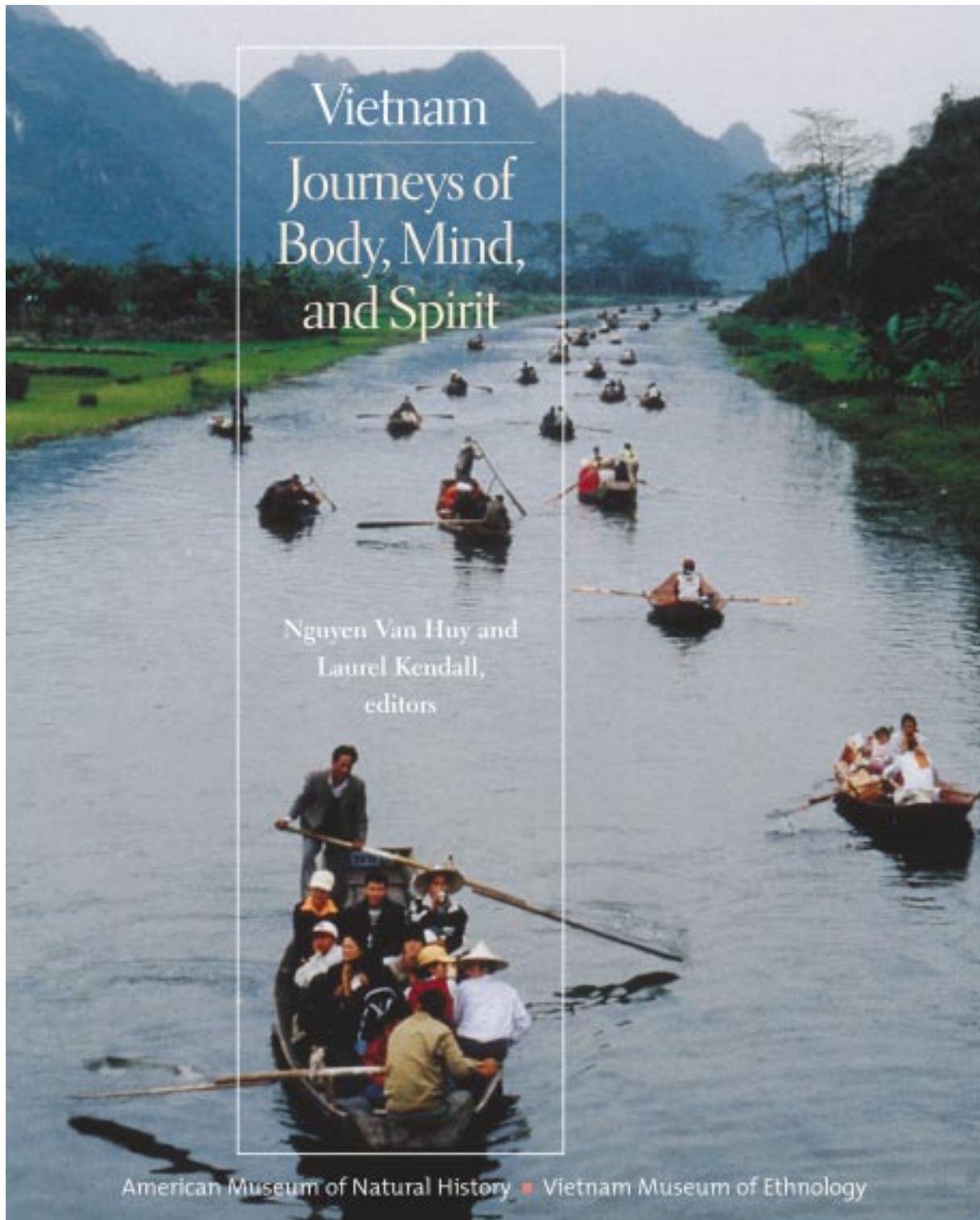


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National Highway 1, stretching the length of Vietnam from the Chinese border in the north to the Mekong Delta in the south, allows the transport of people and goods along the country's 3,260 kilometers of coastline. Shown here is Hai Van Pass (Pass of the Ocean of Clouds), a steep and sometimes perilous mountain pass between Hue and Danang in central Vietnam.

## ONE COUNTRY, MANY JOURNEYS

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Oscar Salemink



■ MANY PEOPLE ARE SURPRISED TO LEARN that Vietnam has the second largest population in Southeast Asia after Indonesia. At almost 80 million (over 76 million according to the 1999 census), it is larger than France, England, or Italy. Vietnam's population is also immensely diverse, with over fifty officially recognized ethnic groups speaking more than fifty languages (some linguists claim more than one hundred) belonging to three language families subdivided into eight language groups. In addition, most of the world's major religions are represented in Vietnam—Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Islam, Hinduism, Christianity (Catholic and Protestant)—besides myriad other religious beliefs and practices, often described as animism, shamanism, spirit worship, or ancestor worship.





In Hue a Vietnamese tourist dons the imperial robes of the Nguyen dynasty, traveling back imaginatively to a moment in the past for a souvenir photograph.

This diverse reality may clash with some images that Westerners have of Vietnam. For decades American and European interest in Vietnam was largely provoked by wars and related events during the Cold War. Westerners were caught by the image of Vietnam either as an enemy of the free world or as David defeating a series of imperialist Goliaths. Both of these images are far from an accurate picture of the country and its history.

In numerous books, reports, and films about Vietnam, the people with the conical hats are portrayed as living in rural village communities that have changed little over time, their lives steeped in tradition. The irony is that such notions and their attendant visual images emerged when Vietnamese society was undergoing a sea change, when much of the countryside was ravaged and villages were being resettled, when much of its population had left the villages to fight a war whose horizons lay far beyond the village boundaries, when migration, both domestic and international, was increasing, when Vietnam's global integration was accelerated by virtue of its being one arena in which the international Cold War was fought. The irony is, too, that a great deal of Vietnam's history and culture is about movement, migration, travel, and change, as revealed by much of its popular art and literature. Rather than discuss various images of Vietnam (accurate or inaccurate), therefore, this overview will pay attention to changes—the journeys of the Vietnamese people over time, in space, and spiritually—without, however, denying *significant* continuities in Vietnam's culture and history.

