

U.S. FORCES INDOPACIFIC CULTURE GUIDE

Vietnam



U.S. AIR FORCE

About this Guide

This guide is designed to prepare you to deploy to culturally complex environments and achieve mission objectives. The fundamental information contained within will help you understand the cultural dimension of your assigned location and gain skills necessary for success.



The guide consists of two parts:

Part 1 “Culture General” introduces the foundational knowledge you need to operate effectively in any global environment – Southeast Asia in particular.

Part 2 “Culture Specific” describes the unique cultural features of Vietnamese society. This section is designed to complement other pre-deployment training. It applies culture-general concepts to help increase your knowledge of your assigned deployment location.



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PART 1 – CULTURE GENERAL

What is Culture?

Fundamental to all aspects of human existence, culture shapes the way humans view life and functions as a tool we use to adapt to our social and physical environments. A culture is the sum of all of the beliefs, values, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning for a society. All human beings have culture, and individuals within a culture share a general set of beliefs and values.

Members of a culture also usually assign the same meanings to the symbols in that culture. A symbol is when one thing – an image, word, object, idea, or story – represents another thing. For example, the American flag is a physical and visual symbol of a core American value – freedom. At the same time, the story

of George Washington admitting to having chopped down a cherry tree is also symbolic, representing the importance Americans place on personal honesty and leadership integrity.



Force Multiplier

The military services have learned through experience the importance of understanding other cultures. Unlike the 20th-century bipolar world order that dominated US strategy for nearly half a century, today the US military is operating in what we classify as asymmetric or irregular conflict zones where the notion of cross-cultural interactions is on the leading edge of our engagement strategies.

We have come to view the people themselves, rather than the political system or physical environment, as the decisive feature in conflict areas. Our primary objective hinges on influencing constructive change through peaceful means where possible. We achieve this endeavor by encouraging local nationals to focus on developing stable political, social, and economic institutions that reflect their cultural beliefs and traditions.

Therefore, understanding the basic concepts of culture serves as a force multiplier. Achieving an awareness and respect of a society's values and beliefs enables deploying forces to build relationships with people from other cultures, positively influence their actions, and ultimately achieve mission success.

Cultural Domains

Culture is not just represented by the beliefs we carry internally, but also by our behaviors and by the systems members of a culture create to organize their lives. These systems, such as political or educational institutions, help us to live in a manner that is appropriate to our culture and encourages us to perpetuate that culture into the future.

We can organize these behaviors and systems into categories – what the Air Force refers to as “cultural domains” – in order to better understand the primary values and characteristics of a society. A cross-culturally competent military member can use these domains – which include kinship, language and communication, and social and political systems among others (see chart in Worldview) – as tools for understanding and adapting to any culture. For example, by understanding the ways different cultures define family or kinship, a deployed military member can more effectively interact with members of that culture.



Social Behaviors Across Cultures

While humankind shares basic behaviors, various groups enact or even group those behaviors differently across cultural boundaries. For example, all societies obtain food for survival, although agrarian societies generally produce their own food for limited consumption using very basic techniques.

Conversely, industrialized nations have more sophisticated market economies, producing foodstuffs for universal consumption. Likewise, all cultures value history and tradition, although they represent these concepts through a variety of

unique forms of symbolism. While the dominant world religions share the belief in one God, their worship practices vary with their traditional historical development. Similarly, in many kin-based cultures where familial bonds are foundational to social identity, it is customary for family or friends to serve as godparents, while for other societies this practice is nearly non-existent.



Worldview

One of our basic human behaviors is the tendency to classify others as similar or different according to our cultural standard. As depicted in the chart below, we can apply the 12 cultural domains to help us compare similarities and differences across cultures. We evaluate others' behavior to determine if they are "people like me" or "people not like me." Consequently, we assume that individuals falling into the "like me" category share our perspectives and values.

12 Domains of Culture



This collective perspective forms our worldview – how we see the world and understand our place in it. Your worldview functions as a lens through which you see and understand the world. It helps you to interpret your experiences and the values and behaviors of other people that you encounter. Consider your worldview as a way of framing behavior, providing an accountability standard for our actions and a logical explanation of why we individually or collectively act in a certain manner.

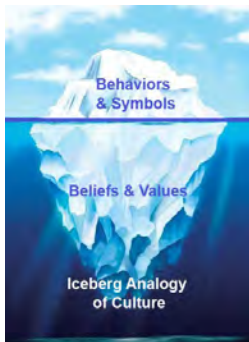
Cultural Belief System

An important component of a worldview is our belief system. A community's belief system sets its universal standards of what is good and bad, defines right and wrong behavior, and assigns a value of meaningful or meaningless. Our beliefs form the fundamental values we hold to be true – regardless of whether there is physical evidence to support these ideas. Beliefs are a central facet of human culture. They are shared views about world order and how the universe was physically and socially constructed.

While all people have beliefs, their specific components tend to vary depending upon respective world views. What people classify as good or bad, right or wrong depends on our deeply-held beliefs we started developing early in life that have help shape our characters. Likewise, these values are ingrained in our personalities and shape our behavior patterns and our self-identities. Because cultural beliefs are intensely held, they are difficult, though not impossible, to change.

Core Beliefs

Core beliefs shape and influence certain behaviors and also serve to rationalize those behaviors. Therefore, knowledge of individual or group beliefs can be useful in comprehending or making sense of their activities. We will use the iceberg model for classifying culture to illustrate two levels of meaning, as depicted. Beliefs and values, portrayed by the deeper and greater level of the



submerged iceberg, are seldom visible, but are indicated / hinted at / referenced by our behaviors and symbols (top level). It is important to recognize, though, that the parts of culture that are not visible (under the waterline) are informing and shaping what is being made visible (above the waterline).

In many cases, different worldviews may present behaviors that are contrary to our own beliefs, particularly in many regions where US forces deploy. Your ability to suspend judgment in order to understand another perspective is essential to establishing relationships with your host-nation counterparts. The ability to withhold your opinion and strive to understand a culture from a member of that culture's perspective is known as cultural relativism. It often involves taking an alternate perspective when interpreting others' behaviors and is critical to your ability to achieve mission success.

As you travel throughout Southeast Asia, you will encounter cultural patterns of meaning that are common across the region. What follows is a general description of 12 cultural domains which are used to frame those commonalities.

CULTURAL DOMAINS

1. History and Myth

History and myth are related concepts. History is a record of the past that is based on verifiable facts and events. Myth can act as a type of historical record, although it is usually a story which members of a culture use to explain community origins or important events that are not verifiable or which occurred prior to written language.

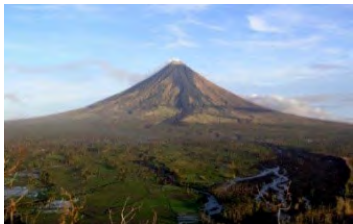


Southeast Asia includes 5 countries on the mainland (Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam) and 5 maritime countries in the North Pacific Ocean and the South China Sea (Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Brunei). As early as 150 BC, the scattered communities on the mainland traded with

and paid tribute to the dominating kingdoms of China and India. China maintained a presence in Vietnam for over 1000 years, while's India's influence was felt mainly as its inhabitants spread Hinduism, Buddhism, and later Islam across the region. Southeast Asia's most famous ancient empire, the Khmer, ruled for 4 centuries beginning around 800 AD from its center at Angkor in Cambodia. Later, Thai kings expanded across the mainland, while a Hindu kingdom from India united the Indonesian archipelago.

China began to halt its expeditions to the region in mid-15th century, just as European nations began sending theirs. The

Portuguese were the first to conquer a Southeast Asian settlement in 1511, although their influence in the region was short-lived. Observing their success, the Dutch and English moved into the area as well. The



Europeans sought to acquire trade routes and territories, and from the 17th through the 19th centuries the Dutch worked to consolidate their power in today's Indonesia, the Spanish their control of the Philippines, the English their hold over Burma and Malaysia, and the French their control over Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. By the beginning of the 20th century, virtually all of Southeast Asia was controlled by colonial powers; only Thailand remained independent.

During World War II, Japan invaded and occupied portions of Malaysia, Burma, Thailand, and the Philippines. After the war, independence movements regained traction, and following years of struggle against the occupying Americans, the Philippines became the first country in Southeast Asia to gain its independence in 1946. Other countries endured years of instability and conflict on their way to independence. In Vietnam, communist rebels battled and defeated the French but then engaged the US in a controversial war. A civil war in Cambodia ended in the rise to power of the Khmer Rouge, during whose reign in the late 1970s almost 2 million people died. A few years

after the Dutch ceded power in Indonesia, a dictator took control in a coup and ruled for 32 years before resigning in 1998. Similarly, a military junta wielding absolute power has ruled Burma since 1962. Since the 1990s, Southeast Asia has largely enjoyed renewed stability. Both Thailand and Malaysia now have an affluent, educated middle class; Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam are well on the road to recovery from decades of conflict; and even Burma has recently held elections and initiated reform to a civilian democracy.

2. Political and Social Relations

Political relations are the ways in which members of a community organize leadership, power, and authority. Social relations are all of the ways in which individuals are linked to others in their community.



Differences in the physical environment affected the social and political structures that historically developed in Southeast Asia. Where people were nomadic or semi-nomadic, systems of government were less permanent and bureaucratic. In areas where populations were more settled, a reliable tax base allowed the development of more elaborate and permanent governing structures. These early states, though, often found it difficult to extend their authority into the remote highlands, where small tribal groups resided, and the islands, where some groups lived permanently in water communities of small boats.

Significant changes occurred in Southeast Asia around 2000 years ago as peoples from China and India began to move into the region (see *History and Myth*). New leaders formed new empires and states, and spiritual beliefs and practices changed as religious leaders introduced new religious traditions (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

Many colonial-era governments, fearing the threat that an educated class might hold, largely denied education and civil liberties to most Southeast Asians and discouraged political activities. Political participation swelled around the time of

independence, although many post-independence political structures in the region were dictatorial and repressive. While most countries are healing from their 20th century conflicts, many governments continue to reflect authoritarian elements. Elites across the region continue to seek to control access to the political system. They are typically from the country's dominant class, which is often comprised of members of a particular ethnic group.

Some countries, such as Vietnam and Cambodia, are somewhat ethnically homogenous, while others, such as the Philippines and Indonesia, are much more diverse. Many countries also have minority communities of ethnic Chinese and Indians. So-called hill tribes, minority groups with distinct ethnic and linguistic identities, are found in Burma, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), formed in 1967, is a regional intergovernmental organization whose goal is to promote economic and political cooperation among its members, including the creation of a free trade community. ASEAN priorities include fostering economic and diplomatic relations with India and China, which have been strained due to longtime territorial disputes in the region. The European Union has a strong relationship with the organization and has taken steps to deepen trade and business links. The US also has close political, security, and economic relations with most of the member states.

The relationship between Japan and the countries of Southeast Asia has improved significantly since World War II, and Japan is a crucial economic and aid partner today.



3. Religion and Spirituality

Religion is a cultural belief system that provides meaning to members of a community. Religious and spiritual beliefs help preserve the social order by defining proper behavior. They also

create social unity by defining shared identity, offer individuals peace of mind, and explain the causes of events in a society.

The earliest populations of Southeast Asia were animists, which means they believed that many different spirits inhabited elements in the natural environment, such as trees and rocks, or were represented in natural phenomena, such as thunder and lightning, or represented deceased ancestors. In many areas today, these traditional beliefs are still very important, and many Southeast Asians incorporate them in their practice of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity.

Indian traders and priests first brought Hinduism to Southeast Asia in the 1st century AD, where it eventually became the dominant religion in several kingdoms. In the 14th century the influence of Hinduism began to wane as people turned to Islam. Today, although there remain only small communities of Hindus in Indonesia, the Hindu principles of absolutism and hierarchy remain significant in politics across the region.

Indian merchants also brought Buddhism to Southeast Asia beginning in the 1st century AD where it became well established in Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia, and Malaysia. Later, Chinese immigrants introduced Buddhism to Vietnam and Singapore. Many Southeast Asian mainlanders

are Buddhist today, although their beliefs and practices may also include some animist and Hindu traditions.

Chinese people spread the teachings of Confucius primarily in what is today Vietnam and



Singapore. These teachings embody a complex belief system emphasizing stability, consensus, hierarchy, and authority that still influences ideas of social harmony across the region.

Islam reached Southeast Asia beginning in the 10th century through Muslim traders from the Middle East, China, and India, with a large number of Southeast Asians converting to Islam beginning in the 14th century to escape the Hindu caste system.

The largest population of Muslims in the world, approximately 240 million, lives in Indonesia today. Muslim minority communities in Thailand and the Philippines have historically suffered economic and political marginalization.

Christianity was introduced to the region by European colonizers beginning in the 16th century. Today, although parts of Indonesia have Christian communities, the Philippines is the only predominantly Christian country in Southeast Asia.

4. Family and Kinship

The domain of family and kinship refers to groups of people related through blood ties, marriage, or through strong emotional bonds that influence them to treat each other like family members (often called “fictive kin”).



Family life is very important to Southeast Asians and relationships among family members are highly valued. As in the US, kinship is generally traced through both parents. Children are generally very

respectful of their parents, and parents are devoted to their children, making economic or other sacrifices as a matter of course to ensure their well-being.

Traditionally, close proximity of kin was a valuable resource in Southeast Asia's agriculturally-based villages. Families were large and close-knit as individual members supported each other economically and socially and the rhythms of family and village life mirrored those of the agricultural cycle.

Family life in Southeast Asia has changed in recent decades as societies have become more economically and socially diverse due to industrialization and urbanization. Today, a much wider variety of occupations is open to both men and women, and the middle class is growing in cities across the region. Women have fewer children today than they did 3 decades ago, and many households in the cities no longer contain 3 or 4 generations of extended family but are mostly nuclear families.

Many Southeast Asian countries that have large rural hinterlands, such as Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand, also have large metropolises, such as Jakarta, Manila, and Bangkok. In these sorts of countries, there is a sharp rural-urban divide in economic and educational opportunities that results in stark differences in rural and urban family life. In rural villages, extended families may remain intact whose activities revolve around agricultural production, while in urban centers the household is usually much smaller and family structures are much more diverse.

Although arranged marriages are much less common today, most Southeast Asians depend on their family's input when choosing a marriage partner. The ages of both the bride and groom have increased as young people postpone marriage to pursue economic and educational opportunities, and divorce rates have risen in recent decades. Of note, in Indonesia and Malaysia Muslim men are allowed to practice polygyny, or have more than one wife, if they can afford to support them all. For these Southeast Asians, matrimony and divorce are under the jurisdiction of Islamic law.

5. Sex and Gender

Sex refers to the biological/reproductive differences between males and females, while gender is a more flexible concept that refers to a culture's categorizing of masculine and feminine behaviors, symbols, and social roles.

Southeast Asia's dominant philosophies and religions (Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity) privilege the male's role as provider and stress female subordination. Despite most countries' commitment to gender equality, women across Southeast Asia may find participation in the business and political spheres difficult, and in some countries, there is still a marked preference for sons over daughters.



Despite these challenges, there is widespread acceptance of women in the workplace, though women usually receive less pay

than men. Industrialization has provided new opportunities for women, and many Southeast Asian women continue to work beyond marriage and children. Hundreds of thousands of Southeast Asian women even relocate to other countries to work as nurses and domestic workers.

Within the agricultural sector, women produce about 50% of food in the region and represent a significant share of the agricultural labor force. They are particularly involved in harvesting rice, tea production, and working on rubber and fruit plantations. Women generally have access to education and training, and in Thailand and the Philippines there are actually more post-secondary female graduates than males.

Opinion on sexual orientation and gender identity is most liberal in the Philippines, where homosexuality is legal and there have been attempts to pass anti-discrimination legislation to protect sexual minorities. But in many parts of Southeast Asia homosexuals suffer discrimination and stigmatization. Malaysia criminalizes homosexuality and cross-dressing, and in Indonesia transgender individuals are often the victims of violence and exploitation.

6. Language and Communication

Language is a system for sharing information symbolically, whereby words are used to represent ideas. Communication is defined as the cultural practice of sharing meaning in interaction, both verbally and non-verbally.



Southeast Asia is linguistically very diverse; of the approximately 6000 languages spoken in the world today, about 1000 of them are found in Southeast Asia. Many of the ancient indigenous languages that were present in the region have become extinct as a result of war, cultural and economic domination, and small population size.

The languages of mainland Southeast Asia belong to 3 groups: Austro-Asiatic (such as Cambodian and Vietnamese), Tai (such as Thai and Lao), and Tibeto-Burmese (including highland languages and Burmese). Languages that belong to these 3 groups are also found in India and China. Conversely, most of the languages spoken on the islands of Southeast Asia belong to the Austronesian family, a group of languages originating from southern China and Taiwan.

The colonial powers that controlled Southeast Asia until the 20th century primarily promoted and used their own languages including French, Dutch, English, and Spanish. Since independence, several states have named one local linguistic variety as the “standard,” such as Bahasa Indonesian and Bangkok Thai, and promoted its use over both European and other local languages. Recently, after years of aggressively promoting their national languages, many Southeast Asian countries have re-introduced English as a language of instruction in school and allowed ethnic Chinese and Indians to attend school in their own languages.



Ancient Southeast Asians developed their own writing systems based on scripts from India and China. Today, Vietnamese, Malaysian, Indonesian, and Filipino, like English and most western European languages, use the Latin alphabet, while Burmese, Laotian, Thai, and Cambodian use writing systems derived from ancient Indian scripts.

Southeast Asians are rarely confrontational or highly demonstrative and emotional in their communication. They value respect as a key component in maintaining social harmony, and conveying respect is a significant aspect of both verbal and non-verbal communication. For example, proper greetings, such as pressing the palms together and slightly bowing as is common in Thailand, are extremely important across Southeast Asia.

7. Learning and Knowledge

All cultures require that the older generation transmit important information to the younger generation. This information can be strictly factual (for example, how to fulfill subsistence and health requirements) and culturally traditional (the beliefs, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning to the community). This knowledge transfer may occur through structured, formalized systems such as schools or through informal learning by watching adults or peers.

Throughout their history, the cultures of Southeast Asia have willingly borrowed and adapted ideas, practices, and institutions from beyond the region. This willingness is evident in the history of education. Prior to colonization, both Hindu and Muslim traders and migrants from India and beyond brought their own traditions of education to the region, and local Southeast Asian

communities adopted these curricula and educational methods to their needs.

Later, during the colonial period, the European powers were largely uninterested in providing education to Southeast Asians because they viewed them principally

as agricultural laborers. If the colonial powers did provide educational opportunities, they were largely confined to members of privileged groups.

Still later, as populations across the region began to resist colonization, the lack of educational opportunities became a topic around which to rally. In many countries, local activists adopted western educational methods but also drew on local traditions to devise new educational opportunities through which they articulated their arguments for independence.

Today, education in Southeast Asia is viewed as both a tool for developing the region and as a human right. Consequently, in most countries education is open to every citizen regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, or socio-economic background. Rapidly



growing populations challenge most national governments in their goals of providing 12 years of basic education to all, often forcing a sacrifice in the quality of services. Students in both urban and rural areas often suffer from a lack of adequate classrooms, teachers, and good text books, although primary school enrollment averages an excellent 96% in the region.

8. Time and Space

In every society, people occupy space and time in ways that are not directly linked to physical survival. In most western cultures, people tend to be preoccupied with strict time management, devoting less effort to relationship-building. Conversely, in most Southeast Asian cultures establishing and maintaining relationships within the group can take precedence over accomplishing a task in the most efficient manner.

Southeast Asians' emphasis on the well-being of the group and maintaining social harmony often means people will deliberately avoid embarrassment of themselves and others, a strategy often referred to as "saving face." Many Southeast Asians try to manage their time efficiently while still showing respect to their co-workers and maintaining "face."



Time is maximized by multi-tasking, and engagements usually start when scheduled. Networking is very important in Southeast Asia, and new contacts are often best made through a high status third party who knows both parties well. Only after the establishment of a good rapport can business negotiations proceed.

Public and private spaces often overlap in a way that is unfamiliar to Americans. Shop owners may also live at their place of business, so entering into a public space can also mean entry into an individual's private space. Consequently, customers and clients should always show proper respect.

9. Aesthetics and Recreation

Every culture has its own forms of creative expression that are guided by aesthetic principles of imagination, beauty, skill and style. Most of Southeast Asia's forms of creative expression, such as art, architecture, dance, music, and theater, reflect the diversity of cultures and ethnicities of the region as well as the influence of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. Ancient and elaborate Hindu temples and highly symbolic statues of Buddha are found in many countries. Similarly, across Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, Islamic art and architecture

intermingle with examples of Hindu and local animist traditions.



Traditional classical dance and theater are enjoying a revival after some forms

came close to extinction during the wars and conflicts of the 20th century. These traditions trace back to the ancient kingdoms of the region and often include dancers dressed in elaborate masks and costumes. Ancient forms of shadow-puppet theater, in which paper puppets are manipulated against a lighted backdrop, are also popular in several countries.

