

# Vietnam

## Objectives

At the end of this section, you will

## Be aware of the following

- Religious persuasion of Montagnard highland people
- Domestic violence and discrimination experienced by women in Vietnam
- Impact of Tet holiday upon the Vietnam War (1968)
- Reverence given Ho Chi Minh by many Vietnamese
- Eclectic nature of Cao Dai thought and practice
- North Vietnamese doctrine of armed and political struggle during the Vietnam conflict
  - Lessons learned from the Vietnam War of importance to military linguists

## Identify

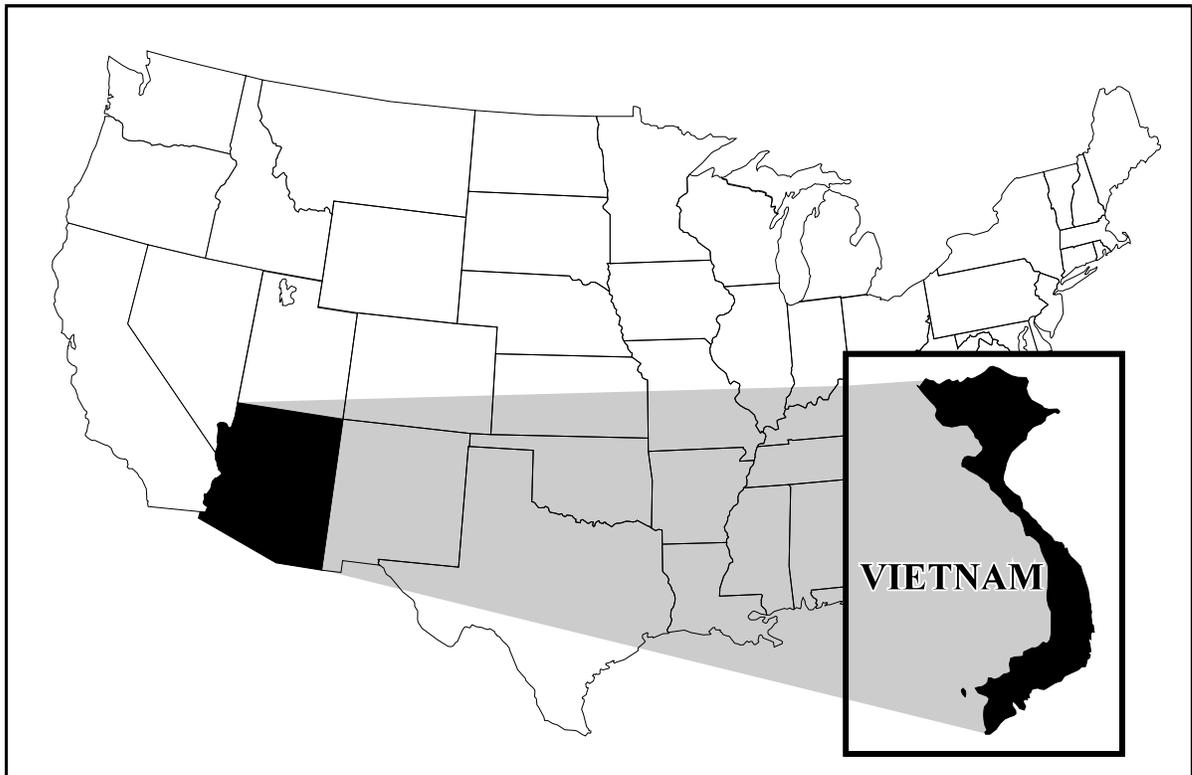
- Cao Dai, Hoa Hao
- Hoa (Han Chinese) minority
- Montagnards
- Hungry Ghost Festival
- Tet Nguyen Dan
- Vo Nguyen Giap, Ho Chi Minh
- Ngo Dinh Diem
- Viet Minh, Viet Cong, Peoples Army of Vietnam
- Dien Bien Phu
- Ho Chi Minh Trail
- Army of the Republic of Vietnam
- Gulf of Tonkin Resolution
- Ia Drang, My Lai, Vietnamization
- Henry Kissinger
- Pentagon Papers
- MIAs, boat people, Khmer Rouge
  - Generals Westmoreland and Abrams