### ■ River Deltas, Coasts, and Mountains

VIETNAM IS A TROPICAL COUNTRY in mainland Southeast Asia, located between the Tropic of Cancer and the eighth parallel in the Northern Hemisphere. To the south and east we find the South China Sea (East Sea) and, farther on, the islands of Hainan and Taiwan, the archipelago of

the Philippines, and the island of Borneo. To the north Vietnam shares a border with China, and to the west lie Laos and Cambodia, which until 1954 were, with Vietnam, part of French Indochina. The shape of present-day Vietnam is like an S, with the major deltas of the Red River and the Mekong connected by a narrow coastal strip and a mountain range known as the Annam Cordillera (Truong Son in Vietnamese). The northern delta, where the capital, Hanoi, is located, has four seasons, with surprisingly cold winters brought by wet winds coming down from the northern Chinese mainland. The monsoon climate in the southern half of the country results in a rainy season from April to November and a dry season from December through March.

Historically, much of Southeast Asia's present population is the result of myriad waves of migration. Whereas it is assumed that insular Southeast Asia and Polynesia were settled by speakers of proto-Austronesian languages coming from the coasts of Vietnam and southern China, the population structure of mainland Southeast Asia is the result of successive migrations from China southward, of such groups as Thai, Burmese, Lao, and Hmong. According to tradition, the Vietnamese themselves had their origin in the Red River Delta, about two thousand years ago. The legend of Au Co and Lac Long Quan tells the story of the birth of Vietnam, the result of a marriage between the elements of water and land. This legend, graphically depicted in a four-hundred-year-old bas-relief

ONE DAY THE dragon god Lac Long Quan, who ruled the Kingdom of Lac Viet, eloped with the fairy Au Co, who came from

#### ■ THE STORY OF ONE HUNDRED EGGS

the north (China). He lived in an underwater palace while she lived in a palace on top of a mountain. Out of their union she laid one hundred eggs from which one hundred human children hatched and grew. When Au Co went on a journey to visit her home country in the north, she was stopped at the border by Hoang De, the emperor of heaven, who threatened to invade Lac Viet. Lac Long

Quan then decided that he and Au Co belonged to different worlds. Because he was a dragon and she a fairy, they had to live apart—he in the water, and she on the land. Half the children would live with her on the land, and half would follow him under the water. They would live apart but help one another in times of need. Thus it happened, and the fifty children of Au Co became the rulers of Lac Viet, known as the Hung kings, the remote ancestors of the present-day Vietnamese.

[Adapted from *Vietnamese Legends and Folk Tales*. Hanoi 2001: The Gioi.]

In 248 C.E. Trieu Thi Trinh (Lady Trieu), at the age of nineteen, led a courageous insurrection against the Chinese. Legend has it that this woman general rode an elephant into battle, wearing golden armor, a golden scarf, and ivory clogs. Today she is a popular symbol of national unity and independence, as evoked in this woodblock print by Nguyen Dang Che of Dong Ho village.



in Binh Da village near Hanoi, is now taken to mean that all ethnic groups stem from the same source, thus signifying the essential national unity of the country. The revival of the celebration of the Hung King Festival in Phu Tho province has recently been taken up as symbol of the birth of an indigenous Vietnam before the Chinese became players in its history.

The French scholar George Coedès has stated that Indochina was not just a geographic space between India and China but also a site of cultural cross-fertilization by Indian and Chinese influences.<sup>1</sup> While Coedès described the Khmer and Lao civilizations as “Hinduized,” Vietnam was “Sinicized,” thoroughly influenced by Chinese civilization. From 211 B.C.E. to 938 C.E. the northern part of what is now Vietnam was occupied by a succession of Chinese dynasties. During this millennium, Chinese technology,



In 938 Ngo Quyen vanquished the Chinese invaders and in 939 proclaimed himself king, setting up the first independent Vietnamese state, after nearly a thousand years under Chinese occupation. This woodblock print by Nguyen Dang Che depicts Ngo Quyen's successful battle in the Bach Dang Estuary, where retreating Chinese ships sank, impaled on the spikes his troops had submerged so they would not be visible to the invaders when they sailed in at high tide.

culture, and political and religious concepts exerted a deep influence over Vietnam. After breaking loose from China, Vietnam—as one of the states paying tribute to the Middle Kingdom—continued to model itself on China in many ways,<sup>2</sup> although part of the Vietnamese national narrative is the story of the struggle against China for independence. In recent years, however, Vietnamese archaeologists and historians have begun to stress that the roots of the Vietnamese nation preceded cultural influences from China and, to a lesser extent, India. These roots, found in the Dong Son culture with its famous bronze drums, are often portrayed as alien to Chinese civilization and resembling the material culture of some indigenous ethnic groups of the Annam Cordillera and Central Highlands. Even though such bronze drums have been found all over mainland and insular Southeast Asia, from Yunnan in China to Timor, Vietnamese historical narratives now appropriate the Dong Son culture as quintessentially proto-Vietnamese.