Combat sports of Asian and Western origins are popular in Southeast Asia today. With the end of the colonial-era ban on martial arts, indigenous forms such as *Pentjak Silat* and *Bersilat* combined with other Asian forms to make up *Muay Thai*, *Pencak Silat* and *Kali*, the main components of today's Mixed Martial Art fighting.

The Southeast Asian Games are an important regional sporting event. These biennial games bring together over 4,000 athletes for 11 days of competition in the Olympic sports and promote regional cooperation and understanding.

10. Sustenance and Health

Societies have different methods of transforming natural resources into food. These methods can shape residence patterns, family structures and economics. Theories of disease

and healing practices exist in all cultures and serve as adaptive responses to disease and illness.

As expected from Southeast Asia's location on the water, more fish is consumed than any other form of animal protein. Rice, a grain that has been cultivated in the region for thousands of years, is the primary food staple. Everyday meals are typically simple, consisting of chopped pieces of meat and vegetables that are fried or steamed and served with rice, often accompanied by spicy chili condiments. Influences from India and China are obvious in popular dishes such as spicy curries and rice noodle soups. Members of Muslim communities in Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines typically do not eat pork or drink alcohol.

Malaria, HIV/AIDS, and the lack of clean drinking water are the main health concerns in Southeast Asia. With an estimated 10% of worldwide new cases coming from the region in 2022, malaria is a major problem. The HIV/AIDS epidemic was delayed in reaching Southeast Asia but turned into a major cause of death throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Since then, due to successful HIV prevention programs including those aimed at sex workers and their clients,



transmission rates have steadily declined, and recent HIV/AIDS incidence rates have been similar to those of the US. Access to clean water has increased in most regions but in Burma, Cambodia and Laos 11-15% of the population still lacks access to improved drinking water sources. All countries are faced with the rise of non-communicable diseases among their aging populations, and most face the threat of emerging infectious diseases, such as the avian flu.

The countries of Southeast Asia confront many challenges in providing health care for their growing populations. Rapid but unequal socioeconomic development has resulted in significant

disparities in health and access to healthcare. Despite these challenges, most countries have experienced a continual increase in life expectancy since the 1950s.

11. Economics and Resources

This domain refers to beliefs regarding appropriate ways for a society to produce, distribute, and consume goods and services. Most Southeast Asian communities practiced wet-rice and slash-and-burn agriculture for centuries before the arrival of Europeans in the 16th century. In addition, Southeast Asia's geographical location between China and India as well as its position on navigable waterways which connect the West and Middle East with Asia and Australia made the area an important center of trade well before European presence.

With European expansion into the area came the introduction of plantations and the mechanization of agriculture as well as the entry of the region into the global marketplace. Worldwide demand for rice increased dramatically in the 19th century, further changing the agricultural landscape of the region. Today, all 3 agriculture types – wet-rice, slash-and-burn, and plantation – are still practiced in the region and all have caused serious

ecological damage such as massive deforestation and an increase in the production of greenhouse gases.

Beginning in the 20th century the region experienced a dramatic industrialization process with growth rates

exceeding even those of developed nations. Explosive growth in exports such as textiles, electronics, auto parts, and petroleum lead to double-digit economic growth, greatly increasing local GDPs. Though in 2022 roughly 10% of the population currently lives below the poverty line of \$2.15 per day, regional economies have grown and now supply both skilled and semi-skilled workers to other countries. The 2008 global financial crisis caused damage to the economies of Southeast Asia. While the financial sector did not engage in high-risk lending practices,



there was a severe drop in exports due to a global reduction in spending from which the countries are still recovering.

12. Technology and Material

Societies use technology to transform their physical world, and culture heavily influences the development and use of technology. After the colonial period, the countries of Southeast Asia have expanded at different rates and currently experience varied levels of economic development. Their places in the global market range from Singapore, which has the second-highest GDP per capita world-wide, to Burma and Cambodia which are ranked among the poorest countries in the world.



Prior to colonial rule, the region's inhabitants were expert farmers, having adopted domesticated rice from India and China and developed complex rice-farming techniques, or mariners who traded across the region. European colonists brought additional skills in metalworking, agriculture, sailing, and navigation. The introduction of commercial agriculture, mining, and an export-based economy during the colonial period placed Southeast Asia on its current technological path.

Southeast Asian nations are generally open to trade and investment, having transformed from inward-looking economies dominated by agriculture to outward-looking, market-oriented economies in just a few years. As China's "backyard," Southeast Asia is often seen as the site of economic competition between China and the US and between India and Japan. Despite lingering mistrust of China because of several unresolved maritime territorial disputes, some Southeast Asian nations welcome China's investment in infrastructure, energy, agriculture, and mining. About 20% of Southeast Asia's total trade is conducted with China. By comparison, about 7% of Southeast Asia's trade is conducted with the US.

Now that we have introduced general concepts that characterize Southeast Asian society at large, we will focus on specific features of Vietnamese society.

PART 2 – CULTURE SPECIFIC

1. HISTORY AND MYTH

Overview

Since the rise of ancient kingdoms around 4,000 years ago, Vietnam's history has been shaped by wet-rice cultivation, trade, and conflict. For millennia, Chinese rule influenced society and culture as a series of Vietnamese kingdoms expanded southwards. In the late 19th century, France colonized much of the area. The Socialist Republic of Vietnam was united as an independent nation in 1976 following decades of war. After a period of massive emigration, social upheaval, and slow growth, Vietnam presently has one of the world's fastest-growing economies, even amidst ongoing social and political repression.

Reflecting the historical expansion of the Vietnamese people southward, Vietnam's 3 primary regions include the North (around the Red River delta and the capital Hanoi), Central (narrow stretch of coast near Da Nang including the south-central highlands), and the South (the Mekong Delta and area around Ho Chi Minh City).

Early History

Archaeological evidence from present-day northern Vietnam suggests that early humans inhabited the region as early as 500,000 years ago. Although much of Vietnamese early history is shrouded in myth (see "Myth" below), scientists believe nomadic hunter-gatherers from southern China entered the region and mixed with native inhabitants. By about 12,000 years ago, residents began forming semi-permanent settlements in the Ma and Red River valleys in the North.



Around 2900 BC, Hung kings of southern China and northern Vietnam founded the Van Lang Kingdom in the Red River Delta (see “Myth” below). Meanwhile, the migratory Lac Viet, or “people of the valley” also settled this area, developing irrigated wet-rice agriculture and bronze casting as early as 2000 BC. For over 2,000 years, the Lac Viet maintained a highly organized feudal society, raising livestock while also constructing complex canal and dike irrigation systems to produce high yields of rice

and other crops. The Lac Viet were also skilled craftsmen, making pottery, baskets, and other goods from leather, silk, bamboo, hemp, and jute fiber.



Around 258 BC, the powerful leader of the Au Viet tribe of southern China united with Van

Lang to form the Au Lac Kingdom. Ruler An Duong Vuong subsequently built a capital and citadel in Co Loa, about 10 mi from present-day Hanoi. A strong leader, An Duong Vuong ruled for decades before his kingdom fell to the powerful army of the Chinese Qin Dynasty around 208 BC.

Nam Viet and a Millennium of Chinese Rule

Internal revolts brought the fall of the Chinese Qin Dynasty just a year later. Soon afterwards, the Trieu Dynasty of southern China invaded Au Lac, subsequently founding Nam Viet, an independent kingdom comprising much of southern China and northern Vietnam with a capital in present-day Guangzhou, China. During the brief Trieu rule, the Lac Viet people maintained much of their own culture and social hierarchy. For protection, Nam Viet paid tribute to the Han Dynasty that replaced Qin rule in northern China. In 111 BC, the Han Chinese expelled the Trieu, instituting direct rule of Nam Viet and beginning more than 1,000 years of Chinese control of the region.

The Chinese introduced their Confucian social philosophy and ethics system (see *Religion and Spirituality*), establishing a

hierarchical feudal society dominated by an imperial Chinese mandarin class. Through their frequent interactions with Han Chinese, some Lac Viet adopted aspects of Chinese culture and language. The Chinese also brought improvements to silk production and rice irrigation, as well as writing and educational systems and new artistic styles.

The Trung Sisters' Rebellion: Over the years, Lac Viet opposition to Chinese rule grew, helping to forge a common Viet identity. In 39 AD, the Trung sisters, Trac and Nhi, led a rebellion resulting in a 4-year period of independence that ended when the Han Chinese emperor sent in troops. To escape capture, the Trung sisters threw themselves into a river, ending their lives and their rebellion, yet eternalizing Viet resistance to Chinese domination. Even today, the Trung sisters are national heroes, symbolizing Vietnam's historical resistance to China while underscoring the significance of powerful women in Vietnamese society.



After a few centuries of Chinese rule, Han settlers and indigenous Viet people likely intermarried, forming a Han-Viet landowning class that identified more with its land of residence than with China. Generally, Chinese rule was repressive, exemplified by the name the Chinese gave the region: Annam, or "Pacified South." Even after the fall of the Han Dynasty in 220, the harsh rule of subsequent Chinese dynasties provoked revolts among the Viet and Han-Viet, which were typically met with further repression.

South Asian Influence in the South

Chinese control extended only as far south as Champa, a large Hindu kingdom on Vietnam's central and southern coast, founded by traders from South Asia around the 2nd century. For centuries, Champa's kings ruled by divine right, worshipping the

Hindu god Shiva before later converting to Buddhism. By the 3rd century, peasants in Champa generally adopted Buddhism (see *Religion and Spirituality*), while the Lac Viet elite residents primarily adhered to Confucianism. Champa became a wealthy kingdom based on fishing, agriculture, and maritime trade with India, China, Japan, and the Middle East. Consequently, some Lac Viet embraced aspects of Cham culture, such as its music and dance (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*).

The Founding of Dai Viet Kingdom

In the early 10th century, the Chinese grip on much of the region began to loosen. In 938, General Ngo Quyen defeated the Chinese at the Battle of Bach Dang River. As Chinese administrators withdrew, Ngo Quyen established the Dai Viet Kingdom at the citadel in Co Loa. When Ngo Quyen died just 5 years later, in-fighting initially delayed the rise of a successor. In



968, Dinh Bo Linh took the throne, uniting the Viet people and securing Dai Viet's independence through the payment of tribute to China.

In 1009, Ly Thai To became Emperor of Dai Viet, moving the capital to Thang Long

(present-day Hanoi) and beginning the Ly Dynasty. Dai Viet faced opposition on all fronts, including the Chinese in the North, Champa in the South, and the Khmer of Cambodia in the West. Nevertheless, the Ly dynasty eventually consolidated its rule, bringing peace and establishing Buddhism as the state religion (see *Religion and Spirituality*). The Ly Dynasty also introduced significant reforms such as centralizing the administration, instituting civil service exams, and founding a scholarly shrine and archive called the Temple of Literature (Van Mieu) (see *Learning and Knowledge*).

During the 13th century, Mongols from north-central Asia led by Kublai Khan invaded the region 3 times. Although Dai Viet's new Tran Dynasty repelled the invaders, the economy was nearly

destroyed, significantly weakening the kingdom. Meanwhile, Champa sought to extend its influence, gaining some Dai Viet territory after several skirmishes.

In 1400, General Ho Quy Ly toppled the Tran Dynasty and seized the Dai Viet throne. He subsequently implemented significant reforms, such as limiting the size of landholdings, revising the tax and public administration systems, opening ports to new trade, and converting coins to paper money. While his Ho Dynasty lasted just 7 years, it also introduced a form of public healthcare, broadened education to include math and science and replaced Chinese with Vietnamese in some official documents.



Ming Chinese Intervention: Privileged landowners unhappy with land reform appealed to Chinese Ming Dynasty rulers, who subsequently intervened under the pretense of restoring the toppled Tran Dynasty. Instead, the Ming established direct control in 1407. While the Ming ruled Dai Viet for just 20 years, their impact was perhaps greater than the previous 1,000 years of Chinese rule. Unlike Chinese rulers before them, the Ming sought to directly undermine Viet culture, seizing or burning historical texts, literature, and art.

The Le Dynasty of Dai Viet

The Chinese Ming rulers soon faced significant resistance. Based in the mountains of north-central Dai Viet, nobleman Le Loi led guerrilla forces that for years pressured the Ming army before finally defeating it in open battle in 1427. For the next 350 years, the Dai Viet Kingdom expanded as indigenous traditions and language flourished.

The reign of Le Loi's grandson, Le Thanh Tong (r. 1460-97), is widely considered Dai Viet's golden age. In addition to commissioning a national history of the Viet, Le Thanh Tong revised the tax and civil service systems, gave additional civil

rights to women, improved math and science education, and increased rice production. Further, he led expansion southward, conquering Champa in 1471, while suppressing Lao and Khmer incursions from the West and South. Le Thanh Tong gave some of the newly-acquired lands to peasants and soldiers, creating new Viet settlements in the South.

During this period, population pressures in the North drove the Viet into the Mekong Delta in a movement known as ***nam tien*** (southward movement). While still placating China with tribute, the Le Dynasty attempted to distinguish and separate itself from China. Nevertheless, the Le Dynasty government and society was based on Confucianism, a doctrine that advocated a divine mandate as justification for imperial authority and taxation. Similarly, the Le dynasty's legal code combined Chinese law with certain Viet features, such as equal inheritance rights for men and women.

European Missionaries Arrive

In the early 16th century, Portuguese Catholic missionaries arrived in the region. Although the Le dynasty banned missionary work in the 1630s, French Catholics soon joined the effort, gaining a significant number of converts by the 18th century (see *Religion and Spirituality*). The efforts of French missionary Alexandre de Rhodes and others to codify a writing system for the Vietnamese language formed the basis of ***chu quoc ngu***, Vietnam's present-day writing system (see *Language and Communication*).



The Nguyen and Trinh Families Divide Dai Viet

In the early 16th century, in-fighting significantly weakened the Le Dynasty. Soon, 2 families, the Nguyen and the Trinh, emerged as the leading factions. Throughout the 17th century, the 2 families fought for control of Dai Viet while reducing successive Le emperors to mere figureheads. The Nguyen steadily expanded to the South and West, driving the Cham and

Khmer further from their traditional territories. As high taxes and violence forced many Viet from communal lands, tax-exempt nobles seized the properties. Reduced property taxes required new sources of income, such as taxes on staples like salt and charcoal, causing widespread impoverishment. Then, neglect of irrigation systems resulted in famine and flooding. Between 1730-70, widespread suffering across Dai Viet caused peasant revolts to erupt.

The Tay-son Brothers: Amidst this discontent, 3 brothers from Tay-son village in central Dai Viet spread a message of justice and equality that soon attracted a following. By 1778, Tay-son rebels had won control of the South, killing all the ruling Nguyen family except for 16-year-old Nguyen Anh, who escaped to Phu Quoc Island off the southern coast. By 1786, the rebels had also routed the Trinh family. As each Tay-son brother took control of



a region, they allowed the Le Dynasty to continue to rule from its capital in Dong Kinh (present-day Hanoi).

The Le Dynasty leaders were unhappy with this arrangement. In

1788, Emperor Le Chieu Thong asked China to remove the Tay-son brothers. In response, the Chinese Qing Dynasty invaded the Dai Viet capital. Tay-son brother Nguyen Hue then declared himself Emperor Quang Trung and marched almost 400 mi North with 100,000 men and 100 elephants to fight the Qing. Attacking at night, Quang Trung's army defeated some 200,000 Qing troops. Despite this success, the Tay-son brothers soon faced another challenge to their authority.

Gia Long Finds Viet Nam

From his exile on Phu Quoc Island, Nguyen Anh schemed to remove the Tay-son brothers. With support from some French traders and former soldiers, he invaded the Mekong Delta in 1788, quickly establishing himself as a powerful ruler with a new

government administration and military based in the southern city of Gia Dinh (present-day Ho Chi Minh City).

In 1789, Nguyen Anh took advantage of disunity and corruption among the Tay-son brothers to advance and by 1802 had captured much of the North. Adopting the name Gia Long, he founded the new Kingdom of Viet Nam ("Viet of the South") with an imperial capital at Hue, chosen for its central location. Following the annexation of the southernmost part of the Mekong delta traditionally belonging to the Khmer, the Kingdom of Viet Nam comprised the territory of present-day Vietnam.

As Emperor, Gia Long established a harsh Confucian feudal order under which some residents fared even worse than before. He adhered more strictly to Confucian principles than previous leaders, ignoring Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity, and traditional Viet customs. In addition to being forced to perform unpaid labor under the traditional *corvée* system for some 60 days per year,



often on public works projects, peasants also lost some of their communal lands. Moreover, Gia Long reversed Le Dynasty improvements to the status of women and levied high taxes to be paid in rice. He also cut off much of Viet Nam from the outside world, limiting trade and focusing on domestic affairs.

The Nguyen Dynasty: For the next 6 decades, subsequent rulers in Gia Long's Nguyen Dynasty maintained his administrative system. During this period, small scholarly and royal classes concentrated in the capital Hue, while around 80% of Vietnamese lived in rural areas primarily subsisting on rice cultivation. Although some Vietnamese women worked as small retailers, a powerful Chinese commercial class dominated trade (see *Economics and Resources*), wielding significant influence. Over time, Nguyen rulers began exerting more authority over their neighbors, demanding tribute from Laos and Cambodia.

The French Invade and Take Control

Meanwhile, several European countries raced to establish colonies in Asia. Despite ongoing repression in Viet Nam, the French had continued their missionary work, converting around 450,000 Vietnamese to Christianity by the mid-19th century (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Seeking to expand their influence even further, the French used the pretext of a captive French priest to bomb the central coastal city of Da Nang in 1847, killing around 10,000 people. As persecution of Christians continued under Emperor Tu Duc, French President Napoleon III sent a fleet of warships and some 2,500 soldiers to protect French missionaries in 1858. Over the next 3 years, the French acquired control of much of the Mekong Delta and the city of Gia Dinh (which they renamed Saigon). As the Kingdom weakened, Emperor Tu Duc signed a treaty in 1862 formally granting France certain territories, as well as the rights to continue their missionary work and engage in trade.



The French continued to acquire territory, and by 1867 had annexed the entire South, renaming the region Cochinchina. The 1874 Treaty of Hanoi formally granted France full sovereignty over Cochinchina, access to the Red River and northern ports, and veto power over Viet Nam's foreign relations. The Kingdom continued to weaken. Following Emperor Tu Duc's death in 1883, his army lost an important battle to the French at Hue. The subsequent Treaty of Hue gave France control over all of Viet Nam, with a colony in Cochinchina and protectorates in Central and North Vietnam, respectively named Annam and Tonkin.

French Indochina

In 1893, France merged the 3 Vietnamese regions with Cambodia and Laos to form the colony of French Indochina, led by a Governor General based in Hanoi. French rule was initially felt most directly in Cochinchina, where colonists seized communal land and collaborated with some landed Vietnamese

elite to create large, export-oriented rice plantations. Even if they did not seize land directly, the French acquired it in other ways. For example, the government imposed heavy taxes, compelling some Vietnamese to borrow money using land as collateral.



Those unable to repay their loans lost their holdings, becoming tenant farmers and wage laborers. As Indochina became the world's largest rice exporter, the French grew rich as

the average Vietnamese became impoverished.

France gradually increased its control over the entire region, expanding its export industry to coffee and rubber in Annam and minerals and tea in Tonkin. To get these products to market, the French forced Vietnamese laborers to build roads, railways, and ports, working mostly under wretched conditions. Although Vietnamese generally suffered under French rule, some welcomed the change from the repressive Nguyen Dynasty and benefited from cooperation with the French. For example, some Vietnamese Catholic collaborators received confiscated land.

Early Nationalist Movements

In the early 20th century, the stark contrast in living conditions between the poor Vietnamese masses and French and Vietnamese landowners helped spark a nationalist movement. This nationalism had roots in centuries-old traditions of resistance to Chinese forms of authority. Inspired by Sun Yat-sen's Chinese Revolution that overthrew the Qing Dynasty in 1911, Vietnamese nationalist Phan Boi Chau began planning the expulsion of the French from Indochina from his residence in China. Nevertheless, when counterrevolutionaries regained power in China in 1914, the Chinese arrested him and other nationalist leaders at France's request.

The French maintained their hold on Vietnam as World War I (WWI) broke out in Europe in July 1914. During the war, France conscripted some 100,000 Vietnamese troops and workers to

support its European war efforts. Within Indochina, the French significantly increased taxes to help finance the war.

Following victory in WWI, France increased its development efforts in Indochina. In Vietnam, the colonial government initiated a massive infrastructure program primarily financed by taxes on alcohol, opium, and salt, building transport systems and draining much of the Mekong Delta to create new farmland. By 1925, some 5,000 French colonial administrators ruled an Indochinese population of about 30 million. As the colonial government continued to repress nationalist movements and jail their leaders, fragmentation within the movements prevented the development of a unified opposition.