## Realize

- Mahayana Buddhist persuasion of most ethnic Vietnamese
- Tolerance toward religion by Vietnamese government as long as official guidelines enforced
- Impact of folk religion on Vietnamese people
- Importance of Spratley Islands to Southeast Asian countries
- Current perspectives of Vietnamese people to the U.S.
- Government restrictions on church/religious activity in Vietnam
- Importance of culture in negotiating styles
  - Necessity of respect for holidays, enemy leadership, and personage of individual enemy in combat operations/power projection strategies

## **Vietnam**

(vee-eh-NAHM)



<u>Population</u>	74,393,324
% under 15 years	36%
<u>Commo</u>	
TV	1:28
Radio	1:9
Phone	1:563
Newspaper	9:1,000
<u>Health</u>	
Life Expectancy	Male 64/Female 68
Hospitals	1:329
Doctors	1:2,617
IMR	45:1,000
<u>Income</u>	\$1,000.00 per cap
<u>Literacy Rate</u>	88%

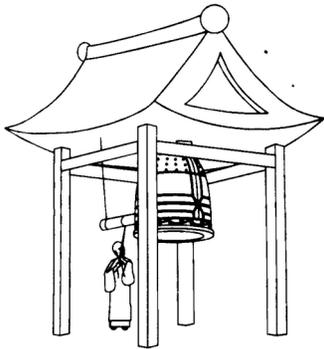
## 1. Religious Groups

## a. Buddhist

*"Historically, most Vietnamese have identified themselves with Buddhism..."*

*The Chinese version, Mahayana Buddhism, became the faith of most Vietnamese, whereas the Indian version, Theravada (or Hinayana) Buddhism, was confined mostly to the southern delta region.*

*Few Vietnamese outside the clergy, however, are acquainted with Buddhism's elaborate cosmology. What appealed to them at the time it was introduced was Mahayana ritual and imagery.*



*Mahayana ceremony easily conformed to indigenous Vietnamese beliefs, which combined folklore with Confucian and Taoist teachings, and Mahayana's "enlightened ones" were often venerated alongside various [indigenous] spirits.*

*The government-controlled Vietnam Buddhist Church was established in November 1981, and it emerged as the only officially sanctioned organization authorized to represent all Buddhist groups both at home and abroad.*

*The communist government's attitude toward Buddhism and other faiths being practiced remained one of tolerance as long as the clergy and faithful adhered strictly to official guidelines.*

*These guidelines inhibited the growth of religious institutions, however, by restricting the number of institutions approved to train clergy and by preempting the time of potential candidates among the youth whose daily routine might require study, work, and participation in the*

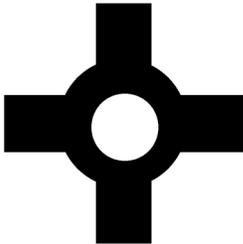
activities of communist youth organizations. In an apparent effort to train a new generation of monks and nuns, the Vietnam Buddhist Church reportedly set up one Buddhist academy in Hanoi in November 1981 and another in Ho Chi Minh City in December 1984 . These academies, however, served as an arm of the state." (Unless stated otherwise, all quotations are from the Library of Congress Country Studies/Area Handbooks--Vietnam.)

## b. Catholic

"Despite the Roman Catholic Church's rejection of ancestor worship, a cornerstone of the Confucian cultural tradition, Roman Catholicism established a solid position in Vietnamese society under French rule.

The French encouraged its propagation to balance Buddhism and to serve as a vehicle for the further dissemination of Western culture.

After the mid-1950s, Catholicism declined in the North, where the communists regarded it as a reactionary force opposed to national liberation and social progress.



In the South, by contrast, Catholicism expanded under the presidency of Ngo Dinh Diem [NGOH DEEN DYEM], who promoted it as an important bulwark against North Vietnam. Under Diem, himself a devout Catholic, Roman Catholics enjoyed an advantage over non-Catholics in commerce, the professions, education, and the government.

This caused growing Buddhist discontent that contributed to the eventual collapse of the Diem regime and the ultimate rise to power of the military. Roman Catholics in reunified Vietnam numbered about 3.0 million in 1984, of whom nearly 1 million resided in the North and the remainder in the South."

## c. Cao Dai and Hoa Hao

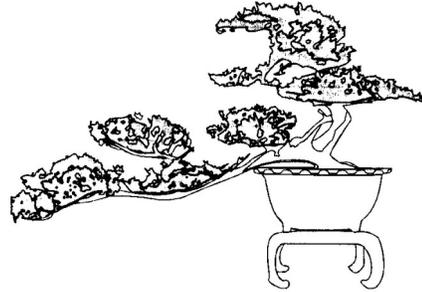
"Two religious movements that enjoyed considerable followings before 1975 were the Cao Dai (kow-DI) and the Hoa

Hao [WHA=HOW]. Both were founded in this century in the Mekong [MAY-KONG] River Delta.