Another major part of the Vietnamese national narrative is the so-called Nam Tien, or March to the South, of the Kinh (Viet). When Vietnam finally became independent from China, the successive dynasties of Ly (1009–1225), Tran (1225–1400), and Le (1428–1786) attempted to pacify their border with China by recognizing China's suzerainty over Vietnam in the form of political and moral overlordship marked by regular tributes to the

Chinese emperor. That saved economic and military resources for expansion south through the gradual absorption of Champa, a seafaring Hinduized polity in what is now central Vietnam. The Austronesian-speaking Cham had developed a civilization bearing similarities to the Khmer civilization and the premodern states of Srivijaya and Mataram in what is now Indonesia. Beginning in the seventeenth century, the Kinh absorbed the declining Champa Kingdom. Kinh culture, actively promoted by the southern Nguyen lords, did not saturate the entire Mekong Delta until the twentieth century. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, north and south remained politically separate. In the northern part of the country the Le dynasty was kept alive by the Trinh lords, whereas in the south the Nguyen lords had carved out a separate domain while formally recognizing the Le emperors. This led to a state of perennial hostility and a constant search for economic and military resources. The Nguyen lords in particular attempted to increase their domain through southward expansion, gradually absorbing areas where Cham and Khmer populations lived.

After the country's reunification by the Tay Son rebellion (1786) and the subsequent "reconquest" by the Nguyen dynasty, which from 1802 on asserted hegemony throughout Vietnam, the attention of Vietnam's rulers turned west. During parts of the nineteenth century, a stronger Vietnamese state controlled parts of what is now Cambodia and Laos and clashed with Siam (Thailand), which was expanding eastward.<sup>3</sup> This process was stopped by the imposition of French colonial rule and the marking of borders between French Indochina and Siam. Still now, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, Vietnam has privileged relationships with Cambodia and especially Laos. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the French first annexed the southern part of Vietnam, Cochin China, as a colony and imposed a protectorate over Annam and Tonkin, the central and northern parts of the country, formally leaving the Nguyen dynasty and its mandarin state intact. Vietnam's western borders with Laos and Cambodia became fixed under French colonial rule, creating the political space for a westward movement of the majority Kinh people into the highlands. The creation of a modern nation-state with fixed borders also meant that a variety of upland populations became ethnic minorities in Vietnam.

A key element of French colonial rule was the attempt to link people—both individuals and local/ethnic groups—to particular places, either





One of Vietnam's important national heroes, Le Loi led a successful ten-year (1418–1428) uprising against the Chinese. According to legend, Le Loi returned the sword that gave him victory to Hoan Kiem Lake (now the center of Hanoi), where it was retrieved by a giant turtle. Here, his story is portrayed by water puppets.

inhibiting movement or, where necessary, promoting tightly supervised migration. One example of such supervised migration was the exploitation of “coolies” from northern Vietnam on the rubber plantations in eastern Cochin China and the various plantations in the Central Highlands and Tonkin.<sup>4</sup> In terms of village rule, the French attempted to shore up their control of village administration by undermining traditional village autonomy.<sup>5</sup> Administrative measures imposed by the French made the movement and migration of peasants more difficult. According to Jan Breman and John Kleinen, such colonial interventions in village administration had the effect of creating more tightly knit communities, which were subsequently regarded as the traditional model of the village.<sup>6</sup>

Colonial rule introduced sweeping changes in Vietnam, propelling it into the modern world in sometimes unexpected ways. The modern nationalism of the twentieth century was largely fed by contacts with overseas intellectuals and often led by members of a diaspora of Vietnamese living in other Asian countries. The influential Dong Du movement (meaning “study in the east,” i.e. in Japan) and the Vietnamese Communist Party leadership based in China until World War II are two examples of how travel and migration—the movement of people, goods, and ideas—



Labeled "The Automobile, the Bicycle, and the Hunt [courtship?]," these ironic woodblock prints from the mid-1920s by Vietnamese artists show the peculiar clothing, strange vehicles, and ambiguous courtship maneuvers of the French, who were a colonial presence from 1858 to 1954. The prints refer to these behaviors, perhaps sarcastically, as "new mores" and "the progress of civilization." The figures engage in obscure colloquial conversation, saying in the left-hand frame, "I couldn't give a damn," and in the right-hand one, "You watch it!"



were at the root of Vietnam's most successful nationalist movement. When the struggle for independence in Vietnam eventually resulted in an all-out guerrilla war against the French under the Communist Viet Minh movement, villagers from all over the country were mobilized. The temporary separation of the country in 1954 along the seventeenth parallel, after the Viet Minh victory over the French at Dien Bien Phu and the Geneva Agreements, undid the previous three-part division of Vietnam and almost restored the division between the Trinh and Nguyen lords that had existed before the Tay Son rebellion of 1786. This division was accompanied by a massive movement of Viet Minh cadres to the north and of anti-Communist Vietnamese, mostly Catholics, to the south.

Enormous upheavals and population movements resulted when the Second Indochina War (known as the Vietnam War or American War) broke out between North and South in 1960, aggravated by the deployment of U.S. troops in 1965. The famous Ho Chi Minh trail, the supply route for



This woodblock print, originally made by Nguyen Dang Tuy in 1945 and reproduced here by his son Nguyen Dang Che, shows a literacy class for the common people. Mass literacy was a top priority for the revolutionary nationalist leadership fighting for Vietnam's independence from the French. Although Vietnam historically had a long educational tradition based on the Confucian canon and elite mastery of Chinese and Sino-Vietnamese (*Han nom*) ideographs, illiteracy prevailed during the colonial period. Vietnam's literacy rate is estimated at 85 percent.

troops and resources from north to south during that conflict, can be seen as a recapitulation of the Nam Tien in another form and historical context. Successive southern regimes resettled villages and populations on a massive scale in an attempt to gain control over these populations and separate them from the guerrillas. Many villagers from predominantly rural Vietnam fled the war in the countryside and settled in rapidly expanding cities, especially Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) and Danang.

After 1975, the now reunified Socialist Republic of Vietnam also resorted to resettlement as an instrument of political control and economic management. Many southern city-dwellers were moved to New Economic Zones in the Mekong Delta and the Central Highlands, many farmers from the densely populated northern deltas came to the south in search of land, and cadres from the north came south to establish social and ideological institutions that would serve as the foundation for the new regime. This movement can be seen in part as another instance of the Nam Tien, with





"Bravo for Vietnamese women! Heroes in production as well as in battle!" Celebrated as leaders in the family, as workers in the economy, and as soldiers in the wars for national independence, Vietnamese women are shown planting rice and ready to defend their country in this contemporary reproduction of a woodblock print from the 1960s.

the additional westward movement into the Central Highlands near the western border constituting something of a *Tây Tiến*, or March to the West.

