resembles incense burned to commemorate the dead.



© fredsharples/ flickr.com
Sandals left outside

Chapter 4 Urban Life

Introduction

Vietnamese cities are where the country's most extreme income disparities can be observed. Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City are the primary recipients of foreign direct investment (FDI), which has been sought as part of the economic reforms (*doi moi*).¹⁶¹ As a result, residents of these two major cities enjoy a higher standard of living than people who live elsewhere. This is reflected in the downtown center of both cities where most new construction has occurred. In Ho Chi Minh City, this development has forced out long-time residents to make room for spacious residential housing units, elegant shops, and international brand-name restaurants.



© iStockphoto.com
New residential homes in Hanoi

Vietnam's emerging middle class is filled by the ranks of those employed by the government and entrepreneurs who have created a thriving private sector. At the same time, many residents are self-employed in the informal service economy, particularly those who migrated from the countryside in search of job opportunities. Unable to afford rental housing, many working poor and homeless in Ho Chi Minh City have created squatter settlements along canals. The added raw sewage exacerbates the existing problem of water pollution. As non-residents, the squatters are ineligible to use social services and usually lack access to clean water.¹⁶²

Telecommunications

Most urban Vietnamese rely on cell phones that can be bought from street vendors and are now internet enabled. Text messaging has become a preferred form of communication for the younger generation.

Exchange 23: What is your telephone number?

Soldier:	What is your telephone number?	deeyen tway koo a an soo may?
Local:	My phone number is 38 11-0211.	soo deeyen ty koo a toy lar bar muee tarm muee mot Khong haay muee mot

As elsewhere in the world, personal electronic devices have become prevalent. A visitor recounted in 2003: “[T]he insidious cell phone has invaded even the most sacred space in Vietnam—the Buddhist temple. I went to one such temple to immerse myself in quiet meditation and incense smoke when, suddenly, the muffled theme of Star Wars chimed from a nearby monk’s saffron robe. Buddha smiled down benevolently on us all, but the

¹⁶¹ Trialog. Waibel, Michael. “The Production of Urban Space in Vietnam’s Metropolis in the Course of Transition: Internationalization, Polarization and Newly Emerging Lifestyles in Vietnamese Society.” February 2006. http://www.michael-waibel.de/Trialog_89_2_2006_Artikel_Waibel.pdf

¹⁶² UN Research Institute for Social Development. Wust, Sebastian et al. “Metropolization and the Ecological Crisis: Precarious Settlements in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.” 8 January 2009. [http://www.unrisd.org/80256B3C005BCCF9/\(httpAuxPages\)/7E11053727CAD373C1256F3C00400FEF/\\$file/chap3.pdf](http://www.unrisd.org/80256B3C005BCCF9/(httpAuxPages)/7E11053727CAD373C1256F3C00400FEF/$file/chap3.pdf)

abbot was not pleased. He gave the chagrined, red-faced young monk a smack on his shaved head, while everyone else tried not to giggle.”¹⁶³

Exchange 24: May I use your phone?

Soldier:	May I use your phone?	toy zoong deeyin twaay koo a dew urk Khong?
Local:	Sure.	dew urk

Vietnam was a relative latecomer to cyberspace with only half a million internet users in 2000.¹⁶⁴ In recent years usage has exploded. Estimates in early 2009 indicate approximately 24 million people out of a population of nearly 90 million go online regularly.¹⁶⁵ Internet access is widely available at cafes. Although users are required to register with the police (a procedure handled by internet providers), the government has no controls in place to monitor web traffic.



Post offices (*Buu Dien*) keep extended hours, typically 6 a.m. to 8 p.m. (and longer for central post offices) including weekends and holidays. Most Vietnamese insist their overseas letters be franked to prevent having the postage stamps peeled off and resold, which may be equivalent to a day’s wages for a postal employee. Their fears seemed unwarranted, based on the experiences of those who have used stamps that can be secured with glue provided by the post office. Licking stamps is considered unhygienic by the Vietnamese.

Traffic and Transportation

Vietnam has a well developed domestic flight network that utilizes airfields built for military aircraft during the many years of conflict.

Exchange 25: Which road leads to the airport?

Soldier:	Which road leads to the airport?	dew urn now zun den sun baay?
Local:	The road heading east.	dew urn hew urn dong

While all airports have solicitors, Tan Son Nhat Airport in Ho Chi Minh City has by far the most. Taxi drivers will suggest hotels from which they receive a commission. They will also energetically attempt to arrange sight-seeing tours. If necessary, be persistent about going to the destination of your choosing.

¹⁶³ New American Media. Lam, Andrew. “In Vietnam, Even the Dead Need Cell Phones.” 15 May 2003. http://news.pacificnews.org/news/view_article.html?article_id=db07ecc22f25a793c5e87e366103b9f2

¹⁶⁴ *San Jose Mercury News*. Boudreau, John. “Vietnam 2.0: ‘Internet Revolution’ Brings 20 Million People Online.” 25 June 2008. <http://www.idgvv.com.vn/?mdl=press&cat=24&id=336&pg=2>

¹⁶⁵ *Washington Post*. Johnston, Tim. “Vietnamese Authorities Rein in the Country’s Vigorous Blogosphere.” 18 January 2009. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/01/17/AR2009011702552.html>

Exchange 26: Can you take me there?

Soldier:	Can you take me there?	an doo ah toy den dor dew urk Khong?
Local:	Yes, I can.	vang, toy doo ah an dee ngay

It is possible to rent a car or even a small motorbike or scooter in Vietnam. However, visitors who stay less than three months and who do not speak Vietnamese must also hire a driver.¹⁶⁶ This is advisable under any circumstance, since roads may have fallen into disrepair. Navigating roads and traffic on a scooter can be dangerous because injury accidents in the cities are common. In 2007, of over 12,000 fatalities on Vietnam's roads, approximately one-third resulted from motorbike accidents.¹⁶⁷ Driving under the influence is common, as well as a low awareness of other drivers, pedestrians, and traffic safety.¹⁶⁸



© Chris Eickert
Motorbikes in Ho Chi Minh City

Exchange 27: Where can I rent a car?

Soldier:	Where can I rent a car?	toy kor tee mew urn mot chee cheh sair hoo ee er daw?
Local:	Downtown.	er jorn tarng fo

For example, people wishing to cross the street simply step out on the road with the assumption that “schools of fish don’t collide,” and they expect motorbikes and cars to go around them. The leading cause of death for international visitors is traffic accidents. Foreign nationals deemed responsible for an accident by the police will be barred from leaving the country until compensation has been paid to the victims or their families.¹⁶⁹

Exchange 28: Is there a gas station nearby?

Soldier:	Is there a gas station nearby?	kor kay san er gun daay Khong?
Local:	Yes.	vang

Gas stations are easy to find along major thoroughfares, as well as on the water to serve boat traffic. In the latter case, the pumps have been imported after being retired from use in the U.S. For those buying their own gas, it is advisable to patronize stations that have new pumps with digital readouts, to verify how much gas has actually been put into the tank.¹⁷⁰

Since municipal public transportation is limited, owning a motorbike is a necessity for urban residents. Helmets, referred to as “rice cookers,” were long resisted by riders

¹⁶⁶ Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada. “Travel Report Vietnam.” 21 May 2009.

http://www.voyage.gc.ca/countries_pays/report_rapport-eng.asp?id=316000

¹⁶⁷ Progressive Policy Institute. “Traffic Accidents Kill 1.2 Million People a Year.” 30 April 2008.

http://www.ppionline.org/ppi_ci.cfm?knlgAreaID=108&subsecID=900003&contentID=254624

¹⁶⁸ Expat Advisory Service. “Traffic Accidents to Cost Nation \$5.5 Million by 2020.” 23 July 2008.

<http://www.expat-advisory.com/vietnam/articles/traffic-accidents-to-cost-nation-5-5-million-by-2020.php>

¹⁶⁹ Bureau of Consular Affairs, U.S. Department of State. “Vietnam: Country Specific Information.”

November 2008. http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_1060.html

¹⁷⁰ Living in Saigon, Vietnam. “Scam Warning—Be Careful When You Buy Gas in Vietnam.” 23 April 2009. <http://livinginsaigonvietnam.blogspot.com/2009/04/scam-warning-be-careful-when-you-buy.html>

because of discomfort and on aesthetic grounds. In late 2007, increased enforcement of the helmet law (rather than a sudden appreciation for safety) convinced riders and their passengers to don helmets.¹⁷¹

Exchange 29: Is there a mechanic nearby?