At a 1930 conference in Hong Kong, Vietnamese activist Ho Chi Minh and other leaders merged various nationalist factions to form the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP), dedicated to toppling French rule and fostering the growth of socialism in the region. In response to this threat, the French tightened their control, prompting strikes which, in turn, provoked further French repression. By 1932, the French had imprisoned around 10,000 activists and executed at least 80 suspected communists.

World War II (WWII) and Japanese Occupation

In 1940, Nazi Germany invaded and occupied France, installing the puppet Vichy government loyal to the Axis Powers of Germany, Italy, Japan, and others. The French colonial structure remained intact under the German Vichy regime in exchange for resources in support of the ongoing war in East Asia.

The Viet Minh: In response, Ho met with other liberation leaders in a cave in Pac Bao near the Chinese border in 1941, where they founded the League for the Independence of Vietnam, better known as the Viet Minh. Though dominated by the ICP, the Viet Minh enjoyed support from noncommunist groups as

well as China and the US, which promised limited arms for the new Vietnamese Liberation Army. From rural camps in the northern mountains, the Viet Minh carried out guerrilla attacks against Japanese and French troops, provided intelligence on Japanese forces to the US and its Allies [the United Kingdom (UK) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), among others], and rescued Allied pilots shot down over Vietnam.

After the Allied liberation of France in spring 1945, Japan seized all of Vietnam, installing Nguyen Vinh Thuy (known as Bao Dai) as the leader of an “independent” Vietnam under Japanese guidance. During this brief occupation, the Japanese interned French administrators, arrested Vietnamese opposition leaders,



and seized rice harvests to feed their troops across Asia and the Pacific. From March-May, over a million primarily rural Vietnamese died from famine, while unemployment was rampant in cities.

Meanwhile, the Viet Minh's power grew with the aid of armed propaganda units as

the ICP dissolved. By June, it had gained control of territory in the North, where it established people's committees, opened schools, abolished the *corvée* system (though it required military service), distributed French-owned land to the poor, and declared universal suffrage. In the South, the Viet Minh united large opposition groups of students, women, peasants, and soldiers. While the Viet Minh rewarded its supporters with land and other aid, it often imprisoned or killed opponents.

The August Revolution: In mid-August 1945, the Japanese surrendered to the Allies, ending WWII. Two days later, Ho Chi Minh led a Viet Minh march on Hanoi, where he was welcomed as a hero. In the subsequent unrest, known as the August Revolution, the Viet Minh occupied administrative offices and declared a provisional government with Ho as President.

Ho Chi Minh: Vietnam's Revolutionary Leader

Before becoming a founding member of the Indochinese Communist Party in 1930, Ho Chi Minh had already had diverse experiences. Born Nguyen Sinh Cung in 1890, Ho worked as a cook on a French ship, in the New York dockyards, and as a hotel cook in London before helping establish the French Communist Party in Paris in 1920.

In 1923, Ho traveled to Moscow to train as a communist agent. He then returned to Asia in 1925, settling in Guangzhou, China, where he founded the Vietnamese Revolutionary Youth League. Under French bidding, authorities in Hong Kong arrested Ho in 1931 but released him a year later.

After spending some time teaching in Moscow, he returned to southern China in 1940. After 30 years in exile, Ho returned to Vietnam in 1941. Ho Chi Minh died in 1969 before he could see his comrades win the Vietnam War and rename Saigon in his honor.

The Democratic Republic of Vietnam

By late August, the Viet Minh controlled both Hue and Saigon, yet its progress in the far South was much slower. Despite his lack of complete control, Ho declared independence for the new Democratic Republic of Viet Nam (DRV) on September 2, 1945.

Notwithstanding this declaration, the DRV received no international recognition. Instead, treaties ending WWII granted the British control of the region south of the 16th parallel (near the central city of Da Nang) and China control of the North. As a result, some 200,000 Chinese troops entered the North. Threatened by the Chinese troops, Ho gave up his claims in the North, signing a treaty allowing French forces to replace the Chinese in 1946 and making the DRV a "free state" within the French Union. Meanwhile, both sides agreed to a referendum to

decide whether the southern region of Cochinchina would join the new state or become independent.

The First Indochina War

Despite these agreements, opposition to the French continued. Following skirmishes between Vietnamese and French troops, France bombed the northern port city of Haiphong in late 1946, killing thousands of civilians and beginning the First Indochina War. In response, Viet Minh forces attacked the French before retreating to the mountains.



While the Viet Minh regrouped, France acquired control of most cities. Although the Viet Minh lost influence in the South after executing unaligned religious leaders, it reinforced its position in the North, accumulating some 250,000 troops. Wary of this growing power, the French declared a nominally independent State of Vietnam in 1948 and then reinstalled Bao Dai to office. In 1949, the Chinese Communist Party took control of China, promising support and arms for Ho's DRV. When the USSR also formally recognized the DRV, the communist threat appeared dire. In 1950, the US recognized the French-sponsored State of Vietnam. Meanwhile, with support from China and the USSR, the Viet Minh resurrected the ICP, renaming it the Vietnamese Worker's Party in 1951.

The Viet Minh increased its activities, using guerrilla tactics and Chinese arms to slowly acquire control of the northern border areas. Meanwhile, the French relied on growing US aid to combat the perceived communist threat. As the human and financial costs of the war mounted, both sides agreed to consider negotiations. The French finally surrendered after a mid-1954 Viet Minh attack at Dien Bien Phu on the Laotian border where the French lost 1,500 soldiers and the Viet Minh suffered 25,000 casualties. During the war at large, an estimated 500,000 people, primarily Viet Minh and civilians, died.

An Unsatisfactory Peace Agreement: Following 2 months of negotiations, Ho's DRV and France signed the Geneva Accords of 1954 that divided the country into 2 zones: the pro-Western State of Vietnam in the South and the Viet Minh-controlled DRV in the North. A demilitarized zone (DMZ) divided the 2 along the



Ben Hai River near the 17th parallel, just north of Hue. Civilians were given 300 days to move between zones under supervision of an international commission that would also oversee elections set for 1956.

The Domino Theory and US Intervention

This uneasy truce worried the US. In 1954, US President Eisenhower warned that communism was like a "falling domino," and now that China and the DRV had adopted

communism, it would continue spreading across Indochina. In an effort to stop this spread, the US had funded nearly 80% of France's war efforts in the final years of the First Indochina War. Following the partition, the US continued its support, helping nearly a million primarily Catholic Vietnamese flee to the South, while the CIA distributed anti-communist leaflets supporting State of Vietnam leader Bao Dai.

The Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam): In 1955, the US began sending direct aid and military advisors to the State of Vietnam. With US support, Ngo Dinh Diem ousted Bao Dai from power, becoming President of the renamed Republic of Vietnam, popularly known as South Vietnam. A Catholic, Diem favored Catholics, marginalized the Buddhist majority, and often jailed or killed political opponents. Further, he seized land from peasants and opponents, favoring Catholics in his resettlement and land tenure policies. With US support, Diem canceled the scheduled 1956 elections and consolidated his power. Meanwhile, northern guerrillas continued to attack South Vietnam, assassinating

South Vietnamese government officials. In response, Diem ordered the arrest of some 65,000 suspected communists.

The DRV, the National Liberation Front (NLF), and the Viet Cong:

Meanwhile, in the North, the DRV struggled to build a socialist society. In 1955, the DRV avoided famine only with help from China and the USSR. Like Diem in the South, the DRV's leaders were intolerant of opposition groups, sending large landowners and other perceived opponents to labor camps or to face execution. Despite these internal preoccupations, the DRV still sought to acquire control of the South. In 1960, the DRV created the NLF specifically to infiltrate South Vietnam and consolidate opposition to Diem. Nicknamed the Viet Cong (a contraction of the Vietnamese term for "Vietnamese communists") by Diem, the NLF also included non-communist Buddhists, Catholics, nationalists, and others.



The Build-Up to War

Although the Viet Minh had formally disbanded, by 1960, over 90,000 former Viet Minh troops had entered South Vietnam to support the NLF in its struggle against the Diem government. In 1961, US President Kennedy increased military and economic aid to the South, including sending 3,200 advisors. In response, about 15,000 armed guerrillas in South Vietnam united as the People's Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF) to provide local military support for the NLF.

In 1962, support for Diem in the South declined after an attempt to consolidate villages into more secure "hamlets" protected by the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) failed. As the NLF and PLAF distributed land to peasants to win their support, Diem grew even more unpopular. After the South's ARVN fired on unarmed Buddhist protestors in 1963, demonstrations erupted with Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc burning himself to death

in Saigon, gaining worldwide attention. As repression of the Buddhist movement continued and additional Buddhist monks committed self-immolation, the US supported a coup in South Vietnam that resulted in Diem's execution in late 1963.



With Chinese support, the DRV increased its activities. By 1964, the NLF administered 1/2 of South Vietnam, especially rural areas. On the so-called Ho Chi Minh trail through

Laos and Cambodia, the NLF discreetly transported troops and supplies from the DRV to South Vietnam. As the South struggled with successive coups, the NLF continued to gain support in the countryside.

The Vietnam War (Second Indochina War)

In August 1964, a DRV ship allegedly attacked the USS Maddox as the American ship was patrolling the Gulf of Tonkin off Vietnam's northern coast. Just 2 days later, further attacks were reported. Within days, the US Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, enabling President Johnson to take "all necessary measures...to prevent further aggression." Subsequently, the US bombed northern coastal bases. In response, the USSR increased its support to the DRV. Evidence later showed that the Maddox had been conducting covert surveillance of DRV installations, and the subsequent attacks likely never occurred.

In 1965, the US began Operation Rolling Thunder, a bombing campaign that eventually totaled some 350,000 bombs, twice the total tonnage dropped in WWII. By the end of the year, almost 200,000 US troops were stationed in Vietnam. Despite US support, South Vietnam continued to suffer battle losses. By mid-1966, the US increased its total troops to 350,000 and occupied all major cities in the South as PLAF and DRV troops retreated to the mountains. In 1967, the US continued to increase its troop-strength, reaching a total of 500,000 by the

end of the year. Despite this surge, the US and South Vietnam could not achieve their objectives of dispelling DRV influence in the South, and the war reached a stalemate. In the 1967 elections, General Nguyen Van Thieu became South Vietnam's President amidst accusations of widespread election fraud.

The Tet Offensive: In early 1968, about 40,000 DRV troops besieged a US military base near the DMZ. While the US killed over 10,000 DRV troops, it was sufficiently distracted when a week later some 70,000 DRV and PLAF troops violated a **Tet** (Vietnamese New Year) truce by simultaneously attacking over 100 cities and towns across South Vietnam. Nearly 40,000 DRV troops were killed or captured as US and ARVN troops attacked and bombed urban areas, causing widespread destruction. Although the Tet Offensive failed in its goal to cause a popular uprising, it demonstrated the DRV's total commitment to winning the war. Meanwhile, with over 20,000 US casualties thus far, opposition to the war among Americans began to grow.



As the US became increasingly mired in the war, President Johnson announced he would not seek reelection in 1968. Further, he vetoed requests for additional troops to boost the 540,000 American soldiers already in Vietnam. When the US halted its major bombing campaign, DRV troops remained on the offensive for the rest of 1968, maintaining their gains.

In June 1969, the NLF and its allies formed the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam, recognized by the DRV and most communist bloc countries, even though the US-backed State of Vietnam still existed. Meanwhile, newly-elected US President Nixon began a process of "Vietnamization" of the war in 1969, withdrawing US servicemen and replacing them with ARVN troops. By 1970,

about 280,000 US forces remained, while the ARVN increased from about 640,000 to over 1 million troops.

In 1970, Nixon resumed the bombing campaign, including secret attacks on the Ho Chi Minh trail and parts of Cambodia. About 30,000 US and ARVN troops then invaded Cambodia. Following massive US protests, the US withdrew its troops from Cambodia later that year. As the South Vietnamese government made some gains, the US continued to reduce its troops. Negotiations in 1971-72 to end hostilities were unsuccessful.

The My Lai Massacre

In March 1968, US intelligence alleged that NLF soldiers had taken refuge in the My Lai hamlet of the Song My village in South Vietnam. A company of US troops was ordered to enter and destroy the village.

Even when the soldiers found no NLF presence, they rounded up primarily women, children, and elderly men, brutally executing them and using rape and torture as weapons. Facing no lethal resistance, the US troops killed up to 500 civilians before other US soldiers stopped them.

After the massacre, high-ranking US officials sought to cover up the event until a reporter broke the story in November 1969. Of the 14 officers charged in 1971, only 1 was convicted. He was later paroled in 1974.

The Paris Accords: In March 1972, the DRV began a major offensive. While South Vietnam did not capitulate, mutually heavy losses compelled both sides to resume negotiations. In the Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam (known as the Paris Accords) signed in January 1973, the DRV agreed to accept the South Vietnamese people's right to self-determination through elections in exchange for a complete US withdrawal. By April 1973, the US had withdrawn from direct military involvement in Vietnam, retaining just a few thousand civilian authorities in the South.

The Fall of Saigon: After the accord, the South Vietnamese government had some success, reducing total land controlled by the NLF in South Vietnam to about 20%. But by 1974, the US withdrawal had caused high inflation and unemployment in the South, made worse by rampant corruption (see *Economics and Resources*). Some ARVN troops felt abandoned by the US and were resigned to eventual defeat. In late 1974, the rapidly weakening ARVN lost territory in the central highlands, and by



early 1975, DRV troops had advanced well into South Vietnam, surrounding Saigon by April. On April 21, South Vietnam's President Thieu resigned. On April 30, DRV forces entered Saigon and set up a provisional government in the South until reunification with the North could be completed.

After over 3 decades of war, Vietnam was in ruins. Nearly 60% of southern villages were destroyed, while all large communities in the North had been severely bombed. Although estimates vary widely, total deaths likely included about 2 million civilians, 1 million North Vietnamese combatants, 200,000 South Vietnamese combatants, 58,200 American soldiers, and additional South Korean, Australian, Thai, and New Zealand troops. Between 12-15 million Vietnamese

became refugees because of the war, and untold numbers suffered psychological and physical injuries, notably from US use of Agent Orange, a chemical weapon employed to clear densely forested areas and destroy enemy crops.



Vietnam War Terminology

The military tactics utilized in Vietnam made the war unlike any other. The US military devised terminology that reflected the war's unique conditions. **Search and destroy** operations sought to root out NLF soldiers from villages.

Free-fire zones were areas cleared of civilians to enable bombing of enemy occupants. **Fire bases** were highland areas where US troops could launch artillery fire. The soldier **body count** became a metric to judge the success or failure of a mission.

Later, the war was publicized widely in the media, movies, and video games, making **Agent Orange**, **Operation Rolling Thunder**, and the **My Lai massacre** household terms.

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam

On July 2, 1976, DRV leaders announced the formal reunification of North and South, declaring the formation of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Bureaucrats from the former DRV flooded the South's former capital Saigon, officially renamed Ho Chi Minh City, to take positions in the new administration. The newly formed Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) led by General Secretary Le Duan became the only legal political party. It did not establish the reconciliation council stipulated by the Paris Accords. Instead, the CPV retaliated against those perceived as threats to the regime, such as monks, priests, intellectuals, and anyone with a connection to the US.

For example, the regime sent some 400,000 people to "reeducation" (labor) camps, while those thought to have benefited economically from the US presence were sent to new "special economic zones," typically in rural areas with harsh conditions. Some prisoners remained confined for over a decade. The regime also targeted ethnic Chinese who had dominated commerce for centuries, claiming they were disloyal (see *Political and Social Relations*).

Conflict with Cambodia

After years of border disputes, the Cambodian Khmer Rouge Army invaded southwestern Vietnam in 1978, killing over 3,000 civilians. In response, Vietnam sent 120,000 troops to oust Pol Pot, Cambodia's genocidal leader who Vietnam initially helped rise to power. As a result, China, a close ally of Cambodia, invaded northeastern Vietnam in 1979, though it withdrew within a few weeks following significant losses. Although Vietnam successfully expelled Pol Pot and installed a new government, Pol Pot continued to control some areas of Cambodia from his new base in Thailand. Consequently, Vietnamese troops remained in Cambodia until 1989, suffering some 50,000 casualties over the decade. Meanwhile, border skirmishes between Vietnam and China continued until 1990.

"Boat People" Flee Vietnam

As the new regime consolidated power, millions of refugees fled Vietnam. Called the world's largest peacetime exodus, these refugees left primarily via small fishing boats to Hong Kong, Malaysia, or the Philippines. From 1975 until the mid-1990s, most of these "boat people" arrived safely in other countries, though hundreds of thousands more died at sea or were robbed and killed by pirates. By the end of the crisis, resettled Indochinese boat people and refugees totaled over 2 million. The US welcomed nearly 800,000.

Post-war Challenges

The new country struggled to recover from the war and its after-effects. The refugee exodus left Vietnam few educated and skilled workers. Further, the remaining population was deeply scarred by decades of war, the infrastructure and economy were in ruins, and corruption and mismanagement were widespread. Finally, the 1980 constitution's socialist policies, such as centralized planning, nationalized industry, and collectivized farming, resulted in an inefficient and slow-growing economy.



By the early 1980s, Vietnam was surviving primarily on Soviet aid totaling over \$2 billion per year. Forced to import rice, the government rationed food at state-run stores. By the mid-1980s, the failing economy and several natural disasters resulted in widespread famine.

Doi Moi Economic Reforms

In 1986, new Communist Party General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh initiated a series of economic reforms. Known as **Doi Moi**



(renovation), the reforms included the abandonment of collectivization in favor of a slow process of privatization and decentralization (see *Economics and Resources*). When Vietnamese troops withdrew from Cambodia in 1989, some foreign investment began to trickle into Vietnam. By the mid-1990s, the US had lifted both its trade embargo and UN veto on

aid to Vietnam, fully restoring diplomatic relations. Meanwhile, the economy began to show signs of growth.

Despite this economic liberalization, Vietnam's political institutions remained closed and social life tightly controlled, particularly following the end of communism in the USSR in 1991. The Vietnamese government soon launched a campaign against Western "social evils" such as gambling, drugs, pornography, karaoke, and some music genres.

Contemporary Vietnam

In the 21st century, Vietnam has continued to pursue economic liberalization, while avoiding major political and social reforms. Nevertheless, endemic corruption led to widespread protests in 2001, forcing Communist Party leaders to replace Secretary General Le Kha Phieu with Nong Duc Manh (see *Political and Social Relations*).

During Manh's two 5-year terms, Vietnam sought rapid infrastructure and economic development (see *Economics and Resources*). Manh also presided over some significant political changes, replacing some senior officials with younger leaders

and allowing corruption investigations into high-ranking bureaucrats.



Nevertheless, the Communist Party retains a tight grip on society, repressing the media and online dissent, jailing opposition members, and maintaining control over large segments of

the economy. In 2011, the Communist Party Congress elected Nguyen Phu Trong as Secretary General. Trong amplified the campaign against corruption after scandals surfaced at state-run firms in 2012. Meanwhile, the government further restricted the media, including implementing strict regulations for published content (see *Technology and Material*).

When China moved an oil rig into waters claimed by Vietnam in 2014, protests erupted across the country. Some Vietnamese attacked Chinese and other foreign-owned businesses (see *Political and Social Relations*). As a result of the violence, thousands of Chinese fled Vietnam.

In 2016, Trong was reelected Secretary General. Under his rule, Vietnam continued to closely control the media, while quelling dissent and fighting some



high-level corruption. Although the Communist Party has maintained its relatively liberal economic policies, it controls nearly all aspects of society and politics in order to preserve its monopoly on power. As Vietnam continues to develop within an increasingly turbulent region (see *Political and Social Relations*), the Communist Party faces difficult choices between sustained economic growth, political control, and peace in the greater Southeast Asia region.

Myth Overview

In contrast to history, which is supposed to be an objective record of the past based on verifiable facts, myths embody a culture's values and often explain the origins of humans and the natural world. Myths are important because they provide a sense of unique heritage and identity. In Vietnam, myths and folklore often reflect how Vietnamese endured and defeated foreign occupiers.

The Dragon Lord and the Mountain Fairy

The 2 main characters of the legend of the Vietnamese people's origins are King Lac Long Quan, a dragon lord of the sea, and Princess Au Co, a northern mountain fairy descended from immortals. According to the legend, Lac Long Quan and Au Co married and had 100 sons. Their union also gave rise to the Kingdom of Viet, whose vast territory stretched from the Yangtze River in present-day central China to the northern Indochinese Peninsula. While the kingdom grew prosperous, both Lac Long Quan and Au Co dearly missed their childhood homes.

Consequently, Au Co took 50 of her sons to live in the mountains of present-day China, while the remaining 50 sons followed Lac Long Quan to live near the South China Sea, known to the Vietnamese as the East Sea. Since this separation, the Vietnamese people have continued to live either by the sea or in the mountains.

Around 2900 BC, myth tells that the eldest of the 100 sons, Hung Vuong I, traveled from his home by the sea to the Red River delta, where he founded the Van Lang kingdom in present-day northern Vietnam. Some Vietnamese consider Hung Vuong I the founder of Vietnam. Hung Vuong, I learned rice irrigation techniques from his father, Lac Long Quan, which each of the subsequent 18 generations of Hung kings used to feed their people.



2. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

Official Name

Socialist Republic of Vietnam

Cộng Hòa Xã Hội Chủ Nghĩa Việt Nam

(Vietnamese)

Political Borders

China: 806 mi

Laos: 1,343 mi

Cambodia: 720 mi

Coastline: 2,140 mi

Capital

Hanoi

Demographics

With a population of over 105.8 million, Vietnam is Southeast Asia's 3rd most populous nation after Indonesia and the Philippines and the world's 16th most populous country. Nevertheless, Vietnam's annual fertility rate of 1.9 children per woman are among the world's lowest. Some 60% of the population lives in rural areas, predominantly along the Red and Mekong River deltas and coastal regions. Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi are Vietnam's largest cities. Due to Vietnam's mountainous geography, the population is concentrated on just 20% of its territory.



Flag

Known as the **co do sao vang** (red flag with a gold star), the Vietnamese flag consists of a red field with a large, 5-pointed yellow star in the center. Designed in 1940

during revolts against French colonial rule (see *History and Myth*), the flag's red background represents blood and revolution, while each of the star's 5 points symbolizes a socioeconomic group of the Vietnamese populace: soldiers, workers, peasants, traders, and intellectuals.

Geography

Located in Southeast Asia, Vietnam shares borders with China in the North and Cambodia and Laos in the West. Vietnam's long coastline borders the Gulf of Tonkin in the Northeast and the South China Sea (known in Vietnam as the East Sea) in the East, before curving around the Gulf of Thailand in the Southwest. Vietnam has a total area of 127,881 sq mi, making it slightly larger than New Mexico and about the size of Norway.

Hills and mountains comprising the eastern extension of the Himalaya Mountain range dominate the terrain in the far North. Much of this northern territory lies above 6,600 ft and includes Vietnam's highest peak, Mount Fansipan at 10,312 ft. The Truong Son Mountain range (also known as the Annamite Cordillera) extends north-south along Vietnam's western border with Laos and Cambodia. Here, a network of passageways collectively known as the Ho Chi Minh trail connected Vietnam's North to its South during the Vietnam War (see *History and Myth*).

Narrow, central highlands separate the flat and fertile Red River Delta in the North from the marshy Mekong Delta in the South.



Often described as the nation's rice baskets, these 2 deltas comprise Vietnam's primary agricultural regions and serve as vital economic centers. Densely populated and fertile lowland plains follow Vietnam's meandering coastline. Over 45% of the country is covered by tropical and highland forests.

Climate

Although weather patterns vary with altitude, topography, and sea proximity, Vietnam generally divides into 2 climactic zones separated by the central highlands. In the North, Vietnam experiences a moderate, temperate climate with 4 distinct seasons. Here, winters tend to be brief and chilly, with January temperatures dipping as low as 41°F in Hanoi. Summers are typically hot, humid, and long, with August temperatures rising

to 95°F. Rainfall is heaviest October-April, when cyclical monsoons (*gio mua*) and tropical storms originating in the Pacific Ocean intermittently bring rains.

By contrast, Vietnam's South experiences a moderate tropical climate dividing roughly into 2 seasons: dry and rainy. The dry and warm season runs October-April, with temperatures averaging 77°F. By contrast, May-September is hot and rainy, with temperatures averaging 86°F and southern monsoonal winds bringing brief yet intense daily rain showers.

Natural Hazards

Vietnam is vulnerable to several types of natural hazards. As many as 12 cyclones (tropical storms characterized by strong, spiraling winds) strike Vietnam's coasts annually, damaging infrastructure, inundating coastal areas with torrential rains, and often resulting in deaths. In addition, monsoonal rains regularly cause widespread and destructive flooding, particularly in the low-lying river deltas and along coastal areas. Notably, floods affect approximately 70% of the population annually, damaging millions of homes and worsening water pollution (see "Environmental Issues" below).



Environmental Issues

The clearing of land for agriculture, timber production, and housing has led to extensive deforestation, causing soil erosion that aggravates already severe and chronic flooding. Agent Orange, a chemical defoliant widely used by the US military during the Vietnam War (see *History and Myth*) continues to contaminate certain areas and adversely affects the health of some residents (see *Sustenance and Health*).

Recent and rapid industrial growth has resulted in increased levels of air and water pollution. Increasing regulations and laws have been developed aimed at environmental protection, but enforcement is still a challenge. Many Vietnamese factories still disregard environmental regulations, causing industrial and

agricultural runoff that pollutes rivers, lakes, and coastal waters, damages ecosystems, and threatens biodiversity. In urban areas, vehicle emissions contribute to poor air quality. In 2023, the US provided over \$200 million in aid to enhance Vietnam's environmental protection mechanisms, remediate Agent Orange contamination, and assist affected and vulnerable populations.

Government

Vietnam is a communist state consisting of 58 provinces (**tinh**) governed by local administrators who report to the central government. The latter directly controls 5 municipalities (**thanh pho truc thuoc trung uong**) (Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh, Can Tho, Da Nang, and Hai Phong). Provinces further subdivide into districts (**quan**), hundreds of rural districts (**huyen**), and thousands of communes (**xa**). Vietnam's most recent constitution was adopted in 1992 and amended several times, most recently in 2013.



Executive Branch

A President, Prime Minister (PM), and 19-member Government Council (GC) head the executive branch. The President, who is head-of-state and commander-in-chief of the military, is elected by the National Assembly (NA, see "Legislative Branch" below) from among its members to serve a single 5-year

term. With the approval of the NA, the President appoints the PM and all GC members, who also must be members of the NA. The PM is head-of-government and leads the GC to run the nation's daily affairs. President Luong Cuong took office on October 21, 2024 while PM Pham Minh Chinh took office in 2021.

Legislative Branch

Vietnam's legislature consists of a single-chamber NA (**Quoc Hoi**) with 500 members who serve 5-year terms. While all members are elected by popular vote, they are screened and approved by the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) (see "Political Climate" below) before assuming their positions. The

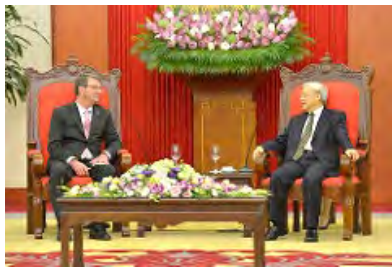
NA's responsibilities include making laws, approving budgets, impeaching public officials, and declaring war.

Judicial Branch

The judiciary is based on a mixed system of civil law and communist legal theory. The system's highest court is the Supreme People's Court, comprised of 13 judges and a chief justice who is nominated by the President and appointed by the NA to serve a 5-year, renewable term. Subordinate courts include a Court of Appeals and a system of administrative, civil, criminal, labor, and economic courts that adjudicate a variety of cases. A Central Military Court oversees matters pertaining to defense personnel. Generally, the courts serve as an extension of state power and maintain little autonomy.

Political Climate

Vietnam's government recognizes only a single political party, the Communist Party of Vietnam (***Dang Cong san Viet Nam***, or CPV), forbidding the activities of all other political groups. The CPV leads the Vietnam Fatherland Front (VFF), a large coalition of political and social organizations that develops government policies and trains future CPV members. Although candidates



unaffiliated with the CPV or the VFF may run for the NA, generally the CPV must first approve their application. As a result, the CPV and its leader, currently Secretary General Nguyen Phu Trong), retain significant control

over Vietnam's political landscape (see *History and Myth*).

Indicative of the CPV's extensive influence in Vietnamese society, affiliation with the CPV typically affords vital economic, political, and social opportunities. By contrast, those who refuse to join the party face significant barriers to economic and social success. Although the CPV includes some ethnic minorities among its ranks, they rarely attain leadership positions.

The Vietnamese government stifles virtually all political dissent by outlawing political protests, strictly monitoring Internet usage, and restricting freedom of speech (see *Technology and Material*). In addition, corruption continues to permeate the government, courts, and police (see *History and Myth*), despite recent efforts to curb its existence. The payment of bribes to authorities in exchange for various services is a feature of daily life for some Vietnamese. This practice poses significant hurdles in poor, rural communities, where local officials favor friends and family or expect payments for the delivery of already scarce public goods and services. Further, the CPV heavily influences the actions of the judiciary, while police may employ torture to elicit forced confessions from suspected criminals.

Although the government strictly controls political expression, some groups advocating political freedom, transparency, and rule of law have recently gained modest followings. In addition, human rights activists and some ethnic minorities, such as the Khmer Krom and Hmong (see “Ethnic Groups” below), have organized protests to call for increased political representation, protection of human rights, and an end to corruption.



Defense

Vietnam's military includes an Army, Navy, and Air Force with a joint strength of about 490,000 active-duty and 5,000,000 reserve personnel. Over the last several years, Vietnam has dramatically increased its defense spending amid a series of territorial disputes with China (see “Security Issues” below), making substantial procurements to better equip both the Navy and Air Force.

Vietnam's military is charged with defending against foreign and domestic threats and participating in peacekeeping and disaster relief efforts. Military service is compulsory for men aged 18-25. Conscription occurs twice annually, with service obligation

lasting 2 years for the Army and Air Defense and 3 years for the Navy and Air Force. While service is not compulsory for women, they may volunteer from age 18.

Army: Vietnam's Army is a well-equipped, well-trained force of 380,000 active-duty troops organized into 8 military regions. The Army divides into 4 command corps; a special forces brigade; 35 maneuver brigades, regiments, and divisions (including armored, mechanized, and light); 32 combat support brigades, regiments, and units; 12 combat service support divisions, regiments, and units.



Navy: Consisting of 40,000 active-duty personnel (including 27,000 Navy Infantry personnel), the Vietnamese Navy is equipped with 8 tactical submarines, 70 patrol and coastal combatants, 8 mine warfare and mine countermeasures vessels, 20 amphibious vessels, and 22 logistics and support vessels.



Air Force: Vietnam's Air Force consists of 30,000 active-duty personnel divided into, 7 fighter/ground attack regiments, 2 transport regiments, 3 training regiments, and 6 air defense divisions. The Air Force is equipped with 76 combat capable aircraft, 30 helicopters, and numerous air defense guns and missiles.

Paramilitary: Vietnam's Paramilitary consists of more than 40,000 active-duty personnel organized into the Coast Guard and Fisheries Surveillance Force.

Vietnamese Air Force Rank Insignia



Colonel
General



Lieutenant
General



Major
General



Colonel



Senior
Lieutenant
Colonel



Lieutenant
Colonel



Major



Captain



Senior
Lieutenant



Lieutenant



Junior
Lieutenant



Officer
Cadet



Master
Sergeant



Sergeant



Corporal



Airman
First
Class



Airman

Security Issues

Relations with China: Vietnam and China have historically bitter and volatile relations, overshadowed by over 1,000 years of Chinese occupation and most recently by China's 1979 invasion of northern Vietnam (see *History and Myth*). Despite their hostile past, the 2 nations established diplomatic ties in the 1990s. Over the last 2 decades, both countries have encouraged the development of bilateral economic and political relations.



Although Vietnam enjoys prosperous bilateral trade with China today, ongoing territorial disputes and maritime sovereignty issues lead to friction. Occasionally, these disputes ignite nationalist demonstrations in Vietnam, where some residents continue to harbor deep anti-Chinese sentiment and fear China's regional domination. Notable territorial disputes include the Paracel and Spratly islands in the South China Sea, both claimed by China, Vietnam, and other countries. In May 2017, Vietnam and China agreed to avoid further actions to complicate or enlarge the disputes and committed to maintaining peace in the South China Sea.

Besides its territorial claims, China's increasing ability to project military power abroad is a source of concern for Vietnam. Looking to balance China's regional power, Vietnam has recently sought to enhance its maritime and air military capabilities, as well as build closer military ties with Japan, India, and the US (see "Foreign Relations" below).

Internal Tensions: While Vietnam is generally free of internal conflict, some low-level tensions exist over land-use rights. The government owns all Vietnamese land and occasionally forcibly evicts farmers or other rural inhabitants. Disputes between authorities and affected communities often escalate to violence,

with the government occasionally using force to quell even peaceful protests. While some rural residents have formed small and informal unions to resolve land disputes, land use remains a controversial issue.

Foreign Relations

After unifying under communist rule in 1976 (see *History and Myth*), Vietnam aligned economically and politically with the Soviet Union, also a communist state. By the late 1980s, as Vietnam's economy stagnated (see *Economics and Resources*) and the Soviet Union's influence in the region began to wane, Vietnam was forced to readjust its orientation. Subsequently, as part of a larger effort to integrate into the global economy, Vietnam sought to mend historically contentious relations with

the US, China, and Cambodia.

Today, Vietnam's foreign policy is still largely driven by economic interests, even though relations with major trading partners can be tense.

For example, China

constitutes an important trade partner (see *Economics and Resources*), yet its assertive foreign policy and expanding military capabilities are considered problematic. Consequently, Vietnam's desire to curb Chinese influence shapes its policies towards other countries, such as the recent development of closer military ties with Japan, India, and the US.

Regional Cooperation: Vietnam is a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Comprising Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Brunei, Thailand, Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Vietnam, ASEAN was created in 1967 to promote regional stability and development. While it is not a base for insurgent groups or terrorists itself, Vietnam works with fellow ASEAN members to limit the growth of terror networks within Southeast Asia.



In November 2017, Vietnam hosted the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, a forum of 21 member states who collectively advocate for economic integration, peace, and sustainable development in the Asia-Pacific region. Vietnam also participates in several global organizations, such as the United Nations, International Monetary Fund, World Bank, World Trade Organization, and the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism.

Relations with Cambodia: Vietnam has an improving but troubled relationship with Cambodia. The 2 nations' security interests align closely, and they engage in significant bilateral trade and other activities. Nevertheless, anti-Vietnamese sentiment persists in Cambodia due to Vietnam's long history of territorial rivalries with and recent occupation of the country (see *History and Myth*). Other contentious issues include an unresolved maritime dispute and the illegal movement of drugs and people across the porous border.

Relations with the

US: The US first established

diplomatic relations with the pro-French State of Vietnam (South Vietnam) in 1950. Yet, within a few years, conflict



had engulfed the country (see *History and Myth*). Over the following 2 decades, the US never recognized North Vietnam's communist government, supporting instead the southern Republic of Vietnam. When the South surrendered to the North at the end of the Vietnam war, the US evacuated all US personnel from the country, severed diplomatic relations, and imposed a crippling economic embargo on Vietnam that would last for nearly 20 years (see *History and Myth*).

By the early 1990s, tensions slowly eased as both nations worked to normalize relations and addressed various political and humanitarian concerns, such as prisoner of war/missing in action (POW/MIA) issues. In 1995, the US and Vietnam formally

reestablished diplomatic relations, and in 2015, celebrated 20 years of continued bilateral progress.

Today, the US and Vietnam engage in a Comprehensive Partnership fostering bilateral economic, social, and political ties. Specifically, the US supports Vietnam's development of human rights, trade and economic ties, disaster relief efforts, defense and security, science and technology, environment and health, and education and social programs. In 2016, the 2 nations entered into a bilateral agreement to promote good governance and strengthen Vietnam's rule of law, with the aim of bringing Vietnam's justice system up to international standards. Finally, US-Vietnamese bilateral economic agreements have resulted in a dramatic growth in trade, from

\$451 million in 1995 to about \$124 billion in 2023.



Despite the US's involvement in the Vietnam War (known as "The American War" in Vietnam) (see *History and Myth*), today little anti-

American sentiment exists. Instead, Vietnamese generally express interest in American culture and support closer relations with the US. Further, some Vietnamese see a close alliance with the US as a deterrence to Chinese aggression and a source of regional stability.

Ethnic Groups

Vietnam is a multi-ethnic country, where the government officially recognizes 54 ethnic groups. Ethnic minorities account for over 50% of the poor, reflecting their historically inferior status in society.

Kinh: According to the 2019 census, the Viet ethnic group, also known as the Kinh, comprise about 85% of the population. Historically settling in North and Central Vietnam, the Kinh today live throughout the country, primarily concentrating in urban areas and lowland delta regions. While the Kinh traditionally

practiced wet-rice cultivation and animal husbandry, an increasing number now work in industrial or services jobs. Most Kinh speak Vietnamese as their native language.

The remaining 53 ethnic groups collectively comprise over 12 million people, or 15% of the population.

Tay: Vietnam's 2nd-largest ethnic group, the Tay, also known as Tho, comprise about 2% of the population. Settling the region as early as 500 BC, today Tay primarily live in the hills and valleys of the far northeastern provinces, where many practice wet-rice cultivation and raise livestock. The Tay typically speak Tay, a member of the Tai-Kadai language family, or Vietnamese.



Thai: The Thai (also spelled Thay or Tay) ethnic group, distinct from the Thai people of Thailand, comprises just under 2% of the population. The Thai likely entered Vietnam from southern China between the 7-13th centuries. Today, Thai live throughout Vietnam but concentrate in the north-central and northwestern provinces. Thai typically practice wet-rice or slash-and-burn cultivation and live in unique houses built on stilts. Most Thai speak the Thai language, also a member of Tai-Kadai language family and related to Tay.

Muong: Muong account for around 1.5% of the population and mostly speak a Vietic language similar to Vietnamese, although they are culturally closer to the Thai. The Muong traditionally live in the northern mountains, where they primarily grow rice, raise livestock, and trade goods such as wood and cinnamon. Because the Muong remained isolated in the mountains for a long period, experts believe they may have more in common with early Vietnamese than the Chinese-influenced Kinh.

Khmer Krom: Comprising about 1.4% of Vietnam's population, the Khmer Krom traditionally live in the Mekong Delta, where they primarily practice wet-rice cultivation and maritime trade.

Originally part of the Cambodian Khmer Empire until Vietnam absorbed the region in the 19th century (see *History and Myth*), Khmer Krom speak a southern dialect of the Khmer language of Cambodia.

Hoa: The Hoa are ethnic Chinese comprising over 1% of the population. The Hoa dominated commerce in Vietnam from the 15th century until the end of the Vietnam War, when the government confiscated many businesses (see *History and Myth*). Many Hoa remain active in commerce in urban areas while others practice wet-rice cultivation, primarily in the South. Most Hoa speak a southern Chinese dialect along with Vietnamese.

Nung: Closely related to the Tay, the Nung account for around 1% of the population. The Nung primarily live in the far northern and northeastern provinces, where many trade goods in local markets and practice slash-and-burn cultivation. Most Nung speak a Tai-Kadai language similar to Tay.

Hmong: The Hmong comprise about 1% of Vietnam's population. Also present in China, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand, Vietnam's Hmong traditionally live in the north-central mountainous region, where they raise livestock and practice terraced and slash-and-burn cultivation of rice, corn, and wheat.



Most Hmong speak Hmong, a member of the Hmong-Mien language family.

Other Groups: Other notable ethnic groups include the Dao, Gia Rai, Ba Na, Cham, Xo Dang, Co Ho, San Diu, Hre,

Mnong, and several others account for about 4% of the population. Located throughout Vietnam, these ethnic minorities primarily live in rural or mountainous areas.

Social Relations

Kinship and family are the governing principles in Vietnamese society. Regardless of ethnic identity, Vietnamese typically identify first with their immediate kin, then their ancestors and

often their village. Family connections are important in most political and economic activities, and Vietnamese typically share their resources with their extended family (see *Family and Kinship*).

Vietnamese society traditionally prioritizes the collective over the individual. Further, centuries of Chinese Confucian influence (see *Religion and Spirituality* and *History and Myth*) entrenched respect for elders and ancestors among Vietnamese.



Consequently, Vietnamese typically believe successes and misdeeds alike reflect not just the individual but also one's family and ancestors. Consequently, the maintenance of family honor is vital to stable social relations in Vietnam.

Due in part to its hierarchical Confucian past, Vietnamese society tends to reflect clear divisions. Urban dwellers, males, and the wealthy typically enjoy greater access to educational and economic opportunities and hold the most prestige. Women tend to experience relatively high levels of domestic violence and face discrimination in the workplace (see *Sex and Gender*). Differences between rural and urban residents have grown in recent years, intensified by unequal access to public services.

The most evident social cleavage is between the majority Kinh population and ethnic minority groups. Some minorities, such as the Hmong, face discrimination for perceived collaboration with US troops during the Vietnam War (see *History and Myth*). Kinh have seized land from, harassed, and beaten some minorities. Anti-Chinese and anti-Hoa sentiment is also substantial and tends to reflect territorial disputes and the status of relations between Vietnam and China. While the government has implemented some programs to improve the livelihoods of ethnic minorities, major disparities persist.

3. RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

Overview

The Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA), Vietnam's federal agency responsible for implementing religious law reports that over 90% of the population subscribe to a system of religious belief. In 2023, about 13% of Vietnamese are Buddhists, another 12% Christians, less than 2% Muslims and Hindus with 45% claiming folk religion and nearly 30% with no religious affiliation.