Vietnam remains a largely rural society, with over 75 percent of the population living in the countryside. For many villagers, service in the army constituted not only exposure to the horrors of war but also an escape from geographic and social immobility. After the war, countless demobilized soldiers or cadres settled in new places or returned to their home communities as agents of change. These population movements evoked feelings of bereavement and loss and an intense nostalgia for the home village (*quê hương*) that was inextricably mixed with memories of childhood (*tuổi thơ*), before adult worries and sorrows took away the innocence of youth. This feeling of nostalgia is the stuff of poetry and novels, music and films, both in Vietnam and in the Vietnamese diaspora. In contemporary literature, one of the most poignant evocations of nostalgia and loss of innocence is Bao Ninh's novel *The Sorrow of War*; in cinema, Tran Anh Hung's *The Scent of Green Papaya*.

If literature and biography can by any measure be taken as a mirror of society, then it is worthwhile to look at representative works from the liter-

ary canon in Vietnam. Vietnam's most famous novel is Nguyen Du's *Truyen Kieu* (The Tale of Kieu), written in 1813 and comprising 3,250 verses in *nom*, Vietnam's own character script. It tells the story, in beautiful verse, of a young girl's spiritual and geographic journey through medieval China. The girl, Kieu, rescues her family from ruin by sacrificing herself, giving up her true love. After a life's journey with a succession of husbands, lovers, and pimps, during which her spirit remains pure, she finds her family and her first love again. This novel, though set in China, has been embraced by generations of Vietnamese as representing profoundly Vietnam's cultural identity. Millions of Vietnamese can recite verses from the novel. But why? Perhaps because the novel tells a story of separation and alienation, of appropriation by strangers while preserving one's own spirit. However, when Kieu is finally reunited with her family and her first love, they cannot simply pick up where they left off; as in *The Sorrow of War*, the past cannot be redeemed, save in memory and nostalgia.<sup>7</sup>

Vietnam's most famous and influential biography is that of Ho Chi Minh, whose importance lies more in his exemplary life (*tam guong*) than in his writings, which together constitute what Vietnamese call "Ho Chi Minh thought" (*tu tuong* Ho Chi Minh). All Vietnamese are familiar with the main narrative of his official biography, especially his travels to the United States, France, the Soviet Union, and China. Moreover, he adopted many different identities, literally traveling from one identity to another, before finally becoming Ho Chi Minh—or Bac Ho (Uncle Ho), as he is affectionately called. The image of Ho Chi Minh as unmarried and childless, without family interests, makes it possible for everyone to see him as Bac Ho, Uncle Ho, the uncle of all of Vietnam's children. His portrait adorns many offices and homes, and in temples and pagodas Uncle Ho is not only revered but already worshipped as one of the legendary heroes who have become mediators with the spirit world or even as a *bodhisattva*.<sup>8</sup> Ho's journey, then, has many dimensions: geographic, temporal, political, ritual, and aesthetic.

This very sketchy history tells us that Vietnam's tortuous and eventful history of struggle is as much a saga of travel as it is of continuity and stability.



These scenes illustrate episodes from the most famous work of Vietnamese literature, *The Tale of Kieu*, by Nguyen Du (1765–1820). His work marked an important stage in the development of the Vietnamese language, and his portrait of his heroine's courageous struggle against feudalism and the strictures of Confucian society achieved great popularity.





Praying at the Cao Dai Temple in Tay Ninh. Caodaism was founded in 1926, and its followers are concentrated in the southeast. It is an eclectic mixture of Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and indigenous beliefs, with some elements of Catholicism. Under "the supreme saint," the pantheon includes figures from world religions and also some historical figures such as Victor Hugo.



## ■ Culture, Religion, Politics

AS EMBODIED IN THE NAME INDOCHINA, Vietnam was influenced by both the Indian and Chinese civilizations, but because of the long Chinese occupation and China's proximity, Vietnam adopted most of its major cultural and political concepts from China. The word *nam* means "south," which situates Vietnam in relation to the cultural and political center, China, the Middle Kingdom. Three major religious traditions found their way to Vietnam from China: Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism.

Buddhism's Four Truths teach that adherence to eight moral precepts of perfection brings a gradual detachment from earthly suffering in successive reincarnations. A decentralized religion, Buddhism is visible in Vietnam's hundreds—perhaps thousands—of pagodas, important centers of learning inhabited and maintained by monks or nuns, who often meditate and study. Lay people regularly visit pagodas to pray and acquire wisdom. Buddhism was introduced to Vietnam from India in the third century C.E.; Zen (Thien) Buddhism arrived from China around 580. When Vietnam won independence in 938, Mahayana Buddhism, which offers broad possibilities for salvation through the merciful intercession of *bodhisattvas*, became the dominant religion and its temples the most important centers of learning. Elsewhere in Southeast Asia, Theravada Buddhism, which emphasizes a rigorous and solitary path to enlightenment, predominates.

Taoism is a philosophy and particular understanding of the world and the cosmos rather than a religion per se. Lao Tzu, the founder, seems to have lived in China in the sixth century B.C.E., but his teachings, known as the Tao Te Ching, were written down about three centuries later. The Tao (the Way, Dao in Vietnamese) deals with balance within the cosmos, between nature and man, between mind and body, and especially between the various forces or principles shaping the world. The complementary yin and yang principles (in Vietnamese *âm* and *đương*) have to be in balance in order to find or create harmony. This harmony leads to spiritual and physical health and well-being and affirms one's place in the cosmos. Such concepts are also important in traditional Asian medicine and acupuncture, geomancy (widely known as *feng shui*, or *phong thủy* in Vietnamese), astrology and fortune-telling, and martial arts.