Soldier:	Is there a good auto mechanic nearby?	kor tur suwa sair hoo ee zoy er gun day Khong?
Local:	Yes.	vang

Motorbike taxis (*xe om*; literally, “hugging a motorbike”),” are available on practically every street corner and have replaced the traditional bicycle. Motorbike taxis are required to provide helmets for their passengers. While theoretically cheaper than regular taxis, *xe om* lack a meter, which may make them more expensive for those unfamiliar with the informal fare structure. For that reason, as well as safety, it is better to use a licensed taxi, which can be found at hotels and on the street.



Exchange 30: Where can I get a cab?

Soldier:	Where can I get a cab?	toy kor tee dorn taksee er daw?
Local:	Over there.	er dangr keeya.

Vietnam’s rail network was built under French colonial rule. It consists of single gauge track, except near the Chinese border where it becomes double gauge as the train approaches the border town of Lao Cai. The southern rail terminus is still officially named the Saigon Station. Service between Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City is on the “Reunification Express,” which refers to the route rather than the speed of service. There are more than 100 stops on the line, but most “express” trains stop at only about 20. Since there is only one track, trains must pull off regularly to let trains from the opposite direction pass.

Exchange 31: Is there a train station nearby?

Soldier:	Is there a train station nearby?	kor gar sair luwa er gun daay Khong?
Local:	No.	Khong

Rail service is complemented by an extensive network of long-distance bus service. The vintage De Soto buses are quite utilitarian. Newer models may come equipped with 24-hour entertainment, such as a DVD player and karaoke for all passengers to use.

Exchange 32: Will the bus be here soon?

Soldier:	Will the bus be here soon?	sair byut sarp den daay Khong?
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¹⁷¹ Voice of America. Steinglass, Matt. “Vietnam Helmet Law Changes Culture Overnight.” 12 December 2007. <http://www.voanews.com/english/archive/2007-12/2007-12-17-voa13.cfm?moddate=2007-12-17>

Local:	Yes.	vang
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Health Care

Vietnam has partially privatized its health care system as part of an effort to provide better care. Since 1992, when Vietnam Health Insurance (VHI) was established, two different insurance plans have been offered. One is compulsory and covers civil servants and others public sector employees, but not their dependents. Its cost is a 3% contribution of salary: the employer pays two-thirds and the employee pays the remaining one-third.¹⁷²

Exchange 33: Is there a hospital nearby?

Soldier:	Is there a hospital nearby?	kor bung veeyin er gun daay Khong?
Local:	Yes, in the center of town.	vang taay joong tarm tarnng fo



© Sara Anderson
Doctor and nurses in Vietnam

One obstacle to expanding this type of insurance is the small size of the formal employment sector. This limits the government's ability to use compulsory payroll deductions as a means to collect the employee's portion. Furthermore, it would make private businesses responsible for paying two-thirds of each employee's insurance premiums.

Voluntary insurance is intended to cover those ineligible for the compulsory plan. The government subsidizes the enrollment of poor children. Yet 56% of Vietnamese remain uncovered.¹⁷³ Those lacking insurance remain vulnerable to the financial consequences of a serious illness.

Exchange 34: Do you know what is wrong?

Soldier:	Do you know what is wrong?	an beeyet kaay zee saay Khong?
Local:	Yes.	kor ah

To trim costs, support staff positions at some hospitals have been eliminated, leaving doctors to assume responsibility for billing-related matters in addition to providing medical care.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷² Asia Pacific Action Alliance on Human Resources for Health. "Human Resource for Health in Vietnam and Mobilization of Medical Doctors to Commune Health Centers." 30 June 2007.

http://www.aaahrh.org/reviewal/1166639983_Vietnam%20-%20Revised.pdf

¹⁷³ Malaysian National News Agency. "Vietnam Faces Great Challenges in Healthcare System." 16 April 2009. <http://www.bernama.com/bernama/v5/newsworld.php?id=404494>

¹⁷⁴ Center for Southeast Asian Studies, UCLA. "Vietnam: First Impressions of U.S. Students." 15 May 2003. <http://www.international.ucla.edu/cseas/article.asp?parentid=3941>

Exchange 35: Is Dr. Dung in?

Soldier:	Is Dr. Dung in, sir?	too ah ong, bark see zoong kor er daay Khong?
Local:	No.	Khong

Education

Secondary schooling is not free in Vietnam. Tuition fees are higher in urban areas, reflecting higher incomes. The quality of education is superior as well. In addition, organized forms of supplementary study (*hoc them*) that operate both within the formal education system, where teachers offer private tutorials, and outside, in the form of cram schools, have expanded rapidly given the return on education afforded by the market economy.¹⁷⁵ Higher education opportunities remain limited, however, and regionally oriented. Students in Hanoi overwhelming go to college in the capital while those in the South opt to enroll in schools close to home as well.

With one million students graduating from high school every year and places for fewer than 20% in existing programs, Vietnam has attracted the attention of foreign universities looking to set up higher education joint ventures.¹⁷⁶ Those involved have discovered it requires a lot of patience. The government still must approve the curriculum and oversee faculty hiring. Within a school, departments may be in competition to secure outside partners and have bureaucratic incentives to sabotage each other's efforts. In addition, there are problems verifying quality. Some joint-ventures have proven to be little more than diploma mills.¹⁷⁷ Still, the government remains determined to raise Vietnam's higher education profile. The Hanoi University of Science and Technology is projected to comprise up to 10% international students, and to have 50% of its faculty holding credentials that meet international standards by 2016.¹⁷⁸

Restaurants and Dining

Vietnam's legacy of French colonial heritage along with American influence creates a cuisine familiar to Western palates. It is easy in urban areas to find restaurants that serve Western-style breakfasts featuring fried eggs and French bread.

Exchange 36: Are you still serving breakfast?

Soldier:	Are you still serving breakfast?	an varn korn fook voo deeyim tarm faay Khong?
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¹⁷⁵ Google Books. *Going to School in East Asia*. Postiglione and Gerald and Jason Tan. "Chapter 18: Schooling in Vietnam [p. 429]." 2007. CT: Greenwood Publishing. http://books.google.com/books?id=HuE--CIdDuEC&pg=PA426&lpg=PA426&dq=primary+school+enrollment+vietnam&source=bl&ots=aGGi-Wiy3r&sig=yHqu9qFeewzo3r-nPuil9kVJACg&hl=en&ei=s9wVSuXUK6CW8wSUKdJHAg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=6#PPA429,M1

¹⁷⁶ *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Overland, Martha Ann. "American Colleges Raise the Flag in Vietnam." 15 May 2009. <http://chronicle.com/weekly/v55/i36/36a00101.htm>

¹⁷⁷ *Casper Star-Tribune*. "Wyo-based diploma mills create ill will overseas." 8 January 2007. <http://www.trib.com/articles/2007/01/08/editorial/editorial/28b92213306ffcff8725725c00267976.txt>

¹⁷⁸ University World News. Down, Dale. "Vietnam: Transforming Higher Education." 22 March 2009. <http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20090320100538501>

Local:	Yes.	vang
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In rural areas, breakfast will consist of sticky rice (*xoi*) wrapped in some sort of leaf: either banana, coconut, or bamboo. Soup (*pho*) is also typically served and may stand alone as the first meal of the day.



© iStock.com
Women share a traditional breakfast

Exchange 37: I'd like some soup.

Soldier:	I'd like some hot soup.	toy moon moot too soop nong.
Local:	Sure.	vang

Most restaurants, particularly smaller private ones, will not list prices on their menus. It is advisable to ask for the prices before ordering, to avoid getting a padded bill after you have eaten and are not in a position to contest the charges.

Exchange 38: Can I have my total bill, please?

Soldier:	Can I have my total bill, please?	sin ten tat kar teeyin arn koo a toy?
Local:	Yes, of course.	vang, zeer neeyin zoy

Unless you are in an international hotel, it is advisable to drink only bottled water—and on which the cap is still sealed.

Exchange 39: May I have a glass of water?

Soldier:	May I have a glass of water?	chor toy mot lee neeyu urk dew urk Khong?
Local:	Yes, right away.	vang, kor ngay

For Vietnamese, sharing meal tabs (Dutch treat) is a foreign concept. The person who organizes and invites the others customarily pays for everyone. Alternative arrangements will also be unfamiliar to restaurant staff and may require advance explanation.

Exchange 40: Can you put this all in one bill?

Soldier:	Can you put this all in one bill?	ten tut kar vaw mot hwa dirn dew urk Khong
Local:	Okay.	dew urk

The French introduced coffee (*ca phe*) to Vietnam. Out of this evolved a Vietnamese brew that uses deep, French-roast coffee with chicory to smooth the bitterness associated with strong coffee. It is flavored with sweetened condensed milk (*ca phe sua nong*) and sugar.

Exchange 41: I would like coffee or tea.