Vietnam's government extended its long-standing policies of restricting religious practices to the South after reunification in 1976 (see *History and Myth*). Over the course of subsequent



decades, the government eased religious restrictions somewhat yet continues to monitor and control religious practice. While Vietnam's constitution guarantees freedom of religion, it also prohibits citizens from

engaging in religious activities that undermine peace, national security, and social unity. Consequently, the government permits some religious groups to practice relatively freely, while significantly restricting the activities of others, particularly those suspected of engaging in political activism. Moreover, government treatment of religious groups varies widely across geographic regions and among central, provincial, and local administration levels.

Religiously diverse, Vietnam is home to a variety of pagodas, temples, shrines, churches, and mosques located throughout the country. Although there has been some historic religious tension and intolerance (see *History and Myth*), interfaith relations are usually peaceful, and Vietnam generally remains free of interreligious conflict.

Early Spiritual Landscape

Early inhabitants throughout Southeast Asia practiced animism, the belief that a spiritual presence resides in all objects, both animate and inanimate, notably animals, trees, rivers, and rocks. Animism promotes the notion that all natural objects are sacred, a conviction that establishes a close connection between animists and their environment.

Some local religious traditions also recognized guardian spirits that inhabited homes, gardens, and rice fields, while others acknowledged spirits of their ancestors who could guide or obstruct the living, causing sickness, family discord, and other forms of misfortune. Today, some members of Vietnam's ethnic minorities primarily adhere to traditional beliefs while other Vietnamese incorporate aspects of traditional religion into their devotional practices (see **Tam Giao** below). For example, Vietnamese experiencing misfortune may seek counsel from diviners, ritual specialists who identify the source of the hardship and offer mediation.

Confucianism

Based on the teachings of Confucius, a 6th-5th-century BC Chinese philosopher, Confucianism teaches that social relations should promote social harmony rather than individual happiness. Since it does not involve deity worship, Confucianism is not usually considered a religion. Instead, it is better described as a social philosophy and system of ethics that prescribes specific rules of conduct and courtesy for every relationship. Confucian principles of fairness, harmony, and ancestor veneration pervade Vietnamese society.



Taoism

This system originated in China around the 6th century BC from the teachings of Lao-Tze, a Chinese philosopher and contemporary of Confucius. Like some traditional animist religions, Taoism emphasizes harmony with nature and

recognizes a variety of nature gods. But unlike animism, Taoism acknowledges a singular great force behind all things in the universe, the **tao**. Adherents of Taoism believe harmony with the natural world is achieved by minimizing the desire for material gain and by living a compassionate, frugal, and humble life that is balanced within the *tao*.

Although Taoism's influence on Vietnamese society was much more subtle than that of Confucianism, its effects continue to linger. For example, some Vietnamese follow certain rituals for telling the future or choosing the appropriate placement of buildings. In addition, some Vietnamese households feature a Taoist 8-symbol diagram above the front door intended to protect the home from evil forces.

Buddhism

This practice traces its beginning to around 500 BC when Siddhartha Gautama, a South Asian prince, attained spiritual insight through meditation. Buddhists believe that humans are fated to suffer, that suffering is caused by greed or desire, and can be stopped by following a spiritual path of unselfish living and meditation. Buddhists' ultimate goal is to achieve nirvana, a state of peace and unity with the universe.



Vietnamese follow 2 different Buddhist traditions – Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism. Mahayana differs from Theravada in its view of Gautama: while adherents of Theravada believe that Gautama is the only enlightened being, the Mahayana school teaches that Gautama was one of many. Mahayana further teaches that all followers may attempt to reach nirvana, while the Theravada school stipulates only ordained monks may do so.

Mahayana Buddhism gradually spread from southern to central Asia and then was introduced to Vietnam's northern Red River Delta region via China in the 2nd century BC. In the South, Buddhism spread between the 3rd-6th centuries, when Indian monks and traders introduced Theravada Buddhism to the

region's indigenous Khmer population. As Mahayana flourished across northern and central Vietnam, Theravada remained mostly confined to the southern delta region, where today it continues to be predominant among the Khmer Krom ethnic minority group (see "Religion Today" below).

Buddhism spread rapidly between the 7-14th centuries, when various rulers adopted it as the official religion (see *History and Myth*). As it spread, Buddhism mixed with indigenous traditions, flourishing among the lower classes. During that time, Buddhist monks enjoyed significant social and political influence, while Buddhist architecture, scholarship, and art flourished. In the beginning of the 15th century, imperial leaders began to favor Confucian ideals of social relations as Buddhism lost its official status and much of its political influence. Although royal interest in Buddhism waned, Buddhism remained popular among the masses.



With diminished access to the ruling class, some monks retreated to rural areas where they tended to stray from traditional Buddhist teachings by incorporating mysticism, animism, polytheism, and tantric rituals into their

Buddhist practices. By the early 20th century, however, religious movements to purge Buddhism of such outside influences successfully restored the religion to a more traditional form. By the 1950s, Buddhist organizations and scholarship flourished in the South, where Buddhism emerged as a powerful political force, playing a key role in deposing the religiously restrictive government of President Ngo Dinh Diem (see *History and Myth*).

After unifying under communist rule in 1976, Vietnam's government restricted religious activity and imprisoned Buddhist leaders who resisted the government's efforts to control religious practices. Authorities also banned the socially and politically influential Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), South

Vietnam's primary Buddhist organization famed for its social activism and involvement in national independence movements during the Vietnam War.

Christianity

While Christianity was first introduced to Vietnam in the 16th century by Portuguese, Spanish, and French Catholic missionaries, it differed fundamentally from the



Asian religious traditions and consequently was initially slow to take root. For example, some Vietnamese were suspicious of the Catholics' refusal to perform ancestor veneration rituals. Further, Christianity's clearly defined doctrine, church membership requirements, and organizational structure starkly contrasted with traditional Vietnamese religious practices.

Despite these challenges, French missionaries had some success, converting around 300,000 Vietnamese by the end of the 18th century. The Vietnamese Catholics formed small, close-knit communities that initially enjoyed some religious freedom. Beginning in the 19th century, the Catholic communities were subjected to waves of persecution by various Vietnamese rulers (see *History and Myth*). Escalating violence against Catholics provided justification for France to intervene in the region (see *History and Myth*).

Christianity grew considerably following French colonization in the late 19th century (see *History and Myth*). For over 50 years, the colonial government suppressed the activities of indigenous religious groups, while allowing Christian denominations to practice freely, significantly swelling Vietnam's Catholic community. In 1933, the first ethnic Vietnamese Catholic was consecrated as a Bishop.

In 1945, the abrupt end of French colonialism and the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in the North (see *History and Myth*) prompted nearly 650,000 Catholics to flee south to avoid religious persecution. The DRV's

communist government repressed religious activity, appropriated church property, arrested church officials, and sent priests to labor camps for reeducation. Meanwhile in the South, the Catholic Church continued to freely operate its 870 parishes and 15 dioceses, with followers in Saigon (present-day Ho Chi Minh City) alone numbering some 1/2 million.



Following reunification with the South in 1976, North Vietnam's communist government formally dissolved diplomatic relations with the Vatican in Rome. In subsequent years, the government continued to confiscate church property as

Catholics throughout Vietnam faced increasing discrimination in education, employment, and government appointments.

Religion Today

Today, Vietnamese generally avoid identification with a single religious tradition. Instead, they incorporate elements of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism along with traditional animist beliefs in their spiritual lives in a practice known as ***Tam Giao*** (three religions).

Within *Tam Giao*, Confucianism promotes benevolent behavior, virtue, and morality within a strict social hierarchy that enforces respect for parents and ancestors. Meanwhile, Buddhism similarly emphasizes ethical and moral instruction, offering its adherents a system of practice to prepare for enlightenment or, failing that, a favorable rebirth or reincarnation following death. Finally, Taoism stresses the importance of living in harmony with nature and shares some common aspects with traditional indigenous animist belief systems.

Vietnamese often include various features of *Tam Giao* in their daily religious practices. For example, they may conduct prayers at Buddhist pagodas and visit local diviners who communicate with nature spirits. Meanwhile, Confucian traditions and

principles of virtue, morality, and respect for parents and ancestors permeate daily life. For example, some Vietnamese believe deceased ancestors can help or hinder the living. Consequently, families regularly conduct elaborate ceremonies and acts of reverence in memory of deceased loved ones. These acts typically occur before an ancestral altar in the home where family members place morsels of food, tea, and small gifts to venerate the deceased (see *Family and Kinship*). Vietnamese may also burn incense, offer prayers, and perform other rituals on holidays and anniversaries to honor their ancestors and encourage good luck.

Buddhism

The government estimates that about 6-15% of the population, primarily members of the dominant Viet (or Kinh) (see *Political and Social Relations*), are followers of Mahayana Buddhism. About 1% of Vietnamese, almost all from the Khmer Krom ethnic minority, practice Theravada Buddhism. Vietnam has more than 20,000 Buddhist pagodas and temples, some 40,000 monks, and 31 Buddhist training institutes. Of note, Vietnam's Buddhist pagodas typically include halls or altars devoted to animist spirits.



Although the government allows most Buddhists to practice their faith relatively freely, it maintains strict control over the community's religious affairs. For example, monks are required to register with the Vietnamese Buddhist Church (VBC), which replaced the UBCV in 1981. Notably, monks associated with the banned UBCV and other unsanctioned groups like the Buddhist Youth Movement face continued government harassment (see "Religion and Politics" below).

Cao Dai: Cao Dai is a syncretic movement rooted in Buddhism, founded in 1926 by Ngo Van Chieu, a civil servant of the French colonial government (see *History and Myth*). Based on the belief

that all religions are one, Cao Dai places Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Confucianism, and Christianity under one supreme being, the **Cao Dai** ("Holy See"). Cao Dai's structure mirrors that of the Catholic Church with a strict ecclesiastical hierarchy headed by a Pope supported by female cardinals. Cao Dai followers worship a variety of religious and historical figures, notably Confucius, Jesus Christ, Gautama Buddha, Joan of Arc, and Winston Churchill. Less than 1 million Vietnamese practice Cao Dai.



Hoa Hao: Hoa Hao was founded in 1939 by Huynh Pho So in the southern Mekong Delta. Rooted in Theravada

Buddhism, Hoa Hao relies on 4 religious volumes collectively known as the Oracles (**Sam Giang**), which are written in vernacular Vietnamese and easily accessible to Vietnam's less educated residents. Today, the ancestral home of founder Pho So is a pilgrimage destination for Hoa Hao's estimated 1-2 million adherents, who venerate Pho So as a mystic believed to eventually return to earth to lead his followers.

Christianity

In recent years, Vietnam's policy toward Catholic communities has somewhat shifted. Numerous Catholic churches have reopened, and Vietnamese are once again training for priesthood. Since 2007, Vietnam has engaged in annual talks with Catholic leadership at the Vatican in Rome to reestablish diplomatic relations and discuss reforms of Vietnam's religious freedom laws.

Today, Vietnam is home to greater than 7 million Catholics, the 2nd largest Catholic population in Southeast Asia after the Philippines. Some 1-2 million Vietnamese, or about 1% of the population, attend Protestant churches. Protestants are primarily members of minority ethnic groups residing in Vietnam's northwestern and central highlands. Vietnamese

Christians of all denominations often incorporate elements of *Tam Giao* in their religious practices, such as burning incense and presenting offerings of fruit, flowers, and candy to Catholic saints.



Islam

As of 2023, Vietnam is home to an estimated 80,000 Muslims scattered throughout the country. Some, like ethnic Cham communities in the

southern Mekong Delta, are native to Vietnam, while others are more recent migrants from the Middle East and Asia.

Other Religious Movements

Like other Southeast Asian countries, Vietnam is home to a variety of other religious movements. Comprising less than 0.2% of the population, these groups include a small Christian sect known as Duong Van Minh, Baha'i, Mormons, and Falun Gong, as well as local religions and other traditional forms of worship. About 70,000 ethnic Cham practice a devotional form of Hinduism. New religious groups originating in the country during the last century include Buu Son Ky Huong, Tu An Hieu Nghia, and To Tien Chinh Giao, together comprising less than 1% of the population.

Religion and Politics

While the Vietnamese government has gradually lifted restrictions on religious activities over the last several decades, freedom of religion varies across the country. Generally, state-sponsored religious organizations enjoy considerably broader freedom than independent and unregistered groups. For example, the government has increasingly allowed registered religious organizations to perform charitable work, approved the construction of new houses of worship, and fostered dialogue with leaders of religious communities.

By contrast, the government continues to curtail the activities of unregistered groups or religious organizations it deems subversive or threatening to the central government, accusing

them of transgressions against national security and regularly detaining and harassing their provincial affiliates. The severity of abuses varies across provinces, where local officials may not fully understand central government religious policies and consequently implement them in an inconsistent manner. Religious groups that promote controversial topics such as democracy and human rights or that have been historically linked with the West are the most vulnerable to intimidation and violence.

Followers of certain Christian denominations have relatively little freedom to practice their faith and been subjected to ill treatment. Since 2001, the government has closed several Protestant congregations, blaming the clergy for inciting inter-ethnic violence and organizing government opposition groups. Since 2014, up to 300 Vietnamese Protestants have fled to Cambodia to escape persecution. Similarly, in 2015 members of an unregistered Mennonite Church were arrested, beaten, and forced to renounce their faith. Further, members of the Christian sect of Duong Van Minh were attacked and their places of worship destroyed. Moreover, followers of Buddhist sects outside of the state-sanctioned VBC also face discrimination and harassment.



Vietnam recently ratified a new “Law on Belief and Religion,” which took effect in 2018. Initially, observers hoped the law would provide equal treatment of religious groups and improve training mechanisms for local authorities. Instead, some now fear that the law will increase government control of religious activity, its ability to prosecute individuals for religious infractions, and its tendency to ban groups that threaten national unity. In 2020, the US still classified Vietnam as a “country of particular concern” or CPC, listing Vietnam among other nations that allow government-sanctioned religious persecution. Due, in part, to improvements in the treatment of Hmong Christians, Vietnam was removed from the list in 2021.

4. FAMILY AND KINSHIP

Overview

Confucian values such as social harmony, obedience to elders, and ancestor veneration strongly influence family life. Vietnamese typically prioritize their family obligations over personal desires. From a young age, children learn to obey and respect their parents. Despite recent changes accompanying economic modernization and urbanization, family remains at the center of Vietnamese life.

Residence

In rural areas, multiple generations (extended family) – including grandparents, parents, unmarried children, and married sons and their wives and children – typically comprise a household. In some cases, extended families occupy multiple dwellings on a single plot of land. In urban areas, nuclear families (2 parents and their children) have become more common, although extended family members often live nearby. Vietnamese own no property, as all land belongs to the state (see *Political and Social Relations*), but they may purchase dwellings. Consequently, home ownership is a goal for many Vietnamese despite high housing costs, especially in urban areas. The government's household registration system (**ho khau**) regulates residence changes, effectively restricting and controlling migration to urban areas.



Rural: Most Vietnamese reside in rural areas (see *Political and Social Relations*). Today, Vietnamese rural people typically live in houses built of bricks, stucco, concrete, and other modern materials, topped with tiles or aluminum. Vietnamese in even more remote areas live in bamboo huts with thatched roofs.

Traditional home styles exhibit significant variation according to available materials and local custom. For example, members of the Kinh ethnic group (see *Political and Social Relations*)

traditionally built homes with wood or bamboo, while Nung and Tay groups typically use mud brick. Across the region, roofs usually have been made of thatched bamboo leaves.



Some communities preferred large homes sheltering several families. For example, the Ede constructed dwellings over 300 ft long

that stood on short stilts. By contrast, the towering stilted communal homes of the Bahnar and Giarau were shorter in length but stood as tall as 65 ft.

Rural homes typically have a main room for gathering, working, and in some cases, sleeping, if the home has no additional bedrooms. This room may also house the family's ancestral altar (see *Religion and Spirituality*). The kitchen is usually located next to the main room or in a separate structure. Homes in remote areas often lack basic amenities such as running water.

Urban: In 2023, about 40% of Vietnamese live in urban areas. Since reforms in the 1980s (see *History and Myth*), economic growth has intensified



the income gap between rich and poor, evident in the range in housing quality seen in urban areas. While some residents of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City enjoy a high standard of living in modern apartments, the poorest urban inhabitants live in squatter settlements on city outskirts lacking access to clean water and sanitation services.

Vietnamese cities typically exhibit a range of housing structures and styles, from colonial-era apartment blocks and French colonial detached homes to apartments built over family-run

stores. Some older buildings are 4 or 5 story walkups with shared kitchen or bathroom facilities. By contrast, modern, high-rise apartment buildings are serviced by elevators.

Family Structure

In line with Confucian teachings (see *Religion and Spirituality*), Vietnamese families typically honor the oldest male as head of the household. Elder family members are highly respected and serve as a source of advice for younger members. Females traditionally defer to male family members.

The eldest son usually inherits the family home and is expected to care for his elderly parents. By contrast, a daughter usually joins her husband's family. Of note, some groups exhibit other patterns of gender relations. For example, the Degar and Ede are traditionally matrilineal, whereby inheritance, property, and the family name passes from mother to daughter.

Children

As in other societies, Vietnamese treasure their children. Parents traditionally nicknamed children after ferocious animals to protect them from evil spirits. Throughout their youth, children learn the importance of familial piety (*hiếu*) and the moral debt (*ơn*) they owe their parents. Children understand their duty is to help the family, make their parents proud, and fulfill their parent's wishes. Consequently, children typically perform various household chores such as washing dishes as soon as they are old enough. In rural areas, children help care for livestock and harvest crops. When they are grown, children expect to care for their elderly parents or parents-in-law.

Birth: Vietnamese practice a variety of childbirth customs. Because a baby's birth year can influence his life path, some Vietnamese try to plan their child's birth so that it occurs during a promising year. During pregnancy, women begin educating their babies by speaking to them, believing that children can comprehend



everything the mother says. Historically, fathers rarely attend their child's birth, but that tradition is changing. After birth, some



mothers dress their newborns in second-hand clothes to avoid the attention of harmful spirits. During the 1st month after birth, only close family members may visit the mother and newborn. After that, the family holds a naming celebration and chooses a godmother. In a

special ritual, the godmother allows water to drip from a flower to the baby's mouth, ensuring that the child's first words are sweet.

First Birthday Celebration: Vietnamese celebrate a child's 1st birthday with the **Thoi Noi** ceremony. During this event, the child is presented numerous items, such as pencils, books, money, or tools. Tradition holds that the item the child chooses first indicates his future career path. During the celebration, family members typically place flowers on the family's shrine and ask the ancestors to protect the child's health. Following this first birthday celebration, few Vietnamese celebrate their actual birthdays. Instead, they add a year to their age during **Tet**, the new year celebration (see *Time and Space*). Middle class, urban families increasingly hold Western-style birthday celebrations.



Dating and Marriage

Traditionally, the primary purpose of marriage was to continue the family name and ensure future descendants who would honor the family's ancestors. While most marriages were historically arranged, today young people typically pick their own mates and consider romantic love to be an important component of marriage. Nevertheless, parents are still heavily influential in the decision-making process.

The legal age of marriage for women is 18. Most women marry in their late teens and early twenties while most men wait until their mid-20s. Child marriage is relatively uncommon: just over 1% of girls are married before age 15, and some 15% marry before age 18.

Young people typically begin socializing in their late teenage years. In urban areas, couples often visit coffee shops or go to the movies, while in rural areas young people are more likely to socialize in groups. If a couple wishes to consider marriage, they inform their parents. Upon their approval, the families hold an engagement ceremony during which a trusted family member or friend represents the families in engagement negotiations. Later, the groom's relatives travel to the bride's home to present **qua**, gifts of wine, food, or jewelry exhibited on special red trays marked with the Chinese character for "double happiness."

Wedding: The couple typically consults a religious leader or family elder to choose a wedding date likely to bring good fortune. The ceremony begins when the groom and his relatives travel to the bride's home bearing wine or tea for the bride's parents. Their consumption of the beverage symbolizes the families' union. The groom then asks the bride's parents for permission a final time. After granting it, the bride's family presents their daughter to the groom.



Next, the couple prays at the bride's ancestral altar and exchanges wedding rings. At this point, the couple travels to the groom's family home, where the same series of ceremonies is repeated.

Depending on the couple's religious affiliation (see *Religion and Spirituality*), an additional ceremony may take place at a church or temple. Following the ceremonies, family and friends typically dine on a large meal and listen to music at a local restaurant or at the groom's family home. Traditional bridal wear comprises a red **ao dai**, the Vietnamese national costume (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*), while the groom wears a blue version.

Divorce: Men and women have equal rights to divorce under Vietnamese law, yet women face greater social stigma following the separation. Generally, divorce has become more common in recent decades. While 2000 saw just 0.66 divorces per 1,000 marriages, by 2024 that rate had decreased to 0.2, significantly lower than the US rate of 14 per 1000 marriages. A variety of factors likely contributed to the increase, such as women's increased economic independence.

Death

Following a death, family members engage in a series of rituals intended to allow the deceased to **qua doi** (move on to another existence). Before the funeral, family members wash the body and place rice, salt, and a coin in the deceased's mouth. These items ensure that the deceased lacks nothing on his journey. Family members then wrap the body in a white cloth and place it in a coffin, sometimes along with a few treasured belongings.