These two boys are being raised in a Buddhist temple in Hue. When they are older, they will choose between a monk's calling or lay life. Buddhism is the predominant religion in Vietnam, and its traditional festivals have been revived.



A moral and political doctrine superimposed on ancient Chinese religious and social concepts about the relation between the celestial order and the affairs of the world, Confucianism was established by Confucius, who lived around 600 B.C.E. As a moral doctrine, Confucianism focused on proper relationships in family, society, and the cosmos. Within families, authority rested with male elders, and women had to subject themselves to the authority of their fathers, brothers, husbands, and, in old age, sons. Filial piety and respect were also key Confucian values. As a political

doctrine, Confucianism established the relationship between rulers and subjects by emphasizing authority and respect, regulated and punctuated by correct behavior and rituals. At the same time, Confucius emphasized learning and wisdom as a condition for enlightened rule. Hanoi's Temple of Literature (Van Mieu), where the scholars and future mandarins of Vietnam have taken their exams since the eleventh century, is dedicated to Confucius.

During the Chinese occupation, Taoism and Confucianism were introduced into Vietnam and existed alongside Buddhism. In this era, Thien (Zen) Buddhism absorbed the mysticism of the Tao, emphasizing the individual search for Buddha within oneself through meditation, withdrawal from the world, and finally bliss. During the first centuries of Vietnam's independence from China, Buddhism was the dominant state doctrine and developed in opposition to Confucianism, which as a moral and political doctrine emphasized this-worldly virtues. With the development of the Vietnamese state, the ruling elite gradually turned to Confucianism as the moral and organizational basis for its regime, especially from the brief Chinese occupation in the early fifteenth century until the French conquest in the nineteenth century. Although Buddhism gradually lost its influence over the ruling classes and even lost the favor of the kings, it retained strong appeal for the largely rural population, who had little to expect in this life from Confucian doctrine.

Despite the several religious traditions practiced in Vietnam, for the large majority of the population distinctions between the various religions and cults are not overly important. In theory, Buddha is venerated in the temple (*chua*); Confucius and Confucian saints in *van chi* or *mieu*; kings and national heroes in the temple (*den*); the tutelary spirits of the village in the communal house (*dinh*); and the ancestors at an altar in the home. In practice all these religions blend into one national brand characterized by syncretism. This combination of religious traditions makes Vietnam very different from the neighboring nations of Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Burma, which all follow Theravada Buddhism from India. In Vietnam we can easily imagine a state official who in the morning places offerings on his ancestors' altar at home, who attempts to uphold Confucian values of respect and hierarchy in dealing with both his family and his office staff, who seeks out a diviner to determine the propitious date for a new venture



Catholicism, introduced by Portuguese and Spanish missionaries in the seventeenth century, has about five million followers in Vietnam. Here, a woman with a rosary takes part in an Easter procession in a small village on the Nam Dinh coast, April 2000.



or a *feng shui* specialist for the location of a building, and visits the local pagoda on evenings of the fifteenth day of the lunar month. In the same vein, the portrait or bust of Ho Chi Minh will not only be in all government offices and in many homes, but also in many temples and pagodas.

While Vietnam's religious traditions were introduced by travelers, their development has been predicated on continued contacts with other countries and communities where these religions are practiced. During the past several centuries, a number of new and alien concepts were brought to Vietnam, some of which blended less well with the syncretistic mix in place.

In the seventeenth century Christianity was introduced to Vietnam by Portuguese, Spanish, and French missionaries, who met with mixed success. It seemed to temporarily gain a foothold when Pierre Pigneau de Béhaine, Catholic bishop of Adran, supported the pretender to the throne, Nguyen Anh, who became Emperor Gia Long, founder of the Nguyen dynasty. Gia Long tolerated the fairly successful Catholic missionaries, but his son and successor, Minh Mang, who reigned from 1820 to 1841, was less indulgent toward the Catholic community, which he saw (correctly, as it turned out) as a fifth column for French colonial designs on Southeast Asia. During the piecemeal French conquest of Vietnam under his successors, the French indeed used the need to protect the Catholic minority as

an important pretext for incursion into Vietnam. This Catholic community has continued to stand apart in Vietnamese society. The Diem regime, allied with the United States in the early 1960s, was largely rooted in this Catholic community, which constituted only 10 percent of the population, a situation that resulted in significant Buddhist protests.<sup>9</sup>

Communism is another alien doctrine introduced into Vietnam. Although an atheist doctrine that rejects religion as an ideology of oppression, Communism shares a number of important aspects with religion: the expectation of liberation from suffering, organizational machinery, and devotion, including martyrdom. In actuality, the Vietnamese Communist Party has learned to tolerate religious beliefs and practices, even among its members, and has lately embraced a wide variety of religious practices as a way to chart a road toward modernization via the market economy. Besides, many Vietnamese point to similarities in Confucian and Marxist practice: the reliance on doctrinal texts, the emphasis on literacy and education, the bureaucratic nature of its governance, the idea of the perfectibility of people (“New Socialist Man”).

Twice during its rule, the Communist Party attempted radical reform: with the land reforms in the North from 1953 to 1955 and with the massive collectivization of the economy after the reunification of the country in 1975. During these same years Marxist and like-minded scholars had a lively debate about the nature of Vietnam’s society and its mode of production and socioeconomic formation. Participants in this debate shared a common belief in a unified national history—the idea that there was and is one Vietnam, emanating from a center (Hanoi and, briefly, Hue). Keith Taylor, however, convincingly debunked that notion by pointing out the regionalism in Vietnam’s history, a regionalism that has been glossed over by the unifying narrative.<sup>10</sup> Taylor pointed to a number of decisive episodes in Vietnam’s history that can be interpreted as a struggle for hegemony between various regions in what is now Vietnam. In some cases, national heroes like Le Loi, who liberated Vietnam from Chinese occupation in the fifteenth century, or the Tay Son brothers, three peasant rebels who overthrew the warring dynasties in the south and north and unified the country in the late eighteenth century, came from very marginal places in the mountains, not the typical Vietnamese heartland. Indeed, when Vietnamese travel about the country, they are constantly asked where they come



A calligrapher creates special requests and messages to the spirits that people will purchase and send up by burning them at temples during holidays such as Tet.



from by people hoping to find a bond based on common regional roots. If two people establish the existence of such shared roots, they bond in a way that is otherwise somewhat uncommon among Vietnamese. If Taylor's thesis is correct, then regionalism, and hence the journeys that bind regions, are a permanent factor in Vietnamese society.