Soldier:	I would like coffee or tea.	toy moon kar fee haay char
Local:	Sure.	vang

Intricate coffee-making procedures are eschewed for a more traditional method of preparation. Boiling water is poured into a single-cup coffee filter (with a metal screw press) that is placed atop a glass containing some condensed milk. The screw press is opened to enable the water to pass through. Stirring is required to mix the coffee with the milk, or with milk and ice cubes if the coffee has been ordered cold (*ca phe sua da*).¹⁷⁹ Available from many street stalls, a cup of coffee may even be served with a glass of complimentary hot tea.



Exchange 42: Where is your restroom?

Soldier:	Where is your restroom?	nar vee sen er daw?
Local:	That room to your left, over there.	nar vee sen er ben jaay koo a an, er darnng keeya

Vietnamese have a term for snacking (*an qua*) that literally means “eating a gift in the form of a savory morsel.”¹⁸⁰ “Grab-and-go” snacks (*an choi*) are widely available from street peddlers, who also sell “sub”-type sandwiches (*banh mi*) made with a variety of fresh meats and cold cuts on French bread.¹⁸¹

Exchange 43: What type of meat is this?

Soldier:	What type of meat is this?	day lar teet zee?
Local:	Pork.	teet heyo

Foods made exclusively from fresh ingredients pose a substantially lower health risk than foods prepared elsewhere that may have sat in the hot sun for some time.

Exchange 44: Do you have a dessert?

Soldier:	Do you have a dessert?	an ko morn jarng meeyen Khong?
Local:	Yes, we have banana, mango, and pineapple.	vang, choong toy kor jey kaay: choo oy, so aay var term

Vietnam has a great variety of fruit, including a regional specialty, dragon fruit (*thanh long*), which is noted for its subtle flavor and is a member of the cactus family.

The Marketplace

Retail commerce in Vietnam is overwhelmingly dominated by female merchants, and most shoppers are women as well. This is not a coincidence: in the Confucian mindset, trade was relegated to the realm of immoral activities to be conducted outside the village



¹⁷⁹ INeedCoffee. Haller, Craig. “Vietnamese Coffee.” 1999–2009.

<http://www.ineedcoffee.com/04/vietnamese/>

¹⁸⁰ *Into the Vietnamese Kitchen: Treasured Foodways, Modern Flavors*. Nguyen, Andrea. “Chapter 1: Into the Mouth [p. 1].” 2006. Berkeley: Ten Speed Press.

¹⁸¹ *Washington Post*. Nicholls, Walter. “The Banh Mi of My Dreams.” 6 February 2008.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/02/05/AR2008020500888.html>

gate. Sellers were seen as inherently dishonest because they had to convince buyers to pay more for an item than it cost to acquire. Therefore, selling was not seen as a suitable line of work for men.¹⁸²

Exchange 45: Do you sell embroidered tablecloths and napkins?

Soldier:	Do you sell embroidered tablecloths and napkins?	an kor barn bo Kharn arn tay oo Khong?
Local:	Yes.	vang

As a result, the responsibility for the somewhat demeaning task of haggling over the price of essential goods fell to female members of the family.¹⁸³

Exchange 46: May I examine this close up?

Soldier:	May I examine this close up?	toy sem kee kaay naay dew urk Khong?
Local:	Sure.	dew urk

While bargaining remains a way of life in Vietnam, it is possible to get discounts even if you are a foreigner. The first buyer of the new year, or even a new month, may get a better price, particularly if the person reflects the type of clientele the merchant hopes to attract.

Exchange 47: Can I buy this?

Soldier:	Can I buy a “ao ba ba”* with this much money?	voo ee so teeyen naay toy moo a dew urk mot kaay ow bar bar Khong?
Local:	Yes.	vang

*Vietnamese casual blouse

Before bargaining, make sure to confirm the currency. Vietnamese typically hold up fingers to get around the language barrier. One finger can mean either one USD or a 10,000 dong bank note. Some visitors have assumed they were bargaining in dong only to learn it was dollars—after the price had been agreed on and the merchant considered the deal complete.

Exchange 48: Do you accept U.S. currency?

Soldier:	Do you accept U.S. currency?	an kor nun doo lar mee Khong?
Local:	No, we only accept Vietnamese dongs.	Khong, choong toy chee nun teeyin vyet naam

Always maintain a friendly demeanor and only enter into protracted negotiations if you genuinely wish to purchase the item. It is also important to carry small bills, since many merchants will not be able to change a bill larger than a 10,000 dong note, which is worth less than one USD.

¹⁸² Education About Asia. *Marriage and Family in Asia*. Leshkovich, Anne Marie. “Entrepreneurial Families in Viet Nam: Controversial Symbols of Moral Dilemmas in Changing Times [p. 2].” Spring 2008. <http://www.asian-studies.org/EAA/Leshkovich-13-1.pdf>

¹⁸³ *Understanding Vietnam*. Jamieson, Neil. “Chapter 6: Continuity and Change in Vietnamese Culture and Society, 1968–1975 [p. 315].” 1993. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Exchange 49: Can you give me change for this?

Soldier:	Can you give me change for this?	an toy laay teeyen cho toy dew urk Khong?
Local:	No.	Khong.

The most famous place to shop in Ho Chi Minh City is the Ben Thanh Market, one of the city's historic landmarks. When visitors inquire about shopping, they are usually taken to this market, which includes a food court.



Exchange 50: Is the market nearby?

Soldier:	Is the market nearby?	kor chur er gun daay Khong?
Local:	Yes, over there on the right.	vang, er darng keeya, ben faay

Located in the city's commercial District 1, which is still officially referred to as Saigon, it is a traditional covered bazaar lined with stalls, the majority smaller than 1.5 m (5 ft) in width.¹⁸⁴ As a result, merchants have a limited space to stock inventory.

Exchange 51: Do you have any more of these?

Soldier:	Do you have any more of these?	an korn kaay naay noo Khong?
Local:	No.	Khong.

Nonetheless, they keep long hours and can probably acquire the desired item from a supplier. In the case of apparel, one can buy fabric from merchants in one part of the market and take it to a tailor located in another.

Exchange 52: How much longer will you be here?

Soldier:	How much longer will you be here?	an sair er daay bow lo nuwa?
Local:	Three more hours.	tam bar teeyin doong ho nuwa

Merchants may be forced to give the police or the marketplace management a cut of their earnings, and that can account, in part, for their persistence in soliciting business.¹⁸⁵

Exchange 53: Please, buy something from me.

Local:	Please, buy something from me.	sin moo-a harng koo-a toy
Soldier:	Sorry, I have no money left.	sin loy, toy Khong kor teeyin

¹⁸⁴ *The Guardian*. Algionby, John. "Ben Thanh Market, the New Retail Hotspot." 31 August 2006. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2006/aug/31/johnalgionby.mainsection>

¹⁸⁵ *Journal of Asian Studies*. Leshkovich, Ann Marie. "Wandering Ghosts of Late Socialism: Conflict, Metaphor, and Memory in a Southern Vietnamese Marketplace." Spring 2008. <http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=1702348>

Beggars and Hawkers

It is difficult to step outside in any Vietnamese city without eliciting interest from street vendors. Merchants plying everything from transportation to fruit and freshly baked bread (which women in Hanoi carry in baskets on their heads) are too numerous to completely avoid. If one does not want to buy anything, avoid sustained eye contact with would-be sellers.

In addition, there are beggars and hawkers. The former include those with visible war-related injuries, such as amputees. The latter are typically male adolescents who present government-issued cards stating they are orphans—in reality street kids—who are allowed to hawk postcards and other souvenir paraphernalia at whatever price buyers are willing to pay. Do not engage them in negotiation if you do not wish to make the purchase, because they may become aggressive and quite nasty if you decide you do not want the item.



© Dave & Lorelle Flickr.com
Basket vendor in Hanoi

Exchange 54: Give me money.

Local:	Give me money.	chor toy teeyin.
Soldier:	I don't have any.	toy Khong kor teeyin.

Most beggars, particularly children, are more persistent than threatening. In 2003, the mid-coast city of Danang cracked down and offered residents a reward for turning in beggars by calling a hotline number. The response was overwhelming. An investigation revealed that one group of beggars had come from quite far away. They believed that their welfare was protected by a beggar god who required them to travel afar to collect money for a religious offering.¹⁸⁶

Gainfully employed urbanites view most beggars who target tourists as able-bodied panhandlers from the countryside in search of an easy living. Therefore, urbanites will advise visitors not to give the beggars money, for fear of encouraging others to beg.