At home, families typically erect an altar adorned with photos of the deceased. Family and friends gather before the altar to burn incense, offer prayers, and share memories. Guests may bring flowers or envelopes of condolence money. In cities, these gatherings may take place in a funeral home or mortuary instead of a private home.



On the day of the burial, the family usually wears white clothing and gathers for a funeral procession (**le dua tang**) to a cemetery. During the journey, mourners scatter paper money to distract evil spirits. Upon arrival, the coffin is buried. The family returns to visit the grave and ensure the spirit's safe passage (**le mo cua ma**) after 3 days, then again on the anniversary of the death and around the *Tet* new year. For several weeks after a death, family members offer rice on the family altar in honor of the deceased. Immediate family members may wear mourning attire, like a black patch pinned to their shirt, for up to 2 years. Members of Vietnam's ethnic minority groups (see *Political and Social Relations*) sometimes follow different funeral customs.

5. SEX AND GENDER

Overview

While Vietnamese women are recognized for their role in historical struggles (see *History and Myth*), traditional values privilege men over women in most spheres. Despite their widespread participation in higher education and the workforce, women continue to face challenges to their full participation in society.

Gender Roles and Work

Domestic Labor: Traditionally, women performed most household tasks, notably managing the family budget and caring for children and family elders. Even if they work outside the home, women continue to perform most domestic chores.

Labor Force: In 2023, about 69% of Vietnamese women worked outside the home. This rate has remained relatively steady since 1990 and falls between that of Laos (56%) and Cambodia (70%), yet is significantly higher than the US rate (57%). Women are employed in all economic sectors, including agriculture, manufacturing, and services. Of note, Vietnamese law prohibits women from work such as mining categorized as harmful to child-bearing or parenting.

Vietnamese women face significant barriers to their equal participation in the workforce. They typically earn less than their male

colleagues, despite laws requiring employers to pay men and women equal salaries for the same work. As of 2024, women earned 14% less than males in comparable positions. Women often experience discrimination in hiring and promotion and are forced to take society's lowest-status jobs, such as small vendors (*tiêu thuong*) and positions in the low-paid apparel



industry. Furthermore, women are required by law to retire at the age of 55, while the retirement age for men is 60. Although this regulation is unenforced in many sectors, it significantly reduces opportunities for women in some areas.

Gender and the Law

The 2006 Law on Gender Equality aims to ensure gender equality in all areas of social and family life. In practice, discriminatory gender bias and stereotypes are widespread in the media and educational materials. Further, lack of enforcement of laws and policies combined with traditional patriarchal attitudes limit women's rights. Women regularly encounter discrimination that hinders their access to healthcare, education, employment, and land. For example, the law stipulates that men and women inherit equally, though in practice, sons typically inherit the parental home, while women inherit items of lesser value. Further, the household registration system (**hokhau**) (see *Family and Kinship*) disproportionately restricts women's access to public services.



A traditional preference for male children over female results in some cases of sex-selective abortions (see "Sex and Procreation" below). While the law forbids prenatal sex selection (methods to control the sex of babies before birth), it is difficult to enforce.

Consequently, Vietnam's male-female sex ratio at birth is skewed and continues to increase, with 110 boys born for every 100 girls in 2023. The government has developed various initiatives in an attempt to reverse this imbalance.

Gender and Politics

Since the Trung sisters' rebellion against the Chinese in the 1st century (see *History and Myth*), women have played prominent positions in Vietnam's national struggles. Recently, Vietnamese women have achieved leadership positions in government, with several serving as Vice President.

The government continues to encourage women's increased political participation and has set a target of 35% women in the National Assembly (see *Political and Social Relations*). Currently, about 31% of legislature members are female, a higher rate than Cambodia (14%) and Lao (22%) but about the same as that of the US (29%). The Assembly elected its first female chairwoman, Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan, in March 2016. Of note, the government's enforcement of the early retirement requirement for women in civil service significantly reduces their leadership opportunities.

Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

Despite various legal protections outlawing rape, domestic violence, and sexual harassment, GBV remains widespread. In 2021, 58% of surveyed ever-married women stated they had experienced at least one type of domestic violence (physical, emotional or sexual), with about 87% did not seek help from public services. Even if crimes are reported, prosecutors sometimes file only minor charges against perpetrators. Currently, the Vietnamese government, international organizations, and charities are working to raise awareness of GBV and improve access to resources for victims.



Vietnam is a source country for men, women, and children subjected to sex and labor trafficking. While adults of both genders become victims when they migrate abroad for work in the fishing, mining, logging, and manufacturing sectors, women and children in particular are targeted for sex work. Other Vietnamese women enter in internationally-brokered marriages in China, South Korea, Malaysia, and Singapore, where they are sometimes subjected to domestic servitude or forced prostitution. Within Vietnam, homeless and disabled children are vulnerable to forced labor. Despite a 2012 law criminalizing sex and labor trafficking and efforts to provide anti-trafficking training to government officials, the country does not yet meet the minimum international standards for trafficking's elimination.

Sex and Procreation

Vietnamese consider sexual intimacy a private matter and tend to avoid public displays of affection. Since 1994, the government has alternately encouraged or mandated a limit of 2 children per married couple. Likely in part due to this policy, Vietnam's birthrate in 2024 was 2.1 children per woman, down from a rate of 6.3 in 1960. In 2017, the government began urging couples to have 2 children in an attempt to reverse the downward trend.

Although the government provides some support for family planning, a lack of appropriate and accurate sex education in



schools and a general lack of information regarding reproductive health results in high rates of unwanted pregnancies. To avoid the social stigma associated with bearing children outside of marriage, some women choose abortion. Legal in the first 22 weeks of pregnancy, the procedure is widely available in both public and private clinics. Vietnam's abortion rate is Asia's and one of the world's highest. For every 1,000 women each year,

Vietnam counts around 64 abortions, significantly higher than the US rate of 14 per 1,000 women.

Homosexuality in Vietnam: Vietnam's first gay pride parade occurred in Hanoi in 2012 and has since become an annual event that has spread to other cities. In 2015, the government abolished a ban on same-sex marriage. Although such unions are now legally permitted, the government neither fully recognizes them nor provides legal protection for same-sex spouses. A hallmark step for the transgender community came as a result of the government recently legalizing sex reassignment surgery. Despite these affirmative measures, members of the LGBT community still face widespread discrimination and abuse. LGBT youth experience particularly significant bullying in school.

6. LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

Language Overview

While Vietnam's official language is Vietnamese, the country's 54 officially-recognized ethnic groups collectively speak over 100 other languages.

Vietnamese

A member of the Mon-Khmer branch of the Austro-Asiatic language family, Vietnamese is the native language of the dominant Viet (or Kinh) (see *Political and Social Relations*) ethnic group. During the almost 1,000 years of Chinese domination in Vietnam's early history (see *History and Myth*), scholars and administrators used a Chinese-based writing system called **chu nho** or **chu Han**. Even after Chinese domination ended in 938 (see *History and Myth*), various Viet

kingdoms continued to use **chu Han** for official business, education, and literature.



Beginning in the 13th century, Viet scholars developed a new writing system called **chu nom** that adapted Chinese characters for Vietnamese words and sounds. While **chu Han** was still predominant

for official purposes, **chu nom** had become widely used for popular literature and unofficial documents by the 15th century.

Because both systems required knowledge of thousands of characters, mastery took years to develop. Seeking a faster way to learn to write Vietnamese, European missionaries arriving in the 16th-17th centuries developed a 3rd writing system based on the Latin script called **chu quoc ngu** (see *History and Myth*). For the next 2 centuries, only Catholic missionaries and Vietnamese Christian converts (see *Religion and Spirituality*) used this script.

In the late 19th-early 20th centuries, the French colonial government (see *History and Myth*) introduced *chu quoc ngu* in their schools (see *Learning and Knowledge*), then banned the Chinese-based *chu nom* in 1920 in an attempt to shield the Vietnamese population from potentially revolutionary ideas in Chinese-language materials (see *History and Myth*).

Some nationalists opposed the change, fearing that the lack of knowledge of the old scripts effectively detached Vietnamese from their own written history. Nevertheless, other activists, particularly communists (see *History and Myth*), welcomed *chu quoc ngu* as a means of quickly increasing literacy and widening their popular support. With the end of colonialism in 1954, *chu quoc ngu* became the official script for government, business, and education and remains so today.

Today, there are 3 main dialects of spoken Vietnamese: northern, central, and southern, which are also known as the Hanoi, Hue, and Saigon “languages.”



The 3 varieties exhibit minor differences in pronunciation and vocabulary, and Vietnamese generally prefer the Hanoi version. Due to centuries of interaction (see *History and Myth*), Vietnamese also includes many loanwords from Chinese.

Vietnamese is a monosyllabic language, which means that each syllable is a word, but multi-syllabic words may be formed by combining separately-pronounced syllables. For example, the word **thanh** (fresh) joins with **nien** (years) to make **thanh nien** (youth). Vietnamese is also a tonal language, with each word having a vowel that is voiced with either a constant or changing (rising or falling) pitch. For example, the syllable “ma” can mean ghost, cheek, but, tomb, horse, or rice seedling depending on

the tone used. Tone is indicated by the use of diacritics, symbols placed above or below a letter.

Other Languages

Vietnam's linguistic landscape reflects significant diversity, with over 100 other languages belonging to 5 language families. Several languages such as Hmong-Daw of the Hmong-Mien language family, Khmer and Muong, both of the Austro-Asiatic family (like Vietnamese), and Tày and Nung of the Tai-Kadai family have over 1 million speakers. Similarly, around 1 million Vietnamese speak Chinese, while much smaller numbers speak other Sino-Tibetan varieties. Other prominent languages, such as 2 Cham varieties and Jarai, belong to the Austronesian language family.

Due to Vietnam's colonial history (see *History and Myth*), some residents speak French.



Others speak Russian due to their work abroad in European communist bloc countries during the 20th century (see *History and Myth*).

English: In recent decades, English has become increasingly popular and is taught at both the primary and secondary levels (see *Learning and Knowledge*). English is also the most popular 2nd language studied in Vietnamese universities.

Communication Overview

Communicating effectively in Vietnam requires not only knowledge of Vietnamese but also the ability to use the language to interact effectively. This broad notion of competence includes paralinguistic (rate of speech, volume, intonation), nonverbal communication (personal space, touch, gestures), and interaction management (conversation initiation, turn-taking, and termination). When used properly, these forms of

communication help to ensure that statements are interpreted as the speaker intends.

Communication Style

Vietnamese typically place great value on courtesy and modesty during communications. Above all, Vietnamese try to avoid showing irritation and anger, since shouting or other emotional outbursts could cause participants to “lose face,” or experience shame and embarrassment that would result in a loss of social standing. Consequently, they avoid openly insulting, criticizing, or disagreeing with others in public, preferring to settle disputes in private.

Vietnamese ideals of polite behavior favor indirect methods of communication. For example, subtle facial expressions, tone of voice, and posture sometimes are used to convey negative intentions instead of giving an outright refusal. In general, foreign nationals should follow the lead of Vietnamese counterparts in determining the appropriate level of formality.

Greetings and Forms of Address

Vietnamese greetings generally vary between rural and urban settings and depend on the formality of the occasion and age of the participants. In the countryside, Vietnamese typically bow while bringing the palms together before the chest. By contrast,

urban-dwellers and younger

Vietnamese across the country prefer to shake hands. Of note, some

Vietnamese women may refrain from shaking hands with men, preferring instead to bow. Close friends and family



members typically hug or simply exchange verbal greetings. During religious and other formal events, people of all ages and backgrounds are more likely to bow.

Vietnamese typically follow a simple “Hello” (**chao**), using a term that expresses the differences between speakers’ gender, social status, age, and profession. While the terms themselves translate literally as family roles, Vietnamese also use them with non-family. For example, they typically refer to elderly or higher status men as **ong** (grandfather) and women as **ba** (grandmother). These terms may also be used with casual acquaintances or business associates. Similarly, they usually address slightly older men as **anh** (older brother), women as **chi** (older sister), and younger or subordinate people as **em** (junior).

Vietnamese often drop the given name in informal speech, replacing it with a number indicating birth order. For example, a younger sibling might address her older sister as **chi hai** (second elder sister).



Names

Vietnamese typically have 3 names: a given name, middle name, and family name. Unlike in most Western societies, Vietnamese order the family name first, then the middle name, and the given (or “first”) name last. Middle names typically have a meaning (for example, Ngoc means “precious stone”) and may be gender-specific or gender-neutral. Given names frequently have gender-specific meanings. Common female given names include Hong (rose) and Huong (fragrance), while the names Hung (heroic) and Tien (progress) are reserved for males. Other names, such as Loc (prosperity) and Phuc (happiness), may be used by either sex.

Vietnam counts only around 100 family names. Common last names include Nguyen, Le, Tran, Pham, and Phan. Some 40% of Vietnam’s population carries the family name Nguyen. Vietnamese customarily address others by their given rather than their family names. For example, a government official

named Nguyen Ngoc Tho would be addressed as “Ong Tho.” Vietnamese women retain their names upon marriage.

Conversational Topics

Following greetings, Vietnamese prefer to engage in light discussion before moving on to the business at hand. Common conversational topics include family, work, hobbies, soccer, and life outside Vietnam. Some Vietnamese ask personal questions concerning a person’s background, education, age, and marital status to show interest in their conversation partners and to determine their social positions.

While Vietnamese appreciate humor, foreign nationals should exercise caution in using it in order to avoid offense. They should also refrain from discussing politics, especially communism and Vietnam’s revolutionary leader Ho Chi Minh (see *History and Myth*), religion, and comparisons between Vietnam and China (see *Political and Social Relations*). Foreign nationals should avoid using profanity and vulgarity. Vietnamese typically appreciate foreign nationals’ attempts to speak Vietnamese.



Gestures

Vietnamese are typically restrained during interactions, making few gestures when speaking. They sometimes smile and nod as gestures of courtesy, even if they do not understand the

conversation. Further, Vietnamese typically consider speaking with hands in pockets or on the hips as disrespectful, preferring instead to cross their arms. Most Vietnamese consider it impolite to point with the index finger or beckon with fingers facing upward. Instead, they typically point and beckon with the entire hand facing downward.

Language Training Resources

Please view the Air Force Culture and Language Center website at www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/ and click on “Resources” for access to language training and other resources.

Useful Words and Phrases

English	Vietnamese
Hello	Chào
Hello (polite)	Xin chào
My name is ____	Tôi tên là ____
What is your name?	Bạn tên gì?
How are you?	Anh / Chị khỏe không?
I'm fine, thanks	Khỏe, cảm ơn
Please	Xin
Thank you	Cảm ơn
You're welcome	Không có gì
Yes / No	Vâng / Không
Goodbye	Tạm biệt
Good night	Chúc ngủ ngon
See you later	Hẹn gặp lại sau
I am American	Tôi là người Mỹ
Do you speak English?	Anh có nói được tiếng Anh không?
I don't understand	Tôi không hiểu
I'm sorry	Xin lỗi
I don't know	Tôi không biết
I only speak a little Vietnamese.	Tôi nói được một chút tiếng Việt.
Excuse me	Xin lỗi
Cheers!	Chúc sức khỏe!
What?	Cái gì?
Where?	Ở đâu?
Who?	Người nào?
How?	Làm sao?
When?	Khi nào?
Help!	Cứu giúp!
Bathroom	Phòng tắm

7. LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE

Literacy

- Total population aged 15 and older who can read and write: 96%
- Male: 97%
- Female: 95% (2022 estimate)

Early History of Education

Vietnam has a long history of formal education, first developing during 1,000 years of Chinese domination of the North beginning in 111 BC (see *History and Myth*). This initial education system focused on instruction in Confucian and Buddhist classics for elite males. Following the expulsion of the Chinese in 938 AD (see *History and Myth*), subsequent Vietnamese kingdoms opened formal institutes and inaugurated Chinese-style civil service exams to staff their growing bureaucracies. Scholars often held lessons in their homes, providing males instruction using the Chinese-based **chu Han** writing system (see *Language and Communication*).

This early education system was open only to very few elite males. With rare exceptions, females were excluded. Traditionally, formal education involved the transmission of

values, skills, and historical knowledge through oral means such as songs, storytelling, and epic poems. Formal education also promoted a widespread respect for learning, scholars, and teachers.



Education in Colonial Vietnam

European missionaries established schools in the 18th century (see *History and Myth*) but with limited influence. The situation changed during late 19th century, when France acquired control over much of the South (see *History and Myth*). Even before the

French colony of Cochinchina was formalized in 1867, the French began opening schools with the aim of assimilating locals to French language and culture. By 1869, some 126 French schools were educating around 4,000 mostly male students in the South. Development was slower in other regions. For example, in 1887, there were just 42 French schools in the North. Of those, 13 were primary schools, with only 4 open to girls, while the rest provided training for adults to become clerks and interpreters in the colonial administration. Of note, these schools used a writing system based on the Latin alphabet called **chu quoc ngu** (see *Language and Communication*) rather than the Chinese-based system used in the traditional Confucian education system.



In the early 20th century, the French emphasis on using education primarily to develop clerks for its colonial administration (among other purposes) (see *History*

and Myth) began to generate significant anti-colonial sentiment. Following tax revolts in 1908, the French closed the newly-opened University of Indo-China and some secondary schools for a decade. French reforms beginning in 1917 intensified rather than eased tensions. By the 1920s, just 3% of the population had completed primary school, equivalent to a 4th grade education. Between 1920-38, only about 10% of children attended school. Further, some regions and minority populations had no access to education at all, fueling regional inequalities and tensions between North and South.

Education and the Struggle for Independence

At this time, Vietnam had just 3 upper secondary schools. One of the few students, revolutionary leader Ho Chi Minh (see *History and Myth*), rejected both the traditional Confucian system and the colonial administration. Consequently, Ho and other revolutionaries traveled overseas to further their studies, returning to form new political parties, such as Ho Chi Minh's Indochinese Communist Party (see *History and Myth*).

In the subsequent struggle for independence, education played a key role. Besides conducting guerilla attacks against the French and Japanese in the 1940s, the Viet Minh (see of *History and Myth*) launched a widespread and successful literacy campaign and announced its support for compulsory primary education. Throughout the 1940s, literacy classes also helped spread the Viet Minh's communist ideals. After



declaring Vietnam's independence in 1945 (see *History and Myth*), the Viet Minh made literacy classes compulsory in its occupied regions. As the French fought to regain Indochina between 1946-54, the Viet Minh and sympathizers provided literacy training to some 10 million Vietnamese.

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Education and the 20th-Century Wars

In the subsequent decades of war and division of Vietnam into 2 states (see *History and Myth*), separate education systems developed. In the northern communist Democratic Republic of Vietnam, enrollment increased significantly as the government opened new schools and developed new curricula in line with its socialist ideals. Nevertheless, dwindling resources and ongoing conflict eventually led to reduced quality and access. In the southern Republic of Vietnam, a new education system based on the French model also saw rapid growth. Between 1960-70, the proportion of children completing primary education doubled from 30% to 60%, and by 1973, more than 100,000 students attended over 15 colleges and universities. Nevertheless, the prolonged impact of the Vietnam War (see *History and Myth*) gradually eroded the South's education system.

Education in Re-Unified Vietnam

Following reunification and the 1976 formation of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (see *History and Myth*), the communist state nationalized all private schools, extended its literacy programs to the South, and adopted a unified national education system in 1981. The imposition of a Soviet-style education

program required the exclusion of former teachers, who were sent to “re-education” camps. Despite a shortage of teachers and resources, enrollment increased, with almost 1/4 of the entire population enrolled in primary or lower-secondary school in 1981. Nevertheless, the lack of resources was severe, particularly in remote areas where daily instruction was limited to 2-3 hours in overcrowded classrooms equipped with few supplies.

As part of its **Doi Moi** reforms of the late 1980s (see *History and Myth*), the government significantly increased investment in education while allowing some private initiatives. Since 1998, the government has instituted several waves of educational reform to improve quality and access.

Modern Education System

The Vietnamese education system today consists of 12 years beginning at age 6, divided into 5 compulsory years of primary school, 4 compulsory years of lower secondary school, and 3 optional years of upper secondary school. The curriculum is fully standardized, and Vietnamese is the language of instruction. The school year typically consists of 2 semesters from September-May or June. Schools usually hold classes Monday-Saturday, though daily schedules may vary significantly, with many schools providing instruction in morning and afternoon shifts. In 2012, Hanoi’s primary and lower secondary schools standardized their hours from 8am-5pm.

Today, the government recognizes 4 types of schools: public, semi-public, “people-founded,” and private. In the last 2 decades, non-public institutions have grown more common, particularly for pre-primary, technical, and vocational programs. Semi-public schools receive partial funding from the government, while people-founded and private schools are run by organizations or individuals.