### ■ **Doi Moi: Renovation, Reform, and Growth**

ONE REASON THE RADICAL CENTRALIZING REFORMS after 1953 and 1975 failed is that they did not take sufficient account of the heterogeneity of Vietnam's population, though there are many other factors. After reunification in 1975 collectivization resulted in a loss of productivity and a breakdown in the distribution system in a country that was almost 80 percent rural, bringing hunger to a large part of the population and demoralizing the most important resource for development: people. The swollen cities in the south had lived off the war economy and were largely unproductive, while the economic policies of the new government initially did very little to stimulate investment. On the contrary, the so-called bourgeois class—including many ethnic Chinese in Saigon—was distrusted. Many people deemed redundant and unproductive were sent to New Economic Zones, where they faced a life of hardship. Many people who had been affiliated with the former Saigon regime were sent to reeducation camps for months or years, often reappearing with broken spirits. In many cases, their potential to contribute productively and positively to Vietnam's development was overlooked and largely wasted. Moreover, a conflict with Democratic Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge degenerated into war by late 1978. In 1979 conflict with China not only brought further death and destruction but also forced an impoverished Vietnam to maintain one of the largest standing armies in Asia, absorbing millions of healthy young men and enormous resources in the process.

General poverty and extreme hardship, the lack of opportunity to overcome hardship with one's own resources in the collectivized economy, and disaffection among many who were affiliated with the former regime caused hundreds of thousands of people to take the desperate step of leaving the country by boat. Leaving behind everything and everybody, people spent

significant sums to get into small, rickety boats, risking storms, starvation, and pirates, in the hope—fanned by radio stations outside Vietnam—of being picked up and accepted by a Western country. Many perished in the flight. In the 1980s such escape was replaced by the Orderly Departure Program, which provided eligible people with the opportunity to emigrate, supervised by international organizations and with the consent of the Vietnamese state. The result is a diaspora of millions of Vietnamese in such countries as the United States, Canada, Australia, France, and other countries in Western Europe. For Vietnam these events initially meant an enormous brain drain and destruction of human capital, but in the 1990s the economic significance of the overseas Vietnamese community came to be seen in a positive light. First, the remittances to family members and relatives in Vietnam amount to many billions of dollars each year, much more than foreign investment and international aid. Second, overseas Vietnamese spearhead foreign investment, perhaps not so much in monetary terms, but in providing the connections and know-how to do business in Vietnam.

In the early 1980s, when some regional leaders realized that continued collectivization would ruin the country, they started to experiment with systems allowing for a degree of private farming. After some successful experiments in the early 1980s, the champion of these local reforms, southern leader Nguyen Van Linh, became the secretary-general of the Communist Party. This paved the way to expansion, beginning in 1986, of local reforms, effectively stopping the centralizing forces by giving individual households the right to enjoy the fruits of their crops and labor and to use and manage their land on a long-term basis. A new, more liberal foreign investment law in 1987 opened the door to foreign investment and, consequently, to a wide range of contacts with the region and the world. As a result, Vietnam saw the slow introduction of economic reforms and the liberalization of the industrial and service sectors. This process of comprehensive market and other reforms is called *Doi Moi*, or Renovation, a term retaining some revolutionary rhetoric. The collapse of the Eastern European Communist bloc in 1989 and of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s had the dual effect of leaving Vietnam as one of the few remaining Communist countries and of abruptly ending the Cold War, facilitating the entry of Vietnam into regional and international bodies. An important benchmark of regional



integration was Vietnam's admission in 1995 to ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations), which was originally set up in 1967 as an anti-Communist alliance. An important benchmark of international integration and cooperation was the signing of a comprehensive trade agreement with the United States, thus completing the normalization of U.S.–Vietnam relations begun in 1993 under President Clinton's leadership and paving the way for Vietnamese access to the World Trade Organization. To the outside world, Vietnam is no longer simply the site of a war but a “normal” country with a market economy and a society facing the opportunities and challenges of globalization.

Economic and social changes do not mean that Vietnam has completely given up on its socialist ambitions. Certainly at a rhetorical level, those ambitions remain. Slogans used in everyday life and posted everywhere

In the mid 1990s billboards advertising international companies line the urban landscape of crowded Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon), the main center of finance, industry, and tourism in the south.

A cooperative pig farm in Dien Ban district, Quang Nam province, 1983. The economic era of collectivization and centralized planning changed in 1986 with the advent of Doi Moi (Renovation), the introduction of a limited free market and the corporatization of many state industries.



indicate that Vietnam is not implementing liberal capitalist reforms but is creating a “socialist market economy.” The regime justifies its departure from orthodox socialism by promising that a socialist Vietnam will be fully industrialized and modernized by the year 2020. By then, Vietnam will be, as the slogans say, a “rich country, have a just and equal society, and its citizens will be civilized people.” Most significantly, Vietnam strives to build “an advanced culture imbued with national identity.” This rhetoric is important because in the eyes of many, industrialization and modernization essentially mean Westernization. Official support for expressions of national culture and conservation of heritage are seen to reinforce Vietnam’s sovereignty as a counterweight to the seductions of the West.