¹⁸⁶ BBC News (World Edition). Arthurs, Clare. "Vietnam Cracks Down on Beggars." 16 February 2003. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/2768489.stm>

Chapter 5 Rural Life

Introduction

The village represents the nexus of Vietnamese society. Often, residents only leave when dire safety concerns or financial circumstances force them to move elsewhere.¹⁸⁷

Traditionally, in the north and central regions, the village was self-contained and could only be entered through a gate that was locked at night. In the south, settlements were more dispersed. Yet life differed little: It was an endless cycle of planting and harvesting, in which the ancestral graves provided the physical link between generations. Few outsiders came to the village and those who did were typically bent on extraction: the tax collector, law enforcement authorities, or the soldier-pillager.¹⁸⁸

In enclosed villages, the hall (*dinh*) was the center of community life in which all ceremonies, both religious and secular, were held. It was where the patron spirit (*thanh hoang*) of the village was venerated and where the council of notables, the traditional form of village governance, met. Much of the village land, which could only be farmed by residents, was owned communally and reallocated on a three-year basis, ensuring a relatively egalitarian distribution among residents.¹⁸⁹



Although the communist government replaced the traditional village administrative hierarchy with party leadership, the *dinh* remained an important meeting place where harvest quotas were assigned and the harvest tallied. After the economic reforms (*doi moi*) were introduced in 1986, residents were allowed to seek off-farm work. In many cases, they have returned only to celebrate the Tet Lunar New Year holiday. As the collective nature of village life eroded, the *dinh* lost its central function.

Land Use and the Rural Economy

Conflicts over access to land, user rights, and ownership were integral to organizing peasant resistance to French colonial rule. Later, similar land rights issues undermined

¹⁸⁷ State of New South Wales Department of Education and Training and Charles Stuart University. Dean, Peter. "Focus Study: Family Life in Vietnam." [No date.] http://www.hsc.csu.edu.au/society_culture/change/focus_studies/2501/CCVietnamfamily.html

¹⁸⁸ Google Books. *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*. Tarling, Nicholas. "Chapter 2: The Political Structures of the Independent States [p. 68]." 2000. New York: Cambridge University Press. http://books.google.com/books?id=U0trzUvic-8C&pg=PA68&lpg=PA68&dq=tax+collector+village+vietnam&source=bl&ots=9w9yySWwkQ&sig=RgCczRLkoEoeDppVj5MGtFY4b18&hl=en&ei=IL0eSq3CCaWUtgPftcSOCQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=5

¹⁸⁹ Google Books. *Understanding Vietnam*. Jamieson, Neil. "Chapter 1: How the Vietnamese See the World [p. 30]." 1995. Berkeley: University of California Press. http://books.google.com/books?id=nC0LAJITUmsC&pg=PA29&lpg=PA29&dq=dinh+village+life++vietnam&source=bl&ots=v5190kHrsY&sig=TzKD3uY2iM6rV6xTt9A14QDbrCY&hl=en&ei=SK8eSvUoipSZA9TdjZAK&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=5#PPA30,M1

the Saigon government, and then the communist government, when its policies brought the country to the brink of starvation in the 1980s.

Exchange 55: Where do you work, sir?

Soldier:	Where do you work, sir?	too a ong, ong larm veeyik er daw?
Local:	I am a farmer, sir.	too a ong, toy lar nong zun



© Peter Cambum
Women tending rice fields

Land reform occurred in the North in the 1950s where land holdings were comparatively egalitarian. After national reunification in 1975, the government collectivized the agriculture in the South, where private ownership and autonomous household farming had been more pervasive than in the North. Instead, an assembly line production method was administered by a local collective. Households were paid with a percentage of the output based upon their labor contribution. Wet-rice farming was broken into 21 separate steps, each of which was performed by a specialized team. This became a nightmare to coordinate, particularly since the tractor team had to plow before any other team could do its job. A saying explains how this worked in practice: “The black buffalo eats grass but the red buffalo eats chickens,” alluding to the bribe that the tractor driver required to prioritize his services.¹⁹⁰

To increase production, in 1981 the government introduced a contracting system in which households took responsibility for all steps of production, under the auspices of the cooperative.¹⁹¹ Although households were allowed to keep any surplus beyond the contracted amount, continual contract adjustments did not provide much incentive for households to maximize production.¹⁹² The system proved to be a transitional arrangement before more comprehensive market reforms resulted in increased harvests. Vietnam became a significant rice exporter as policies evolved enough to create incentives in the supply chain.¹⁹³

In 1993, a sweeping law reintroduced a system of private property. While all land still belonged to the state, usage rights were commodified. They could be legally exchanged, mortgaged, and passed down within the family. In effect, this represented a form of *de facto* ownership that has remained in place.

¹⁹⁰ Google Books. International Studies and Overseas Programs, UCLA. Rambo, Terry. “Dilemmas of Development in Vietnam.” January 1996. http://books.google.com/books?id=Hr-aLkeg6JoC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_summary_r&cad=0#PPP1,M1

¹⁹¹ Department of Economics, University of Sydney. “Land Reform and the Development of Commercial Agriculture in Vietnam: Policy and Issues.” 2002. <http://www.agrifood.info/review/2002/Marsh.pdf>

¹⁹² International Policy Center, Gerald Ford School of Public Policy, University of Michigan. Quy Toan-Do and Lakshmi Iyer. “Rural Vietnam in Transition.” May 2004. http://www.internationalpolicy.umich.edu/edts/pdfs/Do_Iyer_Final_May2004.pdf

¹⁹³ Fédération Internationale des Géomètres (XXIII FIG Congress). Dang Hung Vo and Tran Nhu Trung, “Land Policy for Foodless Cancellation and Poverty Reduction in Vietnam.” October 8–13, 2006. http://www.fig.net/pub/fig2006/papers/ts02/ts02_02_vu_trung_0518.pdf

Exchange 56: Do you own this land?

Soldier:	Do you own this land?	an larm choo meeyin duk naay faay Khong?
Local:	Yes.	vang

Land titles are issued in the form of a red book certificate. A pink book is issued for title to property on the land.¹⁹⁴ Government officials were concerned that these changes would result in the reappearance of landlords and a rural proletariat, which the revolution had vowed to eliminate. Their dilemma has been aptly described: “[T]he current system leads to inefficient use of land resources...[yet] moves towards privatization may entail substantial social costs.”¹⁹⁵ Though landlessness has risen, the poor are also better off.¹⁹⁶ This anomaly has been explained in part by their opportunity to earn off-farm income.



© Charles Kelley
Tractor driver in northern Vietnam

Transportation and Lodging

The road network in rural Vietnam is good and well served by long distance bus service. In terms of lodging, while hotels must send all foreign guest registrations to the local police station, most hotels off the beaten tourist track are private and welcome foreign guests.

Exchange 57: Is there lodging nearby?

Soldier:	Is there lodging nearby?	kor nar ngee er gun daay Khong?
Local:	Yes.	vang

After Vietnam joined the World Trade Organization (WTO), the official dual-price policy—in which foreigners were charged substantially more for lodging and transportation—became illegal. Yet room rates will probably not be posted in smaller hotels and are, therefore, subject to negotiation between guest and management. Foreigners can expect to pay more.

Modern amenities and services may be hard to find in rural areas. People who travel outside the cities will find small hotels, hostels, and “homestays” available; however, internet, television, and room service will most likely be absent.¹⁹⁷ Given the lack of off-farm employment opportunities in rural Vietnam, it is common for visitors to be besieged

¹⁹⁴ Thanh Nien Daily News. Toan, Xuan. “PM Wants Land Use, House Deeds to be Unified.” 14 April 2009.

<http://www.thanhniennews.com/politics/?catid=1&newsid=48029>

¹⁹⁵ Reed College. Hare, Denise and Jalal Akbar Mumtaz. “Property Rights in Land: What Are the Key Attributes?” 3 March 2003. <http://web.reed.edu/academic/studentgrants/downloads/proposal.doc>

¹⁹⁶ Finance and Development, International Monetary Fund. Ravallion, Martin and Dominique van de Walle. “Land and Poverty in Reforming Asia.” September 2008.

<http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2008/09/ravallion.htm>

¹⁹⁷ Vietnam Travel Tips. “Vietnam Lodging.” 2009. <http://www.vietnamtraveltips.net/travel-essentials/vietnam-lodging/>

by merchants, some of them children, hawking soft drinks as well as more expensive items. “Maybe later” is a polite way to avoid making a purchase.

Health Care in Rural Areas

Prior to the implementation of the economic reforms, Commune Health Centers (CHC) provided health care to farmers free of charge.

Exchange 58: Is there a medical clinic nearby?

Soldier:	Is there a medical clinic nearby?	kor jarm ee tee er gun daay Khong?
Local:	Yes, over there.	vang, er dang keeya

When cooperatives were disbanded, CHCs lost most of their funding as well as many staffers, who moved into outpatient fee-based services that offered a better income.¹⁹⁸ The inability of poor farmers to pay can force them to self-medicate rather than seek professional care.