Over the last several decades, the government has significantly increased its education budget while decentralizing control of the education system. Further, the government has made efforts to define and enforce minimum quality standards, thus reducing regional differences. As of 2022, Vietnam spent a greater percentage of its budget on education (15%) than the US (13%) or neighboring Laos (9%). Due at least in part to these measures, Vietnamese students perform very well on international tests, typically outranking developed countries such as the US and Australia, as well as some European nations. Despite this strong performance, critics observe that Vietnam's curriculum favors rote memorization over problem-

solving skills. Further, employers complain graduates often lack specific skills required in the labor force.

Grades 1-9 are officially compulsory, yet some children drop out. While primary schooling is free, some poor students quit due to the

high costs of uniforms and books. Further, some ethnic minority children who speak languages other than Vietnamese (see *Language and Communication*) leave because they are unable to comprehend the mandatory Vietnamese-language instruction. In 2017, the government introduced a new curriculum with a wider array of compulsory subjects designed to ensure the progression of all students from primary to secondary school.

At the secondary level, almost all schools charge fees to cover the costs of supplies, facility upkeep, sanitation services, and traffic guards. Recent protests have reduced these fees in some areas, but they remain a hurdle for many families.

Pre-Primary: Preschool and kindergarten levels are optional but widespread, although quality and access vary greatly. In 2021, some 92% of children of the appropriate age attended pre-primary programs.



Primary: The 5 years of primary education typically include instruction in Vietnamese, math, morality (civics and ethics), arts, physical education, history, geography, and science. As of 2023, some 99% of children of the appropriate age were enrolled. English-language instruction of variable quality is available in some areas.

Secondary: Lower secondary school typically includes many of the same subjects as primary school. By contrast, upper secondary education comprises separate academic and vocational/technical paths. Students on the academic path usually study Vietnamese, math, biology, physics, chemistry, history, geography, civics, and a foreign language (usually English). Vocational/technical schools offer specialized instruction in a range of fields. In 2022, 98% of children of the appropriate age were enrolled in upper secondary school with a completion rate of 59%.

Post-Secondary: To enter post-secondary studies, students enrolled in the academic track must pass a national examination. As of 2022, Vietnam was home to 242 universities and colleges, of which 72% are public, enrolling some 2.15 million students in 2021. In 2015, Vietnam partnered with the German, French, and Japanese governments to open 3 new public universities, while Fulbright University Vietnam opened as the country's first independent, nonprofit university in 2016 with US support. Nevertheless, because their post-secondary programs do not prepare them adequately for the workforce, some graduates remain unemployed. Further, the 190,000 students who study abroad annually struggle because their previous schooling has not given them the team-building and problem-solving skills that foreign universities require. As an alternative to academic higher education, the government encourages vocational training.



8. TIME AND SPACE

Overview

Vietnamese value loyalty and hierarchy in the workplace, taking time to build lasting relationships with business partners. While public displays of affection are common among Vietnamese of the same sex, social touching between unrelated Vietnamese of the opposite sex is typically considered inappropriate.

Time and Work

The Vietnamese workweek runs Monday-Friday. To avoid the midday heat, the workday tends to begin early in the morning. While hours vary by establishment, most businesses are open from 7:30-11:30am and 1:30-4:30pm, closing for at least an hour for lunch.

Banks typically open from 8:00am-11:30am and 1:00pm-4:00pm. In some tourist areas, banks may stay open later or operate on weekends. Post

offices remain open later, some until 9:00pm. Shops and marketplaces usually operate 7 days-per-week, often remaining open until 8:00pm. Along with other businesses, shopkeepers often take a midday break.



Working Conditions: Labor laws limit the Vietnamese workweek to 48 hours, with an 8-hour day and a 6-day week. Additional work requires overtime pay, which is capped at 200 overtime hours per year. Workers under age 18, pregnant women, and mothers with infants are not permitted to work overtime. Workers are entitled to 12 days of paid vacation per year. Despite these regulations, some manufacturing and agricultural workers do not receive these protections, and forced labor, child labor, and other abuses occur. Human rights observers recently denounced conditions in Vietnam's state-run drug rehabilitation centers, accusing the government of subjecting detainees to forced labor.

Time Zone: Vietnam adheres to Indochina Time Zone (ICT), which is 7 hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) and 12 hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time (EST). Vietnam does not observe Daylight Savings Time.

Lunar Calendar: Although Vietnam's official calendar is the Western (Gregorian) calendar, the Chinese-based lunar calendar marks important holidays. Lunar cycles determine each month, which results in 11 fewer days per year than the Western calendar. Leap months are added approximately every 3rd year to keep the lunar calendar synchronized with the seasons. The Lunar New Year (**Tet**) is the largest of Vietnam's traditional festivals (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*). Life events such as weddings and births are often timed to coincide with lucky times on the lunar calendar.

National Holidays

These holidays occur on fixed dates:

- January 1: New Year's Day
- April 30: Liberation/ Reunification Day
- May 1: International Workers/Labor Day
- September 2: Independence/National Day

These festivals occur on variable dates according to the lunar calendar:

- **Tet:** Multi-day celebration of the Lunar New Year
- Hung Kings Temple Festival

Time and Business

Vietnamese typically prefer to build trust and develop personal relationships prior to conducting business. While meetings do not often begin on time, foreign nationals should attempt to be punctual. Meeting participants usually spend an extended period conversing about family, health, and recent activities (see *Language and Communication*) before conducting business. Of note, the business process is often facilitated by a personal recommendation or introduction.

Seniority, status, and respect guide most business interactions in Vietnam. Most meetings begin with the exchange of business cards, with visitors offering their cards to the most senior official first. The host also typically offers tea, which guests should

accept. It is acceptable for meetings to overrun their scheduled times, although guests should acknowledge the situation to indicate their respect for their hosts' time.



To “save face” or avoid embarrassment to themselves or others, Vietnamese prefer to offer criticism in private rather than public. Further, Vietnamese typically avoid openly rejecting an idea or admitting their lack of comprehension. Instead, they may remain silent, preferring indirect methods of communication (see *Language and Communication*).

Personal Space

As in most societies, the use of personal space depends on the circumstances and nature of the relationship. In general, Vietnamese tend to stand at least one arm's length from one another, although this distance may be closer with friends and family.

Touch: While close friends and relatives may touch one another during conversation, social touching between members of the opposite sex is considered inappropriate. Because they view it as the most sacred part of the body, Vietnamese avoid touching another's head.



Eye Contact: Vietnamese generally consider prolonged direct eye contact with a member of the same sex as a challenge or sign of aggression. By contrast, direct eye contact with a member of the opposite sex signals romantic interest. Consequently, Vietnamese tend to avoid prolonged direct eye contact. Especially when interacting with elders or other people of high status, the avoidance of direct eye contact symbolizes respect and modesty.



Photographs

Foreign nationals should always obtain permission before taking a Vietnamese's photo. Photographs of military installations, military camps, bridges, airports, and other similar areas typically are prohibited.

Driving

Like Americans, Vietnamese drive on the right side of the road. Cars, motorcycles, mopeds, and bicycles are popular methods of transportation (see *Technology and Material*). Some operators do not adhere to traffic laws, and roads are often chaotic with many unmarked intersections.



Honking is a common way of signaling to pedestrians and other vehicles. Some drivers ignore posted speed limits and traffic signals, habits that result in almost 18 traffic deaths per 100,000 people in 2021. This rate is above regional averages and more than the US rate of 14.

9. AESTHETICS AND RECREATION

Overview

Vietnam is known for its rich artistic traditions inspired by nature and emphasizing the principles of balance, precision, and harmony. Over the course of thousands of years, indigenous cultures blended with foreign influences to produce unique styles of dress, music, dance, theater, and fine arts. In the 20th century, Vietnamese art incorporated some Western influences, and styles continue to evolve today, primarily due to urbanization and globalization.

Dress and Appearance

Vietnamese typically prefer Western-style clothes for daily wear, often pairing light-weight, loose-fitting pants with a casual cotton or synthetic knit blouse or shirt. Generally, Vietnamese are vigilant about protecting themselves from sun exposure. If working outdoors, Vietnamese, especially women, tend to cover all exposed skin with long sleeves, scarves, and sometimes large, conical hats (***non la***) woven from palm leaves. In urban areas, some women carry brightly-colored patterned umbrellas to shield themselves from the sun.

Generally, older Vietnamese prefer more conservative styles. By contrast, young people tend to wear modern styles reflecting a mix of fashion trends from both the West and other Asian



countries. In business contexts, Vietnamese men wear black or brown dress shoes, dark trousers, and a white dress shirt, often with a tie. Women typically wear a dress or pants and a blouse.

Traditional: Vietnam's national women's dress is the ***ao dai***, a 2-piece outfit comprised of wide-legged satin trousers worn under a long-sleeved, knee-length fitted tunic with slits along each side cut to just below the waist. Young girls often wear white *ao dai* to symbolize their purity, while young women



typically wear pastel tunics with white pants. Meanwhile, older and married women typically wear dark colors or white tunics with black pants.

Similar to the *ao dai*, male traditional wear (***ao the***) also consists

of a long tunic worn over loose-fitting pants. Historically, the tunic's color indicated an individual's social standing: yellow garments were reserved for the emperor; purple and red for high court officials; blue for a court official of lower status; while black, brown, and white were for the peasantry. Although traditional clothing is more common in rural areas, Vietnamese usually reserve traditional garments for special occasions, such as holidays, festivals, children's birthdays, weddings, and funerals (see *Family and Kinship*).

Recreation and Leisure

Vietnamese generally prefer to spend their leisure time with friends and relatives. Vietnamese men typically socialize in coffee shops, restaurants, and bars. Women tend to visit with friends at home or while shopping. In urban areas, karaoke is a popular recreational activity, particularly among the youth.

In both rural and urban areas, gardening is a favorite pastime. Notably, some Vietnamese maintain elaborate ***bonsai*** gardens (the Japanese art of cultivating miniature trees and plants). Outdoor enthusiasts enjoy camping, hiking, and swimming at beaches along Vietnam's long, winding coastline.

Festivals: Vietnam hosts a variety of public festivals to celebrate popular cultural, historical, and religious events. Various communities hold parades to celebrate Liberation/Reunification Day, which commemorates the 1975 capture of Saigon (present-day Ho Chi Minh City) and the end of the Vietnam War (see *History and Myth*). Independence/National Day recognizes Vietnam's 1945 declaration of independence from France and Japan (see *History and Myth*).

Other festivals mark events in the lunar calendar (see *Time and Space*), such as the widely celebrated Lunar New Year (**Tet Nguyen Dan**), when Vietnamese enjoy socializing and feasting with relatives and friends over the course of several days. In one *Tet Nguyen Dan* tradition, families provide food offerings to kitchen guardian spirits believed to provide protection from evil influences over the subsequent year.

During the **Tet Trung Nguyen** (“Wandering Souls” Day), a lunar holiday rooted in Buddhist traditions (see *Religion and Spirituality*), Vietnamese celebrate their ancestors by preparing special offerings of food. Other popular festivals include the King Hung festival and **Tet Trung Thu** (the Mid-Autumn Festival), and numerous celebrations of the harvest, the hunting season, and various other occasions. Most celebrations include feasting, music, and dance.

Sports and Games

Soccer: Soccer is Vietnam’s most popular spectator sport. Fans follow their favorite teams



in the national professional league, the Vietnam Football Federation, or cheer for the men’s and women’s national teams in international competitions. In 2008, the men’s national team won its first international title in a Southeast Asian championship. Until his 2016 retirement, Le Cong Vinh was a prominent Vietnamese soccer star and was considered one of Southeast Asia’s best players.

Other Sports: Basketball and volleyball are also popular team sports. Badminton, tennis, table tennis, swimming, yoga, and cycling are other favorite sports activities. Some Vietnamese practice martial arts, such as **tai chi**, which is particularly popular among the elderly, and **taekwondo**, a Korean martial arts form. In the 2000 Summer Olympics, Tran Hieu Ngan earned a silver medal in women’s *taekwondo*, becoming the first Vietnamese athlete to win an Olympic medal.

Traditional Sports: Traditional sports include **vovinam**, a Vietnamese martial art developed in the early 20th century that combines elements of Japanese, Korean, and Chinese forms; **dau vat**, a traditional form of wrestling; and **ba trao**, competitive boat racing using as many as 80 paddlers. Children enjoy spinning tops carved from guava fruit, playing with jacks made from bamboo, and flying kites.

Music

Traditional: Unlike Western music, traditional Vietnamese music is distinctively non-harmonic. Songs often feature elaborate rhythms and melodies, with performers playing several variations of a melody on multiple instruments simultaneously. While some traditional musical styles were reserved for the royal court or Buddhist rituals, others were popular among common people and performed during festivals, games, weddings, work, and other daily activities. The melodic 3rd-person narratives known as **ca tru** in the North and **vong co** in the South remain particularly popular.



Traditional music features string, wind, and percussion instruments, such as the **trung** (bamboo xylophone), **dan vong co** (modified guitar), **dan tranh** (16-stringed zither), **dan bau** (single-stringed zither), and a variety of drums, gongs, flutes, pan pipes, and mouth organs. Notably, one of the world's oldest known instruments, the **dan da**, traces its origins to Vietnam's central highlands. Similar to a xylophone, the **dan da** consists of 6 or more rocks of varying sizes, which a performer hits with a wooden mallet to produce ringing tones.

Modern: Vietnamese appreciate a variety of musical styles, particularly rock, pop, jazz, and classical music. They often sing at social events, including both formal and informal impromptu performances. Vietnamese artists often blend traditional musical elements with modern, Western-style pop and rock. Notable

Vietnamese musicians include composer and activist Trịnh Công Sơn, composer of Vietnam's national anthem *Van Cao*, and prolific songwriter and folk singer Phạm Duy.

Dance and Theater

Theater and dance have a long history in Vietnam. For example, water puppetry (*mua roi nuoc*) is a unique theater form that first emerged in northern Vietnam during the 11th century and uses a pool of water as the stage. Traditionally, communities staged water puppet performances in local shallow ponds or lakes to mark important seasonal events, such as a harvest.



Today, water puppetry remains a prominent theater form, with numerous groups performing throughout the country. Ranging in size from 12-40 in and weighing up to 10 lbs, puppets are manipulated with poles held by puppeteers who stand in the waist-deep water. Performances typically consist of several

short skits depicting rural life, historical events, and folklore, often with a comedic touch.



Other popular performing arts include traditional Chinese opera (*hat boi* or *hat tuong*), which typically explores Confucian principles (see *Religion and Spirituality*) or love and nature; Vietnamese operettas (*hat cheo*), originally performed by farmers in the 10th century, fusing dance, song, and comedic miming; and *cai luong*, a type of musical drama-comedy first developed in the early 1900s, blending Vietnamese folk music,

Chinese opera, and French influences.

Literature

Early regional folklore and folk poetry were transmitted primarily orally as legends, verses, and stories, often featuring spirits and ghosts. One common theme involves the protagonist consulting ancestors to resolve a moral dilemma. A popular form of oral poetry still recited today is the lyrical, 1st-person folk ballad called **ca dao**. Other oral traditions include **tuc-ngu** proverbs.

Written literature evolved after the 2nd century BC, when regional residents began to use Chinese to record literary works (see *Language and Communication*). After the ouster of the Chinese in the 10th century (see *History and Myth*), scholars developed a new writing system called **chu nom** (see *Language and Communication*) that adapted Chinese characters for Vietnamese words. *Chu nom* was widely used for popular literature beginning in the 15th century. Poets, in particular, often used *chu nom* to compose folklore and intricate texts that had different interpretations depending on the direction of reading. A

prominent example is a poem by Emperor Thieu Tri (1841-47) that could be read backwards or forwards in 12 distinct interpretations.

Perhaps Vietnam's most famous piece of literature is the early 19th-century narrative

poem **Truyen Kieu** ("The Tale of Kieu"). Written in *chu nom*, *Truyen Kieu* explores themes of individual freedom, Confucian and Buddhist obligations, destiny, and love. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, some authors adopted the Latin-based **chu quoc ngu** writing system (see *Language and Communication*), while others began to incorporate Western ideas and produced new literary forms, such as novels, short stories, and travelogues.

Despite government censorship, some Vietnamese writers in recent years have focused on interpreting the social, political, and historical events that have shaped modern Vietnam. For



example, People's Army of Vietnam veteran Bao Ninh's novel "The Sorrow of War" explores war's trauma and its effects on family relations. While it was initially banned, Ninh's work was eventually published following the widespread distribution of illegal copies. A number of contemporary Vietnamese authors living abroad explore Vietnam's postwar period and enjoy international commercial success.

Visual Arts and Handicrafts

First introduced to Vietnam in the 2nd century BC (see *Religion and Spirituality*), Buddhism historically influenced various artistic forms. For example, Vietnam is home to thousands of Buddhist pagodas that house paintings, stone and bronze sculptures, murals, and rock carvings related to Buddhist rituals and concepts.



Vietnam also has a notable arts and crafts tradition. Various artisans today follow traditional production methods in



woodwork, pottery, and stone carving. Other traditional handicrafts include weaving, woodblock printing, mosaics, and silk painting. Folk art often reflects common themes, such as rural life, nature, folklore, and historical events. Modern artists often

incorporate traditional themes into their work, with some of them also drawing on recent political and social issues for inspiration.

10. SUSTENANCE AND HEALTH

Sustenance Overview

Traditional cuisine and dining etiquette play an important role in Vietnamese culture. Friends and families gather frequently for meals, traveling long distances on holidays, anniversaries, and other special occasions to meet loved ones. Dishes tend to be low in fat, prominently feature vegetables and other fresh, seasonal ingredients, and juxtapose cooked and raw elements for balance, texture, and dramatic effect.

Dining Customs

Most Vietnamese eat 3 meals per day, with the largest in the afternoon or evening. Guests typically arrive on time, often bringing small gifts, such as candy, bread, tea, or fresh produce. Upon entering the home, guests remove their shoes. In wealthier households, hosts provide indoor sandals or slippers for their guests. Before dining, hosts may offer guests tea and light snacks. During a meal, hosts generally serve dishes all at once. After finishing their first serving, guests usually must decline several offers of additional servings if they do not want more food.



Although Vietnamese traditionally dine while sitting on bamboo mats on the ground, urban families increasingly use chairs at Western-style tables. Vietnamese prefer chopsticks (*doi dua*) to forks or knives, although they use spoons to eat soup. At most meals, Vietnamese use their chopsticks to take small morsels of food from communal bowls, placing them in individual rice bowls before consuming them. Diners usually finish all food in their individual bowls, but typically refrain from taking the last portion from communal dishes as a sign of respect. Vietnamese never use chopsticks to point nor leave them lodged vertically in food – a custom reserved exclusively for offerings to ancestors.

Diet

Vietnamese cuisine varies by region, often reflecting the country's history of foreign contact (see *History and Myth*). Influenced by Chinese traditions, many northern dishes are stir- or deep-fried with salty soy, fish, or prawn sauce. Northern dishes typically incorporate less meat than recipes in Vietnam's central and southern regions. In the South, Indian, Cambodian,



and Thai culinary traditions greatly influence the cuisine. Here, many dishes are sweetened with sugar and coconut milk or liberally spiced with chili paste, garlic, and other fragrant spices.

Notably, elements of French traditions prevail in dishes across the country, including the use of beef in Vietnam's signature dish, **pho** (a rich noodle soup with broth made from beef stock) and French bread in the **banh mi** (a sandwich of meat, cabbage, and other fillings).

As Vietnam's main staple grain, rice (**com**) is featured at almost every meal, usually alongside meat, seafood, or vegetables, and is used in a variety of desserts. Noodles, typically made with rice, are also popular, especially in soups. The most common forms of protein are beef, pork, chicken, and fish. Popular vegetables include green and white onion, ginger, bean curd, cabbage, spinach, kale, bean sprouts, and bamboo shoots. A variety of fresh herbs such as parsley, mint, and basil offer distinctive flavors in many dishes.

Meals and Popular Dishes

Common breakfast foods include sticky rice (**xoi**) wrapped in banana, coconut, or bamboo leaves, and **pho**. Both lunch and dinner commonly include steamed white rice mixed with vegetables and meat; soups; noodle dishes served with meat or seafood, fresh herbs, and vegetables; or **banh xeo** (rice flour crepes with various fillings).

For dessert, Vietnamese enjoy sweet sticky rice, puddings, a variety of baked goods, or fresh fruit such as watermelon, papaya, bananas, and **thanh long** (dragon fruit – a member of the cactus family known for its sweet, subtle flavor).



Other popular dishes include **thịt kho** (pork cooked in fish broth); **rau luoc** (boiled vegetables);

canh ca (vegetable and fish soup); **lau** (a large bowl of seasoned broth placed over hot coals used by diners to cook meat and vegetables); and **cha ca** (grilled fish with dill). Some dishes are seasoned with or dipped in **nuoc mam** (a salty, fermented fish sauce) or **nuoc cham** (*nuoc mam* mixed with chili, garlic, sugar, vinegar, and fresh lime).