### ■ The State of Vietnam’s Population

VIETNAM IS A DENSELY POPULATED COUNTRY, with over 76 million people living on 330,000 square kilometers, an area about the size of the state of New Mexico. The population density is around 230 per square kilometer (similar to that of the United Kingdom), which is high for a country with a largely rural population and agrarian economy. The population is





An early-twentieth-century view of the backbreaking work of transplanting rice in water in southern Vietnam. Rice, which is still planted in this way, remains the most important crop in the country.

diverse, with fifty-three officially recognized ethnic minorities speaking perhaps more than a hundred languages, and among the majority Kinh (ethnic Viet) population many regional differences obtain.<sup>11</sup> Traditionally the Kinh—85 percent of the population—practice lowland wet-rice cultivation, which requires the construction and maintenance of elaborate irrigation works. Since the 1950s, however, many Kinh have migrated and settled in the midlands and uplands of Vietnam, the traditional abode of most ethnic minority groups. These highlands, almost three-quarters of Vietnam's land area, currently contain about one-third of the population—around 25 million—of whom almost 10 million can be classified as members of an ethnic minority. The modes of subsistence of these minority groups are extremely diverse but often entail some combination of wet-rice cultivation, permanent rain-fed cultivation, rotational or itinerant shifting cultivation, fruit orchards and cash crops, livestock, hunting, fishing, and harvesting of timber and other forest products.

Some 50 million people, then, are living in the lowlands of the Red River Delta, Mekong Delta, and the smaller delta pockets along the eastern seaboard. Despite the rapid growth of the cities in recent years and the

Coffee is one of the cash crops of the country, with farms concentrated in the Central Highlands. Members of the Ede minority, like this woman, are involved in coffee production.



massive influx of migrants, over 70 percent of Vietnam's population still lives in the rural areas—a high proportion compared with other countries in the region and developing nations elsewhere. Overall, more than half of Vietnam's entire population is engaged in agriculture, often as smallholders. The average size of Vietnam's smallholder farms in the lowlands is less than one hectare, and agriculture is very intensive. Despite its limited agricultural land, during the Doi Moi era Vietnam has become a major player

in the world markets for rice (second global rice exporter in 2000) and coffee (second global coffee exporter in 2000), thereby subjecting itself to the vagaries of the global market.

With the continued reforms in the 1990s, farmers were allowed to buy and sell land (officially, they were granted long-term land use rights), and as a result social and economic differentiation is becoming increasingly manifest. Poor households, often lacking labor or knowledge and skills, become indebted because of a medical or natural calamity or lack of labor and must sell off their land, a challenge plaguing the many female-headed households in Vietnam. Many ethnic minority farmers in the Mekong Delta and the Central Highlands lack the skills to compete in the market and consequently lose their land, often because of indebtedness to loan sharks. The emphasis on cash crops creates economic opportunities but can make farmers more vulnerable. Coffee cultivation attracted hundreds of thousands of migrants from northern Vietnam to the Central Highlands, who cleared hundreds of thousands of hectares of forest to establish coffee gardens. But the drop in the price of coffee in the world market in the 1990s, especially the lower *robusta* quality grown in Vietnam, bankrupted thousands of small-holding coffee farmers, leading the government to develop a plan to convert one-third of the total coffee acreage in Vietnam.

Apart from large-scale and smallholder agriculture, other important economic activities in the rural areas are animal husbandry, fisheries, forestry, and handicrafts. Many farmers (i.e., the women) are raising pigs, cows, and poultry, for a variety of purposes but mostly to earn money in the local market. For farming households fish, especially sweetwater fish caught in rice fields, ponds, streams, and rivers, is a more important source of protein than meat. With the development of more powerful fishing boats and modern cooling and distribution systems, many marine fisheries have grown to commercial levels, catering to urban and international markets. Shrimp farming is a lucrative sideline to this trade.

Forestry is especially strong in the highlands, where most of the remaining forests are located. The forestry sector was slower to decentralize than the agricultural sector, partly because timber harvesting was—and is—more lucrative and partly because of the growing concern about the rapid rate of deforestation and concomitant degradation of land and other resources. These two considerations combined to slow down the allocation

Fishing is one of Vietnam's primary industries, and fish have traditionally provided a major source of protein in the Vietnamese diet. Fishing with beach seines, as seen here in May 2000 at Nam Dinh, dominated in the 1960s and 1970s but by 2000 was regarded as a side activity for farmers on the coast, while fishing from small boats has become more common.



of forest land to individual households or groups of households, as was done with agricultural land. In the context of the many foreign-funded forest protection and reforestation schemes, allocating the right to protect forest land for a fee and for certain limited harvesting rights is as far as the government wishes to go.

Handicrafts are an important source of income for many households, especially during slack seasons or through employment of otherwise unproductive labor, like the elderly. Handicrafts tend to be concentrated in craft villages that specialize in particular goods, like pottery (Bat Trang pottery village near Hanoi is famous; see chapter 6), basketry, carpentry, rattan and bamboo products, lacquer products, silk production and weaving, bronze casting, and paper and printing. In the 1990s, the export and general turnover in the handicraft sector has grown considerably, attracting more attention as a viable income-earner.

In the cities the industry and service sectors are quickly gaining ground, with annual two-digit growth rates. Vietnam's industrial exports have grown immensely since the 1980s, despite the Asian financial crisis of 1997. With its low GDP—somewhat more than \$400 per capita, up from \$200 in the 1980s—and consequent low wages, Vietnam is an attractive manufacturing base, especially for such capital-extensive and labor-intensive industries as the garment sector, which employs tens of thousands of young women and men from the countryside in factories in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly





The accelerated harvesting of wood has led to the denuding and shrinking of the country's forests, especially in the Central Highlands. These workers are in an Ede area in Dak Lak province, 2000.