Exchange 59: Can you help me?

Soldier:	My arm is broken, can you help me?	karng taay koo a toy bee gaay, an zoop toy dew urk Khong?
Local:	Yes, I can help you.	vang, toy zoop an dew urk

The government’s compulsory health care insurance plan is only open to public-sector employees. Yet self-employed farmers are more vulnerable than other occupational groups to the effects of incapacitation from illness or injury. Peak periods of the agricultural cycle such as harvesting cannot be postponed. Thus, the timing of an illness may have a greater affect on income loss than the amount of time they are incapacitated.

In January 2009, the Bank for Investment and Development of Vietnam (BIDV) agreed to borrow an additional USD 200 million from the World Bank to address rural financial and health issues. The BIDV, working with the World Bank, previously dispersed more than USD 600 million to cities and provinces across Vietnam.¹⁹⁹ While the new loans are not designated specifically for rural health care, money is being funneled into small and medium-sized enterprises to reduce poverty and improve rural living conditions.



© Sara Anderson
Doctor examining baby

Education in Rural Areas

Vietnamese have traditionally venerated education and this is reflected in Vietnam’s high literacy rate. Yet a farmer’s decision on whether and for how long to send his children to

¹⁹⁸ School of Medical Practice and Population Health, Newcastle University. Tuan, Tran. “Community-Based Evidence about the Health Care System in Rural Vietnam.” 2004.
<http://ogma.newcastle.edu.au:8080/vital/access/services/Download/uon:669/DS3?view=true>

¹⁹⁹ VUFO–NGO Resource Centre: Vietnam. “World Bank Add \$200 Mln to Vietnam’s Rural Finance Project.” 2 February 2009. <http://www.ngocentre.org.vn/?q=node/8104>

school (which require families to contribute to upkeep rather than pay tuition), is calculated by how much additional income schooling would later bring in for the family.²⁰⁰

Exchange 60: Is there a school nearby?

Soldier:	Is there a school nearby?	kor ju urn hok er gun daay Khong?
Local:	Yes.	vang

Other factors being equal, girls are more likely to drop out. In recent years, girls have represented as much as 70% of all dropouts.²⁰¹ Although schools offer holidays during peak periods in the agricultural cycle to enable pupils to help their parents, girls often have to work longer in support of the family. Additionally, a sense of disenfranchisement is associated with textbooks that depict subservient roles and de-emphasize the value of education for females. However, there is a shortage of male teachers, whereas women comprise 70% of Vietnam’s primary and secondary school teachers.²⁰²



© Ivar Abrahamsen
Rural classroom

Even though families of ethnic minorities are not required to make any monetary contribution toward education, minorities have lower enrollment rates. In part, this is because of a language barrier. Owing to a lack of teachers from those minorities, instruction is usually presented in Vietnamese, a language that few minority children are exposed to before setting foot in a classroom.²⁰³

Moreover, their nomadic agrarian way of life offers few obvious opportunities to use education.

A Different Way of Life

The government promotes a view of harmonious relations between the ethnic *Kinh* majority, lowland rice farmers, and Vietnam’s various upland-dwelling tribal minorities. Yet historically they have had an uneasy relationship, exacerbated by the recruitment of minorities to fight on different sides during civil conflicts—leaving ill-will and distrust long after the fighting has ended.

For the *Kinh*, culture is reflected in the immaterial aspects of life, such as language, religion, education, and customs. They perceive highlanders as having a less-developed culture and, therefore, refer to them as *moi* (savage)—while the Montagnard or *Degar* people of the Central Highlands refer to themselves as *Dega* (first people).

²⁰⁰ Asia Foundation. “Reducing Poverty: Access to Education in Vietnam.” 19 March 2008. <http://www.asiafoundation.org/news/?p=76>

²⁰¹ UNESCO. National Institute for Educational Development. Loan, Dr. Do Thi Bich. “Gender Issues in Education in Vietnam.” 19 June 2002. http://www.unescobkk.org/fileadmin/user_upload/appeal/gender/vietnam.doc

²⁰² Vietnam News Service. Hoa, Tran Quynh. “Gender Stereotyping Results in Male Teacher Shortages in Vietnam.” 14 July 2008.

http://www.menteach.org/news/gender_stereotyping_results_in_male_teacher_shortages

²⁰³ Enabling Education Network. Nguyen Thi Bich and Dinh Phuong Thao. “Introducing Multilingual Teaching in Vietnam.” 15 December 2008. <http://www.eenet.org.uk/newsletters/news12/page15.shtml>

The name comes from a creation tale in which the first two Montagnards were named *De* and *Ga*. One mythic parent embodies their Mon-Khmer heritage while the other represents their Malayo-Polynesian heritage, from which all Montagnards are descended.²⁰⁴

Exchange 61: Do you know this area?

Soldier:	Do you know this area very well?	an beeyet zor Khoo vuk naay faay Khong?
Local:	Yes.	vang

Kinship and family roles vary within the six distinct *Degar* tribes, but matrilineal and matrilocal marriage patterns are common among them. Accordingly, girls take the initiative to court boys, who can be members of the same community or a different one.²⁰⁵ When a couple is joined in matrimony, the groom moves into the bride's home and adopts her name. Traditionally, the woman's family arranges the marriage and pays a "groom price" to his family, since they are acquiring him as a member.



Exchange 62: Does your leader live here?

Soldier:	Does your leader live here?	ong sar ju urn koo a an song er daay Khong?
Local:	Yes.	vang

Within the family, the traditional gender division of labor is observed. Males are responsible for matters outside of the house, such as ensuring an adequate supply of food, while females are responsible for cooking and childcare. Leadership roles within the community are also filled by males.

Exchange 63: Can you take me to your leader?

Soldier:	Can you take me to your leader?	an doo ah toy den ong sar ju urn koo a an dew urk Khong?
Local:	Yes.	vang

To grow crops, *Degar* practice shifting cultivation. This entails killing trees by cutting around the trunk, burning the undergrowth, and planting crops for three or four years until the soil is depleted of nutrients. The community then moves on to another section of

²⁰⁴ Cultural Orientation Resource Center. "Montagnards: The People." 18 February 2004. <http://www.cal.org/co/montagnards/vpeop.html>

²⁰⁵ *The Ethnography of Vietnam's Central Highlanders*. Salemink, Oscar. "Chapter 1: Introduction: Ethnography, Anthropology, and Colonial Discourse [p. 33]." 2003. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press. http://books.google.com/books?id=2_zKFyHIBk0C&pg=RA1-PA33&lpg=RA1-PA33&dq=matrilineal+montagnard&source=bl&ots=F7aXPN0tWz&sig=BQdeaXU7AUup-PHhrkfAwXj5PLs&hl=en&ei=rkMkSsWXXKp64tOb0-COBA&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1

the forest and begins anew. Clumps of trees are always left untouched, however, to guard the ancestral graves and provide shade for rituals.²⁰⁶

Such rituals focus on a community’s relationship to the forest, particularly the ancestral spirits of the matrilineal clans as well as those of the animals and plants upon which the community relies. Traditionally, each village had a headman whose authority derived from buffalo sacrifices during ceremonial feasts. On these occasions, wealth was redistributed through sharing of meat; and the various forest-dwelling spirits, which the attendees might have offended through their subsistence-related activities, could be appeased.²⁰⁷

Exchange 64: We need your advice.

Soldier:	Respected leader, we need your help / advice / opinion.	too a ong sar ju urn, choong toy kun ong zoop / Khwen / chor ee keeyin
Local:	Yes.	vang

For centuries this way of life proved sustainable in an environment of healthy primary and secondary forests. Yet the land is also valuable for cash-crop cultivation, which has motivated *Kinh* settlers to migrate from the lowlands. The *Kinh* now outnumber the *Degar* 2 to 1, a population transfer that Hanoi has encouraged to ease crowding on farmland elsewhere.²⁰⁸



© Hiepahi V
Farm in Sapu

Newcomers often simply start clearing land, or claim already-cleared land or fallow fields. They plant cash crops such as coffee, which requires water applications that strain local resources, high levels of fertilizer, and pesticide application. Settlers assume that their “land to the tiller” ownership claim will be recognized by the local authorities, who are also *Kinh*. This has led to clashes over land use—which have turned violent.²⁰⁹

Exchange 65: Did these people threaten you?

Soldier:	Did these people threaten you?	nurng ngwee naay dar harm zwa an faay Khong?
Local:	No.	Khong.