Beverages

In addition to drinking tea multiple times throughout the day, Vietnamese also enjoy **ca phe** (coffee). Introduced to the region in the late 19th century by the French, *ca phe* may be served hot or poured over ice and mixed with sweetened condensed milk. Popular alcoholic beverages include beer, wine, and several



rice-based drinks, such as **ruou quoc lui** (in the North) and **ruou de** (in the South), rice wines similar to Japanese sake.

Restaurants

Vietnamese, particularly urban residents, eat out regularly, with restaurant visits frequently lasting hours. Restaurants range from upscale establishments offering global cuisines to street stalls selling a variety of snacks (**an vat**) and meals, such as *banh mi*, *pho*, fried breads, fish, **goi cuon** or **cha gio** (fresh or fried rolls filled with shrimp, thin noodles, mushrooms, and onion). While tipping is relatively uncommon in Vietnam, some upscale restaurants may add a small service charge to the bill.

Health Overview

The Vietnamese population's overall health has improved considerably since the end of the Vietnam War (see *History and Myth*), when the newly unified government extended the North's better-developed health services to comparatively underdeveloped areas in the South. Nearly all Vietnamese have access to clean water, while about 93% have access to modern sanitation facilities. In addition, instances of malaria have



reduced considerably in recent years, following aggressive government efforts to control and treat the disease.

Between 1975-2023, Vietnamese life expectancy at birth increased from 62 to nearly 76 years, more than the global average of 72 years. Meanwhile, infant mortality (the

proportion of infants who die before age 1) decreased from 52 to 16 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2022. In addition, maternal mortality fell from 139 deaths per 100,000 live births in 1990 to 46 in 2020, although it remains high compared to rates in China (23) and the US (21) at that time,

Despite these gains, Vietnam's healthcare system is inadequate, suffering from insufficient funding; a lack of hospitals, clinics, and medical personnel; and significant disparities in the quality of care offered by urban, rural, public, and private facilities. Moreover, socioeconomic change has increased the prevalence of non-communicable diseases, with demographic trends likely to burden the healthcare system with rising demand and costs in coming years.

Traditional Medicine

Used primarily to protect or restore health, traditional medicine consists of knowledge, practices, and skills derived from the beliefs, experiences, and theories of the native population.

Traditional medicine has a rich history in Vietnam and centers on using non-surgical methods to identify and treat the basic causes of illness. Due to heavy Chinese influence starting in the early centuries BC, today Vietnamese methods include **Thuoc Bac** (“Northern Medicine”), referring to Chinese traditional medicine, and **Thuoc Nam** (“Southern Medicine”), or Vietnamese traditional medicine.

Today, some Vietnamese supplement modern treatments with traditional therapies by growing or gathering their own medicinal herbs or purchasing herbal treatments from pharmacies and other vendors. Besides herbal medicine, common traditional treatments include mineral baths and mineral ingestion, food therapies, massage, acupuncture (a process of a practitioner inserting very thin needles into a patient’s skin), cupping (**giac hoi** – the process of applying suction cups to draw blood and pathogens to the skin’s surface), and herbal steam therapy (**xong hoi** – a patient inhales medicated vapors).



In some areas, specialty clinics offer unique treatments combining modern techniques with traditional cures to treat illnesses such as cancer, respiratory diseases, and HIV/AIDS. Notably, some communities in remote rural regions, and residents unable to afford modern procedures, rely entirely on traditional medicine.

Modern Healthcare System

Vietnam offers free or low-cost medical care in public facilities to civil servants, public sector employees, the poor, and ethnic minorities living in remote or disadvantaged areas. Significant investment in national insurance programs over the last 3 decades to cover the remaining population has increased participation rates significantly from 10% of the population in the early 1990s to over 93% in 2023.

Despite expanded insurance coverage and federal healthcare spending, the healthcare system remains underfunded and

struggles to meet growing demand. Physical infrastructure, particularly Vietnam's 1,400 public hospitals, is dilapidated, with many facilities poorly equipped and operating far above capacity levels. On average, Vietnam has about 31 hospital beds for every 10,000 citizens – a rate below the World Health Organization's minimum standard of 50.

Moreover, public facilities are understaffed. In 2023, Vietnam



had just 13 physicians per 10,000 people, significantly lower than the US rate of 30. This shortage in medical professionals is more extreme in rural areas, where the ratio dips to as low as 1 physician per 10,000 people. Rural facilities are often unable to treat serious illnesses,

forcing rural residents to travel long distances and incur significant costs to receive proper care.

Finally, medical facilities fail to adequately address the special needs of Vietnam's aging population. As of 2019 there are less than 10,000 hospital beds prioritized for geriatric care across the entire country. In 2019 approximately 4 million elderly require daily care, this number is estimated to increase to 10 million by 2030. Private hospitals and clinics tend to offer high quality services but are available only in urban areas and unaffordable for most Vietnamese.

Health Challenges

Today, the leading causes of death and illness are so-called "lifestyle" diseases, such as diabetes, heart disease, respiratory disease, and cancers. In 2022, these chronic and non-communicable diseases accounted for 74% of all deaths. Preventable "external causes" such as accidents, suicides, and drug use result in about 9% of all deaths annually, slightly higher than rates in the US (7%) and China (7%).

Communicable diseases, such as tuberculosis, dengue fever, hepatitis, typhoid fever, and bacterial diarrhea contribute to 9%

of all deaths, a notably higher prevalence than in the US (5%). Intermittent outbreaks of avian influenza resulted in 65 deaths from 2003-21, one of the world's highest avian flu fatality rates.

Regular flooding (see *Political and Social Relations*) puts millions of rural residents at risk of illness from polluted groundwater and facilitates the spread of communicable diseases. Notably, about 12% of children under age 5 are underweight, a rate significantly higher than in the US (0.4%). Malnutrition disproportionately affects rural children.



HIV/AIDS: About 250,000 people, or about 0.3% of the population, predominantly sex workers and drug users, are infected with HIV/AIDS. While the overall prevalence rate is low, cases of infection are rising. Since carriers and victims of HIV/AIDS suffer from severe discrimination and stigmatization within



Vietnamese society, many cases go unreported.

Agent Orange: Agent Orange, a chemical defoliant widely used by the US military during the Vietnam War (see *History and Myth*), continues to contaminate certain areas and adversely affects residents' health. Besides killing crops and other plants, Agent Orange contaminated soil and groundwater, leading to high rates of birth defects, stunted growth, and other medical issues. Despite efforts to clean contaminated areas and address the needs of victims, as many as 3 million Vietnamese continue to suffer from Agent Orange-related health issues. The US has provided aid to remediate Agent Orange contamination (see *Political and Social Relations*).

11. ECONOMICS AND RESOURCES

Overview

For thousands of years, the Vietnamese subsisted in a rural agrarian economy, utilizing canals and dikes to irrigate rice paddies while farming other crops. Others made silk clothing or handicrafts such as woven baskets and woodcarvings to trade at small inland and larger coastal markets. Most commerce was controlled by the Chinese, first as occupiers then as merchants, many of them remaining in the region following the rise of native kingdoms (see *History and Myth*).

French colonization in the 19th century (see *History and Myth*) significantly altered Vietnam's economy. France sought to exploit rich soil in both the South and the northern Red River delta to grow rice for export. In the North and Central regions, the French invested in mining and cash crops such as coffee, tea, and rubber, grown on large plantations. France also maintained the traditional *corvée* system requiring Vietnamese to labor on infrastructure and other projects for many days per year without pay (see *History and Myth*). While most Vietnamese suffered when the French took communal lands, providing only meager wages on plantations or in mines in exchange, some members of the elite benefited from large landholdings or low-level positions in the colonial bureaucracy.



In the early 20th century, the French began to industrialize the North while investing in light industries in the South. Meanwhile, the Chinese Hoa ethnic group (see *Political and Social*

Relations) worked with the French to dominate retail and trade. Internal trade grew as the North sold the South industrial products, coal, and minerals in exchange primarily for rice and other foodstuffs. The Japanese occupation during World War II and war against the French (see *History and Myth*) halted economic progress.

Economic ideology in the North diverged significantly from the South's, particularly after the country officially partitioned in 1954 (see *History and Myth*). The North followed a socialist model supported by China and the Soviet Union (USSR) that centralized planning, collectivized farmland, and promoted industrial development. Meanwhile, the South largely maintained its capitalist export-based economic model, backed by the US. In the subsequent Vietnam War (see *History and Myth*), both economies suffered major disruptions due to extensive bombings and labor shortages. The South primarily relied on foreign aid since most housing, farmland, and livestock were ravaged. By the end of the war, the regional economy was in ruins.



After reunification in 1976 (see *History and Myth*), the government began to implement the North's socialist economic model throughout the country. Nevertheless, structural inefficiencies, corruption and mismanagement, emigration, and international isolation caused the economy to stagnate (see *History and Myth*). In 1982, the regime initiated a "family economy" policy allowing peasants to sell excess products to the government or at local markets, while increasing industrial development. Despite these efforts, inefficient policies and inaccessible foreign development loans forced Vietnam to rely primarily on Soviet aid for survival. By 1985, resultant famine and hyperinflation had severe social and economic effects.

In 1986, new leadership initiated **Doi Moi** (renovation) reforms (see *History and Myth*) to improve the economy by allowing market forces to play a larger role, privatizing land and state-owned companies, curbing price controls, and reforming banks. Further, the government closed some of its most inefficient public companies and sought foreign direct investment (FDI). By the mid-1990s, investment from Asia and the West poured in, causing per capita GDP growth to average 6% from 1992-97. As

inflation and unemployment fell, investment in the oil industry, manufacturing, and tourism increased. In 1995, Vietnam became a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (see *Political and Social Relations*), facilitating its regional integration.

By 1997, the rapid rate of economic growth began to slow as investors rejected excessive bureaucracy and regulations. State-owned firms still dominated the economy as corruption continued unabated. Nevertheless, when a sudden devaluation of Thailand's currency triggered the Asian financial crisis in mid-1997, domestic private consumption and some sustained FDI enabled Vietnam to maintain the highest growth rate in Southeast Asia, averaging over 5% in 1997-98.



In the 21st century, Vietnam has sustained a positive economic trajectory, with average annual per capita growth above 4.3% from 2000-23. Its export orientation and cheap labor force have helped Vietnam become one of the world's fastest-growing economies. In 2007, Vietnam joined the World Trade Organization, formally committing to a more market-based economy. Since then, the government has continued to restructure public investment and the financial sector, reduced the number of state-owned firms, improved infrastructure, and



began to combat high-level corruption. Unemployment and inflation are low, and there are fewer child laborers than in the past. Most significantly, the poverty rate has fallen significantly: just 1% of the population lived at or below the poverty line in 2024 compared to 77% in 1992.

Despite these gains, Vietnam remains poorer than its similarly-sized regional neighbors, Thailand and Malaysia. Corruption is still a major concern, and the oversized public sector is inefficient despite controlling such lucrative industries as oil, coal, and cement. Moreover, rapid improvements to standards of living have been uneven. Rural dwellers and ethnic minorities have benefitted far less than city dwellers and the Kinh majority (see *Political and Social Relations*). Finally, Vietnam's trade-based economy remains highly vulnerable to global economic shocks. Consequently, further reforms are required to sustain Vietnam's recent rapid economic growth and deliver its rewards to all citizens.

Services

Accounting for about 42% of GDP and 38% of employment, the services sector is the largest and fastest-growing segment of Vietnam's economy. Significant sub-sectors include wholesale and retail trade, transportation and storage, banking, public administration, communications, and tourism.

Tourism: The tourism industry is one of Vietnam's fastest growing services subsectors. In 2023, tourism directly accounted for over 6% of GDP and 8% of total employment, or 3.9 million jobs. Vietnam hosted 12.6 million tourists in 2023, who visited attractions such as the islands of Ha Long Bay, mountain rice terraces, and historical sites in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Hue, and Nha Trang. Tourists primarily come from China, South Korea, Japan, the US, Taiwan, and Russia.

Industry

As the 2nd largest component of the economy, the industrial sector accounts for about 38% of GDP and 33% of the labor force. The most significant sub-sectors include manufacturing, mining, oil and gas production, and construction.



Manufacturing: Accounting for nearly 24% of GDP and 24% of the labor force, Vietnam's diversified manufacturing sector has been a catalyst for the country's rapid economic growth in recent years. Significant manufacturing components include textiles, shoes, electronics, furniture, machinery, and fertilizers.

Mining: Vietnam has large reserves of coal, nickel, iron, lead, zinc, and the world's 3rd-largest reserves of bauxite, an aluminum ore. Mining, which also includes the extraction and



production of oil and gas, accounts for around 2.8% of GDP and just 1% of employment.

Oil & Gas: Vietnam has the world's 23rd largest oil and 27th largest natural gas

reserves, with new discoveries likely with additional exploration. Though a net exporter of crude oil, Vietnam imports refined petroleum products due to limited domestic refining capacity. State-owned PetroVietnam controls the industry and plans to more than double its refining capacity after having completed the new Nghi Son refinery in 2018.

Construction: Construction has been a vital component of the rapid post-war economic growth, since much of Vietnam had to be rebuilt.

Construction accounts for around 6% of GDP and provides over 4.4 million jobs, or about 8% of the labor force.



Agriculture

The agricultural sector includes farming, livestock, fishing, and forestry. Although agriculture is the smallest component the economy, accounting for about 12% of GDP, it employs around 29% of the labor force.

Farming and Livestock: Almost 40% of Vietnam's land area is dedicated to cultivation. Since the end of farm collectivization in the late 1980s (see *History and Myth*), Vietnam has made significant improvements in agricultural efficiency, yields, and exports. Nevertheless, family plots are typically small and rural farmers often struggle to make a living, as large agribusinesses dominate farm exports. Vietnam ranks 1st in the world for



cashew nut exports, 2nd for rubber, 3rd for rice, and 8th for tea. Rice is by far the major crop, produced by efficient irrigated (wet-rice) cultivation or by slash-and-burn techniques. Other

notable crops include sugarcane, corn, cassava (starchy, tuberous, tropical root), soybeans, peanuts, bananas, and coconuts. Poultry, pigs, cows, and buffalos are common livestock varieties.

Fishing: Vietnam has a huge fishing industry, consisting of about 110,000 vessels of various sizes. Vietnam harvests over 7 million tons of fish and related products each year. Aquaculture production, in particular, accounts for around 65% of seafood exports. In 2024, Vietnam was world's 3rd largest seafood exporters, selling about \$10 billion of catfish, shrimp, tuna, and other varieties to Japan, China, South Korea, the US, and other countries. The fishing industry accounts for about 5% of GDP and employs over 4.5 million people, or over 8% of the labor force.



Forestry: With over 42-43% of its territory covered by woodlands in 2024, Vietnam has a highly-developed forestry industry. State-protected forests account for nearly 50% of Vietnam's total forested area. Timber,

woodchips, furniture, paper, and other wood products comprise nearly 4% of GDP. Commercial yields primarily consist of eucalyptus and acacia trees.

Currency

Vietnam's currency is the **dong** (₫), issued in 12 banknote values (100; 200; 500; 1,000; 2,000; 5,000; 10,000; 20,000; 50,000; 100,000; 200,000; and 500,000). While a *dong* formerly subdivided into 10 **hao** and 100 **xu**, neither these nor any coins are still in circulation. With fluctuations in exchange rates, \$1 has been worth between ₫23,313-₫25,309 in recent years. Although some larger businesses accept credit cards, smaller vendors typically accept only cash in small denominations.



Foreign Trade

Vietnam's exports, which totaled \$371.29 billion in 2022, primarily consisted electrical and industrial machinery, footwear and apparel, and furniture sold to the US (30%), China (16%), South Korea (7%), and Japan (7%). In the same year, Vietnam imported \$359.15 billion of electrical and industrial machinery, plastics, fuels, and metals from China (33%), South Korea (17%), Japan (7%), and the US (4%).

Foreign Aid

Every year, Vietnam typically receives around \$1-2 billion of official development assistance. In 2020-2021, Vietnam's largest donors were, on average, The International Development Association (\$686 million), Japan (\$530 million), the Asian Development Bank (\$220 million), Germany (\$217 million), France (\$190 million), Korea (\$122 million), and the US (\$143 million). Although US aid to Vietnam was about \$143 million in 2021, Vietnam receives more US aid than most countries in the greater East Asia and the Pacific region. US aid primarily supports programs for the environment, health, economic development, education, and social services.

12. TECHNOLOGY AND MATERIAL

Overview

Although Vietnam devotes a larger share of public investment to infrastructure than other Southeast Asian countries, residual war damages and mismanagement afflict transport and telecommunications networks, particularly in rural areas. The government suppresses freedoms of speech and media, while monitoring Internet content.

Transportation

Bicycles and motorbikes are Vietnam's most common forms of transport. Although the number of Vietnamese families using a privately-owned vehicle is growing rapidly, travel by bus, **xe om** (motorbike taxi), boat, train, pedicab, and foot are common. While buses are the primary form of public transport in cities, metro systems are under construction in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, with completion scheduled for 2024. Buses and trains are the most common forms of transport between cities. Boats and ferries connect Vietnam's islands and delta regions.



Roadways: In 2020, Vietnam had over 397,673 mi of roads, with about 80% of them paved. National Route 1A is the primary highway connecting Ca Mau in the far Southwest to Lang Son on the northeastern border with China. Vietnam plans to construct a 1,100 mi North-South Expressway to relieve congestion on Route 1A. The recently completed Noi Bai-Lao Cai Expressway connects Hanoi to Lao Cai on the northwestern border with China. Although roads connect remote villages to urban areas, many are unpaved, in disrepair, or subject to variable conditions due to flooding and other issues.

Railways: Vietnam has around 1,953 mi of railways, primarily built during the colonial era (see *History and Myth*). In 1976, state-owned *Duong Sat Viet Nam* (Vietnam Railways) re-opened the North-South Railway as the “Reunification Express,” a

single-track railway connecting Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City. In 2010, Vietnam canceled plans for a high-speed railway between these 2 cities that would have reduced the journey time from 30 hours to under 6, although the government was reconsidering the plan again in late 2016. Vietnam also has connections to China via Dong Dang (East) and Lao Cai (West). Corruption and an investment shortfall have caused a reduction in railway traffic, which reached a recent low of <1% of passenger traffic in 2021.

Ports and Waterways: Vietnam has over 26,000 mi of inland waterways primarily in the Mekong and Red River deltas, enabling the transport of about 2% of passenger traffic and 15% of total cargo traffic in 2021. Saigon Port in Ho Chi Minh City is Vietnam's largest, located on the Saigon River. Major sea ports include Haiphong, Da Nang, Nha Trang, and Quy Nhon.



Airways: Vietnam has 42 airports, 38 with paved runways. Tan Son Nhat International Airport in Ho Chi Minh City is Vietnam's largest airport, serves an average of 40 million passengers annually,

compared to over 50 million served in both Bangkok, Thailand and Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Vietnam Airlines is the national flag carrier, accounting for over 52% of the domestic market share, yet budget carrier VietJet Air comprised over 43% of the market share and is poised to become Vietnam's busiest domestic carrier in the next few years.

Energy

Vietnam has a rich and diversified mix of energy resources, with significant reserves of coal, oil, and natural gas. In 2023, approximately 100% of rural households had access to the electric grid, although electricity shortages occur throughout the country. In 2022, power production was dominated by coal (57%), followed by hydropower (30%) and gas (12%) with other fuels comprising the remaining 1%. Over the next decade, Vietnam expects the shares of coal and renewable resources to

increase. Although Vietnam exports crude oil and coal, growing energy demands also require imports of coal and large amounts of refined petroleum products.

Media

While Vietnam's constitution recognizes freedom of expression, the criminal code prohibits speech critical of the government or that threatens vaguely defined national interests. Vietnam has one of the harshest environments for journalism and media in Asia, jailing more journalists than any other country except China. In 2013, the government enacted a law preventing Vietnamese from sharing news stories online. The authorities frequently censor, arrest, attack, or imprison journalists reporting on state-sensitive issues, causing widespread self-censorship.

Print Media: The Vietnamese press includes hundreds of local and national periodicals published in Vietnamese, English, French, and other languages. *Tuoi Tre*, *Thanh Nien*, *Nhan Dan*, *Tien Phong*, and *Sai Gon Giai Phong* are popular national daily newspapers. While *Viet Nam News* and the *Saigon Times Daily* are popular English-language dailies, the monthly *Vietnam Economic Times* has more in-depth English-language coverage.

Radio and TV: Vietnam has a wide range of public and private radio and TV broadcasters. Vietnam Television (VTV) and Voice of Vietnam (VoV) are state-run broadcasters. Many households subscribe to satellite, Internet, or cable TV services that provide international content in Vietnamese, English, French, Russian, and other languages.



Telecommunications

Vietnam has a relatively underdeveloped yet rapidly growing telecommunications network. In 2023 Vietnam had about 2 landlines and 140 mobile phone subscriptions per 100 people and approximately 78% of the population used the Internet, up from just 0.25% in 2000. The government approves content for all Vietnamese websites, blocks sites deemed critical of the government, closely monitors social media accounts, and has imprisoned online activists.



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