Saigon), Hanoi, Bien Hoa, Can Tho, Vung Tau, Da Nang, and Hai Phong. The alleged abuses in the factories that produce for brand names like Nike have led to increased international scrutiny of the subcontracting system through which multinationals operate their production systems. Foreign and domestic investors tend to concentrate on the bigger cities that meet the logistical requirements of export production, and as a result the standard of living in these cities has risen dramatically since 1985. With the rising standard of living, these cities have diversified their economies, starting with their industrial base and their service sector, followed by their infra-

structure and educational and health facilities. A new class of *nouveaux riches* and a new middle class display substantial wealth, considering it must have been accumulated in a relatively short period of time. The cities abound in cars and motorbikes, fancy houses and furnishings, fashionable clothes and personal gadgets like cell phones, and entertainment. More recently, people have been sending their children overseas to study.

In sharp contrast to this emerging upper and middle class stand the many people who are part of the so-called informal sector, the people who often bridge countryside and city. Every morning starting at two o'clock, women on bicycles bring flowers into Hanoi shops and markets from the surrounding villages, quietly chatting as they pedal along. And later in the morning other women in the open-air markets sell their flowers to middlemen who take the flowers to the shops. The informal sector can include almost anything—peddling food, newspapers, souvenirs, clothes, or cigarettes on the sidewalks or streets; selling fresh produce like vegetables, fruit, and flowers; picking up garbage and seeking out what can be profitably recycled; providing services ranging from transport on motorbikes and bicycle repairs to casual labor and sex. Informal work is not always low paid or badly regarded; for instance, many teachers and university professors conduct classes after hours for extra money. The distinctive feature of this sector is that it is not formally organized and that it escapes formal and official regulation. It can be very visible out on the street—as any visitor from a Western country can see—but it is not very visible to an administrative gaze. For many people, especially women, the informal sector provides a relatively secure, convenient, and solid income while allowing them to preserve their autonomy. Research into the informal sector has revealed that women often value the fact that they control their own time and thus can combine informal work with child care more easily than formal employment would allow.

Children are another ubiquitous sight in Vietnam's streets, a sure sign that the population is growing fast. Their presence outside is also a sign that the education system is overloaded, as many schools operate in shifts to accommodate all the students. Although many in the West think of Vietnam as a country tainted by war, most Vietnamese were born after 1975. They know about the French and American wars only from hearsay, from



A woman on her way to market in the Mekong Delta, one of the richest agricultural regions of the country for such crops as rice, coconuts, fruit, and sugarcane.

stories told by adults, or as history that they learn from books and films. Much like young people in North America and Europe in the 1960s who were not much interested in looking back at World War II, Vietnam's young people pursue interests that differ sharply from those of their parents. In a country that values formal education and prides itself on a high literacy rate (though the official figures of 85 percent may be a bit inflated), young people's first priority is to succeed at school. Students study hard and take extra classes in order to pass the entrance exams for the universities of their choice. For them and their parents, admission to a good university is a tangible sign of social success and a passport to a future career. Given the amount of time and money it takes to succeed in the ever more commercialized educational sector, with paid extra classes, fees, and private schools, the number of dropouts is considerable,<sup>12</sup> and there is a sharp

social differentiation, with well-to-do urban citizens having a marked advantage. The second priority for contemporary Vietnamese youth is having fun, and young people complain about the lack of entertainment, though this is slowly changing in the big cities. Teenagers can be seen hanging out on the streets, like their Euro-American counterparts, experimenting and taking risks. Many experiment with sex, a situation that has led to one of the world's highest abortion rates for unmarried women,<sup>13</sup> and according to regular reports in the Vietnamese press, some experiment with drugs, a growing problem in high schools, colleges, and universities.

To limit population growth and be able to provide higher-quality services to fewer people, Vietnam implemented a rigorous birth control program in the 1990s, putting pressure on parents through a system of positive stimuli and fines to limit their number of children to two. Although this program has been praised by the United Nations Population Fund as effective in curtailing the population growth on a national scale, it has not been as effective in enhancing the reproductive rights of individual women. Partly as a consequence of postwar demographics, women are still a majority in Vietnam, rendering their position more precarious. Despite the influence of patriarchal Confucian morals, however, many observers state that gender relations in Vietnam resemble those of Southeast Asia rather than China; women are not as overtly subservient as in China and play a pivotal role in the household and in the household economy, being the ones who hold the purse strings. In general, women have comparatively good educational opportunities and are not formally barred from particular professions; in addition, the overall economic improvement during Doi Moi has created better work conditions and more opportunities for employment for many women, though the proportion of women in leadership positions is still very low.<sup>14</sup>

Despite progressive legislation and the activities of organizations like the Vietnam Women's Union and the National Commission for the Advancement of Women, several issues surfaced in the late 1990s that seem to indicate a downward trend for women, though perhaps they have only become more visible. I will mention two. Since the late 1990s it has become apparent that domestic violence persists. The incidence of wife beating remains high and is one of the major causes of divorce.<sup>15</sup> Another issue is ongoing



trafficking in girls and women, often across borders. Girls and women, tricked by promises of employment or marriage, tend to end up as sex workers in brothels in Cambodia or Thailand or find themselves married to older men in Taiwan or China and reduced to the status of domestic servants, almost like slaves.<sup>16</sup> Measures are being taken by the Vietnamese authorities and nongovernmental organizations to counter these practices.

## ■ Conclusion

VIETNAM, A COUNTRY THAT STRUGGLES with many of the same challenges that face other countries today, including drugs, generation gaps, and fears of globalization, has been shaped by myriad movements in both space and time, ones involving the body, the mind, and the spirit. At the end of the twentieth century, the international image of Vietnam was colored by just a few of these journeys: the journey of American soldiers to Vietnam to fight against perceived Communist threats to freedom emanating from China and the Soviet Union, the hasty departure of these American soldiers, and the exodus of the refugees known as boat people. Although this dominant image is shaped by important contemporary events, it is far from hegemonic; indeed, when judged against the thousands of years of Vietnamese history, against the relations and movements that have been occurring for millennia, these events are but a tiny mark on Vietnam's journey through time.