²⁰⁶ Lt. Col. John Paul Vann, a soldier and then civilian who spent years in Vietnam and “cheated death numerous times, ...[even] been shot down on several occasions. He’[d] also driven through several ambushes” was killed when his helicopter slammed into just such a clump of trees one dark night in 1972. UC Berkeley, Institute of International Studies. “Remembering the Vietnam War: Conversation with Neil Sheehan.” 14 November 1988. <http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/conversations/Sheehan/sheehan-con4.html>

²⁰⁷ Palomar College. Crouthamel, S.J. “Vietnam: Mnong Gar.” 2003. <http://daphne.palomar.edu/scrouth/seasiai.htm>

²⁰⁸ Journal of Vietnamese Studies. McElwee, Pamela. “‘Blood Relatives’ or Uneasy Neighbors? Kinh Migrant and Ethnic Minority Interactions in the Truong Son Mountains.” Fall 2008. <http://caliber.ucpress.net/doi/abs/10.1525/vs.2008.3.3.81>

²⁰⁹ UN High Commissioner of Refugees, A Writenet Report. “Vietnam: Situation of Indigenous Minority Groups in the Central Highlands.” June 2006. <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/pdfid/44c0f55a4.pdf>

In the northern ethnic hill tribe region, where the land is unsuitable for cash-crop agriculture, there is evidence that local officials honor long-standing, household-user rights to land that has traditionally provided the community with its livelihood.²¹⁰ By contrast, traditional *Degar* concepts of land use are seen as outmoded and an inefficient use of resources in the Central Highlands.

When privatizing user rights, officials have allocated the rights to men (the household head by *Kinh* custom and law), making no allowance for the fact that Montagnard communities have mainly matrilineal kinship and inheritance systems—and thereby have disenfranchised women.²¹¹ Since local authorities are evaluated on their ability to meet targets set elsewhere, they often direct resources toward the *Kinh* and away from the *Degar*, whose typically lower educational achievement level results in a slower rate of return on investment than in *Kinh* communities.²¹²

In response, some *Degar* have moved deeper into the forest to maintain their traditional way of life. Others have crossed into Cambodia, where they have sought refugee status. In some cases, they have been resettled in the U.S.—principally North Carolina, where there is a growing *Degar* community.²¹³

Household Registration and Identity Cards

Vietnamese children are recorded at birth as belonging to a household (*ho*), typically that of their father. The name of every household member (*khau*) is entered in a booklet known as the household registration book (*ho khai*). It is the household head (*chu ho*) who bears responsibility for making sure the entries are up to date.



© Christine Molloy
Family in northwestern Vietnam

Exchange 66: Is this your entire family?

Soldier:	Is this your entire family?	day lar twan bo zar den koo a an faay Khong?
Local:	Yes.	vang

Although the *ho khai* existed in imperial times, since independence it has been used by the communist government to monitor people. The *ho khai* is kept in the family's home, but it is local officials who have the authority to add and delete members. The information includes name, date of birth, occupation, and place of employment.

²¹⁰ Center for Southeast Asian Studies, UCLA. Coe, Cari. "How Citizen's Property Rights Constrain National Forest Policy in Vietnam." 15 October 2008.

<http://www.international.ucla.edu/calendar/showevent.asp?eventid=6904>

²¹¹ Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Salemink, Oscar. "Enclosing the Highlands: Socialist, Capitalist and Protestant Conversions of Vietnam's Central Highlanders." June 2003. [p. 13].

http://dlc.dlib.indiana.edu/archive/00001142/00/Oscar_Salemink_RCSD_paper.pdf

²¹² USAID Vietnam. "Vietnam Central Highlands Needs Assessment Final Report [p. 12]." December 2008. http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNADN887.pdf

²¹³ University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Cannell, Evan. "The Montagnards: From Vietnam to Carolina." 21 March 2005. <http://www.unc.edu/depts/slavdept/lajanda/slav075cannell.ppt>

Exchange 67: Are you the only person in your family who has a job?

Soldier:	Are you the only person in your family who has a job?	ong lar ngwee zwee nut jong zar den kor veeyik larm faay Khong?
Local:	No.	Khong

The *ho khau* provided the police (*cong an*) with a means to control population movements and restrict rural emigration, by basing foodstuff and scarce goods allocations on it.²¹⁴ If a household included people not listed, or if people listed had gone elsewhere without approval, rations could be cut or other disciplinary measures imposed.

Exchange 68: Are these people part of your family?

Soldier:	Are these people part of your family?	nrung ngwee naay kor faay lar zar den an Khong?
Local:	No.	Khong

Although the economic reforms have diminished the state's role in daily lives, employment in the public sector still generally requires an individual to have a local *ho khau*.²¹⁵ If someone runs afoul of the law, confiscation of the *ho khau* can make life difficult in terms of access to social services—such as medical care, and schooling for children.²¹⁶



© Charles Roffey
Children in northern Vietnam

Exchange 69: Is this all the ID you have?

Soldier:	Is this all the ID you have?	daay lar tut kar churung meng nun zen mar an kor?
Local:	Yes.	vang

Vietnamese whose births were registered also have ID cards. Those who lack them generally live on the margins of society, such as on floating villages that move from place to place.²¹⁷ Mobile teams were organized in 2009 to provide ID cards, which include fingerprint identification, to those who live in difficult to access locales.²¹⁸

²¹⁴ Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia. Hardy, Andrew. "Rules and Resources: Negotiating the Household Registration System in Vietnam Under Reform." October 2001.

http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_hb3413/is_2_16/ai_n28870025/

²¹⁵ Vietnam Investment Review. "The Little Residential Book." 15 September 2003.

<http://www.vir.com.vn/Client/VIR/index.asp?url=content.asp&doc=757>

²¹⁶ Refugee Review Tribunal, Australia. "Vietnam." 10 May 2005. <http://www.mrt-rrt.gov.au/docs/research/VNM/rr/VNM17306.pdf>

²¹⁷ Inter-Press Service Asia Pacific. Nhean, Moeun. "Vietnam–Cambodia: In Floating Villages, Lives Adrift." 2005. http://www.newsmekong.org/vietnam-cambodia_in_floating_villages_lives_adrift

²¹⁸ Look at Vietnam. "Central Province Provides Mobile ID Card Service for the Needy." 4 May 2009. <http://www.lookatvietnam.com/2009/05/central-province-provides-mobile-id-card-service-for-the-needy-2.html>

Checkpoints

Checkpoints are common in Vietnam and often associated with local law enforcement shakedowns.

Exchange 70: Where is the nearest checkpoint?

Soldier:	Where is the nearest checkpoint?	jarm keeyim swat gun nuk er daw?
Local:	It's two kilometers.	haay kay so

If their car contains foreign visitors, the Vietnamese hosts may turn on its inside lights as it passes through checkpoints after dark, to discourage local authorities from stopping them and extracting a bribe.



© castinaAmy! Flickr.com
Traffic stop

Exchange 71: Please get out of the car.

Soldier:	Please get out of the car.	sin dee zar Khoy cheeyik sair hoy do
Local:	OK.	dew urk

Nonetheless, drivers know to stop and expect to have their papers examined. They will also assume a bribe can reduce the wait time.

Exchange 72: Show us the car registration.

Soldier:	Show us the car registration.	chor choong toy sem zay darng kee sair
Local:	OK.	dew urk

They will expect to have their cargo inventoried for contraband and taxation.

Exchange 73: Are you carrying any guns?

Soldier:	Are you carrying any guns?	an kor dem teyo soong Khong?
Local:	Yes.	vang

According to Vietnamese authorities, checkpoints at 17 major gateways have also helped to screen and quarantine potential carriers of the H1N1 virus (swine flu), which the World Health Organization (WHO) recently proclaimed a pandemic.²¹⁹

Landmines

Vietnam was extensively mined over the latter half of the 20th century, during the war against the French, the long conflict with the U.S., and the border hostilities with China.

Exchange 74: Is this area mined?

Soldier:	Is this area mined?	Khoo vuk naay kor min faay Khong?
Local:	Yes.	vang

²¹⁹ VietnamnetBridge. "Checkpoints Keep Vietnam Free of Swine Flu." 25 May 2009. <http://english.vietnamnet.vn/Health/2009/05/849603/>

The Chinese military has taken responsibility for several mine sweeps along its border with Vietnam.²²⁰ Bilateral assistance has also been provided by the U.S. to Vietnam's mine removal (demining) efforts. According to a Vietnamese government study, the existence of unexploded ordnance causes over 4,000 sq km (1,544 sq mi) of land that could be cultivated to lie fallow.²²¹



Some demining has not penetrated the topsoil. As a result, soil erosion, flooding, and farming continue to unearth mines. Scavengers are particularly vulnerable to injury because they collect unexploded ordnance and mines to sell for scrap metal. Aware of the risks, they are pushed by poverty into this dangerous line of work.

²²⁰ China.org.cn. Xinhua News Agency. "Landmine Sweeping on Sino-Vietnam Border Nearly Completed." 31 December 2008. http://www.china.org.cn/china/military/2008-12/31/content_17036050.htm

²²¹ Voice of America News. "Clearing Landmines in Vietnam." 18 March 2007. <http://www.voanews.com/uspolicy/2007-03-19-voa2.cfm>

Chapter 6 Family Life

Introduction

The well tended family altar present in virtually every home reflects the Vietnamese view that ancestors remain part of the family. They are believed to actively share in the joys and sorrows of their descendants. Ancestors are also thought to work on behalf of the living to ensure their well-being. For these efforts, they are thanked through daily offerings and prayers.

Exchange 75: Does your family live here?

Soldier:	Does your family live here?	zar ding an song er daay faay Khong?
Local:	Yes.	vang

Within the household, men have higher status than women, and sons are more highly valued than daughters. Deference to hierarchy is stressed not equality among members as dictated by Confucianism. That would mean child to parents, wife to husband, and younger brother to older brother.

Exchange 76: Do you have any brothers?

Soldier:	Do you have any brothers?	an kor an erm jaay Khong?
Local:	Yes.	vang

Blood ties are given primacy in Vietnamese culture. Popular stories warn brothers against allowing anything to come between them, particularly a woman.²²²

Elderly

The elderly are cared for by their sons, daughters-in-law, and grandchildren. The oldest son takes primary responsibility along with inheriting a larger portion of his parents' assets.²²³ Decades of war altered this tradition as families were broken up and generations went missing. If the parents died prematurely, it was the responsibility of the eldest son to raise his siblings, and they were to treat him with the deference accorded to parents.



© i-WeAge! Flickr.com
Elderly couples

Exchange 77: How many people live in this house?

Soldier:	How many people live in this house?	kor bow nee yoh ngwee song jong nar naay?
Local:	Ten.	muee

²²² *Understanding Vietnam*. Jamieson, Neil. "Chapter 1: How the Vietnamese See the World [p. 17]." 1995. Berkeley: University of California.

²²³ Suite101.com. Lebozec, Lana. "Family Expectations of a Vietnamese Son." 21 September 2000. <http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/vietnam/49449>

It remains the norm for adult offspring to care for their parents. Multi-generation households continue to be common. The elderly often tend the grandchildren because the parents are engaged in the day-to-day activities of running and supporting the household. In this capacity, grandparents help educate grandchildren about family history and Vietnamese lore.

Family Formation

Marriages were traditionally arranged between families. The process was undertaken by the male’s elders through intermediaries, to prevent the family from suffering a “loss of face” through public rejection. A long engagement became the norm in Vietnam. It enabled the future son-in-law to show her parents that he would treat his betrothed well. Traditionally, if he and his family did not follow through with this pledge after marriage, the bride had no recourse.

The Vietnamese term for marriage is *ruoc dau*. It means welcoming or escorting (*ruoc*) a wife or daughter-in-law (*dau*) into her new home. Married women have multiple household roles but are most commonly referred to by his family as the daughter-in-law. This emphasis on the integration of the bride into his family reflects the importance of perpetuating the family bloodline.²²⁴

Exchange 78: Are you married?

Soldier:	Are you married?	an lap zar den choo a?
Local:	Already.	roy.



© Harm, Trinh & Ai Vy
Young couple

Pre-marital sex by a courting couple is viewed as a form of Western decadence and is condemned by the government. Sexual pleasure decoupled from reproduction is seen as undesirable and as contributing to family breakdown and societal decay. Nonetheless, it is assumed to be widespread among urbanites. Single parenthood remains shameful, however. Thus, many women rely on legal abortion as a means of birth control. The medical procedure stirs little controversy in Vietnam, which has one of the world’s highest abortion rates. Abortions now outnumber live births in Ho Chi Minh City.²²⁵

The Vietnamese government has alternated between encouraging and mandating a two-child limit per family since 1994. It is common that couples who lack family planning terminate unexpected pregnancies to meet this obligation.²²⁶

²²⁴ *Understanding Vietnam*. Jamieson, Neil. “Chapter 1: How the Vietnamese See the World [pp. 25–26].” 1995. Berkeley: University of California.

²²⁵ Newsvine.com. Mason, Margie. “Vietnam Man Runs ‘Abortion Orphanage.’” 29 March 2008. http://www.newsvine.com/_news/2008/03/29/1398333-vietnam-man-runs-abortion-orphanage

²²⁶ BBC News: Asia Pacific. “Vietnam to Enforce Two-Child Rule.” 20 November 2008. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7740407.stm>

Childbirth

Vietnamese believe a child *in utero* is able to hear everything. To take advantage of this, an expectant mother is supposed to talk to the fetus, to begin educating it in worldly matters, and to remain active but move softly so as to not disturb the baby. Pregnant women abstain from sex after the third month and eat nourishing foods, but do not eat so much that the baby would grow too large before birth.²²⁷ Custom prevents using a metal object to cut the umbilical cord, which was traditionally cut with a knife fashioned from bamboo, or a piece of earthenware.

After delivery, the baby is clothed in hand-me-down rags to avoid making jealous the spirits that could harm the infant. The father, who is never present for the delivery, can see his newborn only after it has been bathed and clothed. Considered 1 year old at birth, new babies will turn 2 when the next lunar new year begins. Hence, a child born on New Year's Eve would be considered 2 the next day.

Traditionally, only close family members visit during a child's first month, to limit the newborn's exposure to germs. Those who come may bring gifts but should not gush about the baby's cuteness or beauty. If they do, the parents will hastily remind them to first say "*trom via*," which means "to talk sneakily behind a spirit's back," in order to keep evil at bay.²²⁸



After the first month, the parents throw a party for the baby in which a godmother is chosen as a protective patron. During this gathering, she presides over a ritual that allows water from a flower on the family altar to drip into the baby's mouth. This practice is intended to elicit sweet words when the baby begins to talk. After the ceremony, it is considered safe to clothe the child in new outfits. After one year, another celebration is held in which a male child is placed on a bed with various objects. Whichever one he picks up will become his vocation. If it is a book, it means he will be a scholar.²²⁹

Childhood

When child mortality rates were high, families went to great lengths to protect male children from being snatched by evil spirits.²³⁰ They were sometimes nicknamed after ferocious animals, or even dressed with their hair styled as if they were girls. Now, parents are expected to go to similar lengths and sacrifice whatever is necessary for their offspring to gain an education. For rural and poor Vietnamese families, the inability to send children to school is an all-too-common occurrence that repeats the cycle of

²²⁷ St Elizabeth Medical Center. Cultural Diversity. "Vietnamese: Women's Health/Gender Roles." 2000–2006. http://www.stemc.org/about_stemc/cultural_diversity/vietnamese.php?id=319

²²⁸ *The House on Dream Street*. Sachs, Dana. 2000. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books. <http://www.adoptvietnam.org/vietnamese/names-vietnamese.htm>

²²⁹ Street Directory. Asia Destinations. Nguyen, Bobby. "Vietnam Travel: Marriage in Vietnam." No date. http://www.streetdirectory.com/travel_guide/208089/asia_destinations/vietnam_travel_marriage_in_vietnam.html

²³⁰ *The Religions of South Vietnam in Faith and Fact*. U.S. Department of the Navy, Bureau of Naval Personnel, Chaplains Division [1967]. "Animism." <http://sacred-texts.com/asia/rsv/rsv04.htm>

poverty.²³¹ If at all possible, children are sent to school, because education is viewed as the best means for the family to improve their economic circumstances.²³²

Exchange 79: Do your children go to school?

Soldier:	Do your children go to school?	kark korn an kor dee hork Khong?
Local:	Yes.	vang



Early on, children are inculcated with the importance of filial piety (*hieu*) and moral debt (*on*). Throughout life, Vietnamese children carry an ingrained sense of indebtedness toward their parents. All they can do is try to lighten their parents’ load and strive to make them proud. A father will never express this sentiment, however, since it might cause the child to cease striving. Complying with parental wishes in all matters, big and small, is a way to demonstrate *hieu*. Moreover, the child will need to abstain from any behavior that could diminish the family’s standing in the community, which would affect not only the deceased ancestors but the generations yet to come.²³³

Household Authority

An immigrant woman, whose parents’ marriage was arranged by their fathers against her mother’s wishes, says her mother “[H]as not once left my father or raised a hand against him, either to defend herself or protect her children. She still stands by his side and willingly supports any decisions he makes, with little regard to her own opinions.”²³⁴

Exchange 80: Is this your wife?

Soldier:	Is this your wife?	day lar var an faay Khong?
Local:	Yes.	vang

This reflects the Confucian view that circumstances may allow a husband to strike his wife. It extends to children as well who, according to a Vietnamese saying, “sit where

²³¹ Inter-Press Service Asia Pacific. Nhean, Moeun. “Vietnam–Cambodia: In Floating Villages, Lives Adrift.” 2005. http://www.newsmekong.org/vietnam-cambodia_in_floating_villages_lives_adrift

²³² Google Books. *Sociology of Families*. “How Should Individual Rights and Family Obligation Be Balanced?” 2002. Pine Forest Press. http://books.google.com/books?id=BXxogvIQKLcC&pg=PA57&lpg=PA57&dq=vietnamese+families+sacrifice+children's+education&source=bl&ots=qstu-XREjz&sig=dVdCvoBVBcgR-G27N9CObx_a428&hl=en&ei=KNMmSoH5GZHgsgOt282QBg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=3

²³³ Google Books. *Vietnam’s Forgotten Army: Heroism and Betrayal in the ARVN*. Wiest, Andrew and Jim Webb. “Chapter 1: Coming of Age in a Time of War [p. 12].” 2008. New York: New York University Press. http://books.google.com/books?id=r3dez4JhXUQC&pg=PA12&lpg=PA12&dq=on+moral+debt+vietnam&source=bl&ots=Ize09rPhCW&sig=KFqXolCAEI8PHhEyrgCH5xgB_vQ&hl=en&ei=gLImSoCMIZnutQPOwdGbBg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=5

²³⁴ *Secrets of the Red Lantern: Stories and Vietnamese Recipes from the Heart*. Nguyen, Pauline. “Chapter 10: Red is For Life [p. 313].” 2008. Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing.

their parents place them.”²³⁵ In Vietnam there is no recognition that discipline can turn into child abuse. Corporal punishment is considered part of responsible parenting and is typically carried out by male members of the family. In the event a child is injured and requires medical care, the police would simply charge the father, or grandfather, with disorderly conduct rather than child endangerment.²³⁶

One exception is when a child is eating rice, which is served at virtually every meal. It is believed that no matter how serious the offense, physical punishment would disrupt the bond between the eater and the mythical rice-maker. Savvy children learn to eat slowly when they have provoked parental displeasure.²³⁷

Status of Women

In addition to cooking and cleaning, women manage the family budget, oversee child-rearing, and care for the elders. They have also traditionally dominated the ranks of street traders (*tieu thuong*). This was viewed as a lowly profession by Confucius, since marketplace activities typically involve vigorous bargaining. Such a negative perception of traders as devious was subsequently reinforced by Marxism.



While the economic reforms (*doi moi*) were intended to unleash entrepreneurship, hawking-related activities continue to meet with social disapproval. As a Vietnamese commentator observed, “The business families cannot but leave a negative mark on the minds of their children, who come into daily contact with trading, hustling and even cheating activities.”²³⁸

Exchange 81: Are these your children?

Soldier:	Are these your children?	day lar kark korn an faay Khong?
Local:	Yes.	vang

Owing to the high visibility of women in the marketplace, “female greed” is viewed in some quarters as destroying traditional morality. Yet women’s economic contribution to their families has lifted households out of poverty. It has also enabled many others to acquire middle class status in which a degree of material comfort has become a precondition for domestic contentment.

²³⁵ Harborview Medical Center, University of Washington. “Vietnamese Cultural Profile.” July 1996. http://www.ethnomed.org/cultures/vietnamese/vietnamese_cp.html

²³⁶ Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN). “Viet Nam: Dramatic Rise in Child Abuse Cases.” 29 August 2008. <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/publisher,IRIN,,VNM,48b7acb31a,0.html>

²³⁷ Office of Outreach, Cornell University. “Teaching Asia: Vietnam Through Cinema.” 3 November 1998. <http://www.einaudi.cornell.edu/Southeastasia/outreach/resources/vietcinema/TeachingAsiaVietCinema.htm>

²³⁸ Education about Asia, Marriage and Family in Asia. Leshkowich, Anne Marie. “Entrepreneurial Families in Viet Nam: Controversial Symbols of Moral Dilemmas in Changing Times [p. 2].” Spring 2008. <http://www.asian-studies.org/EAA/Leshkowich-13-1.pdf>

Reflecting their improved status within the family, women have been accorded the right to have their own names on land titles. Specifically, the central government has pledged to redesign title certificates, issued by local authorities, to include two spaces—for the names of both husband and wife—rather than just the male head of household. This will enable women to provide collateral to secure access to credit for their business activities.²³⁹

Divorce

Traditionally rare in Vietnam, divorce (for reasons other than female infertility) is a relatively new phenomenon.²⁴⁰ In the last two decades, however, divorce has become much more culturally accepted and commonplace, averaging over 50,000 per year.²⁴¹ Domestic abuse is cited as the leading factor in marital break-up.²⁴² For urbanites, their accumulated material assets can be divided and child custody worked out between the couple.



© McKay Savage
Market woman in ChauDoc

For farmers, it is more complicated. Women who marry and leave the village of their birth cannot continue to farm there. Although in theory they might be able to rent out their allotment of land, in reality it belongs to the family collectively, and is managed by the head of household.²⁴³

Exchange 82: Did you grow up here?

Soldier:	Did you grow up here?	an lirn leen er daay faay Khong?
Local:	Yes.	vang

²³⁹ The World Bank. *Economic Status of Women*. “Gender Equality Focus of Berlin Conference.” 22 February 2007.

<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/NEWS/0,,contentMDK:21227023~pagePK:64257043~piPK:437376~theSitePK:4607,00.html>

²⁴⁰ Google Books. *Infertility Around the Globe: New Thinking on Childlessness, Gender, and Reproductive Technologies*. Inhorn, Marcia Claire and Frank van Balen, eds. Griel, Arthur. “Chapter 5: Infertile Bodies [p. 148].” 2002. Berkeley: University of California.

http://books.google.com/books?id=v5RD71IHGLAC&pg=PA145&lpg=PA145&dq=divorce+vietnam&source=bl&ots=2j9SqIBcQC&sig=atw0rB6rcj0hJWWpbNWleR4rj00&hl=en&ei=9p0lSpXWGaCCtgOdpfGbBg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=2#PPA148,M1

²⁴¹ Chao-Vietnam. “Over 50,000 Vietnamese Couples Divorce Each Year.” 27 June 2007. <http://chao-vietnam.blogspot.com/2007/06/over-50000-vietnamese-couples-divorce.html>

²⁴² UNFPA. Vietnam. “Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment.” 2006. <http://vietnam.unfpa.org/gender.htm>

²⁴³ Google Books. *Women’s Rights to House and Land*. Tinker, Irene and Gale Summerfield, eds. Tran Thi Van Anh. “Chapter 5: Women and Land in Rural Vietnam [p. 111].” 1999. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

http://books.google.com/books?id=BgOP9jp9OI8C&pg=PA111&lpg=PA111&dq=divorce+vietnam&source=bl&ots=49SEamCJXa&sig=l8pLFJU1iTZW8DY0J2_16tJCe_I&hl=en&ei=6Z8lSoKEHqDYswPhxvyZBg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=2

Yet in the event of divorce, women customarily leave their husband's home and lose the right to farm land in his village as well. Thus, only under extreme circumstances would a female farmer initiate divorce.

Naming Conventions

Vietnamese surnames, which appear first, were acquired during imperial times. Since the final three dynasties were Tran, Le, and Nguyen, respectively, these are the most common surnames.²⁴⁴ But Vietnamese do not refer to themselves as Mr. or Mrs. Nguyen. Rather, Nguyen Van Hai would be known as Mr. Hai. Nguyen Thi Hoa would be known as Mrs. Hoa. The middle name Van indicates the person is male; Thi indicates the person is female and is quite common. Other middle names might reflect generation or family birth order. Vietnamese women do not change their surnames upon marriage, so it is entirely coincidental if they share a common name with their husbands.



Upon a first meeting with a foreigner, Vietnamese may ask about the origin of one's name, and might express surprise that English given names have no meaning. Vietnamese often introduce themselves to foreigners by explaining the meaning of their given name. "I'm Ngoc (jade)." Popular first names for boys include Minh (bright), Phuoc (lucky), and Vinh (successful). Girls are named for objects of delicate beauty, such as flowers. Lan (orchid) and Dao (peach blossom) are common female names.²⁴⁵ There are also unisex names such as Hanh, which means "has good conduct."

²⁴⁴ Australian Federation of Police. "Asian Culture and Crime Trends." August 1997. http://www.afp.gov.au/about/publications/platypus_magazine/platypus_magazine_previous_editions/1998/march_1998/asian.html

²⁴⁵ Behind the Name: The Etymology and History of First Names. Campbell, Mike. "Vietnamese Names." 1996–2009. <http://www.behindthename.com/nmc/vie.php>