The Cao Dai, the older of the two and a self-styled reformed Buddhist sect, flourished in the rural areas of the southern delta region. It was founded and initially propagated by Ngo Van Chieu, a minor official who, in 1919, claimed to have had a series of revelations. The faith grew under the leadership of Le Van Trung, its first 'pope' or Supreme Chief, chosen in 1925. An amalgam of different beliefs derived from Confucianism, Taoism, Christianity, and Western nineteenth-century romanticism, it claimed 1 million to 2 million adherents.

The Hoa Hao [WHA HOW], with more than 1 million followers, identified itself as a reformed Theravada Buddhist sect, but, unlike the Cao Dai, it preserved a distinctive Buddhist coloration.

Based mostly in the southernmost areas of the delta, it stressed individual prayer, simplicity, and social justice over icon veneration or elaborate ceremonies.



Before 1975 both faiths sought, with some success, to remain neutral in the war between Hanoi and Saigon. After 1975, however, like Buddhists and Roman Catholics, they were under heavy pressure from the communist regime to join its ranks."

#### d. Protestants

"Protestants, numbered between 100,000 and 200,000 in the early 1980s, and were found mostly among the Montagnard communities inhabiting the South's central highlands.

Because of their alleged close association with American missionaries of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, Protestants were reported to have suffered more than Catholics after 1975."

## e. Folk religion

*"In addition to organized religions, there existed a melange of beliefs without institutional structure that nevertheless had an enduring impact on Vietnamese life well into the 1980s.*



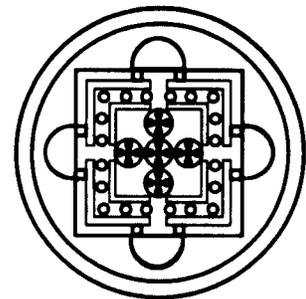
*These beliefs derived partly from Confucianism, stressed the virtues of filial piety, loyalty, family solidarity, and ancestor veneration--all central to the family system of the old society.*

*Taoism, another important system of belief introduced from China, emphasized the importance of an individual's relationship to nature and to the universe. Beliefs rooted in Taoism were condemned by the regime as superstitious.*

*Despite official disapproval of superstitious practices, most Vietnamese, regardless of their professed religion, level of education, or ideology, were influenced at one time or another by such practices as astrology, [divination by means of patterns in thrown rocks, bones or earth] and sorcery.*

*Diviners and other specialists in the occult remained in popular demand because they were believed to be able to diagnose supernatural causes of illness, establish lucky dates for personal undertakings, or predict the future. Moreover, many Vietnamese believed that individual destiny was guided by astrological phenomena.*

*By consulting one's horoscope, one could make the most of auspicious times and avoid disaster. It was not unusual, for example, for a couple to consult an astrologer before marrying. He would determine if the betrothed were suitably matched and even fix the date of the ceremony.*



*The belief in good and evil spirits, or [indigenous belief], antedated all organized faiths in Vietnam and permeated the society, especially in the rural areas and in the highlands. These beliefs held that all phenomena and forces in the universe were controlled by spirits and that the souls of the dead were instrumental in determining an individual's fate.*

*If propitiated, they provided the living with protection; if ignored, they induced misfortune. Although officially condemned as 'superstitious practices,' these beliefs continued to proliferate in the rural and in the highland areas as well as in the cities in the 1980s."*



## **2. Ethnic/Racial Groups**

### **a. Vietnamese (85-90%)**

*"The ethnic Vietnamese are concentrated largely in the alluvial deltas and in the coastal plains, having little in common with the minority peoples of the highlands, whom they historically have regarded as hostile and barbaric. A homogenous social group, the Vietnamese exert influence on national life through their control of political and economic affairs and their role as purveyors of the dominant culture."*

### **b. Minorities**

**(1) Hoa (WHA)** *"The 1979 census listed fifty-three minorities accounting for 12.7 percent (6.6 million persons) of the national population. This figure included the Hoa (Han Chinese), the single largest bloc--representing approximately 1.5 percent of the total population, or about 935,000 people--in the lowland urban centers of both the North and the South."*



## (2) Montagnards (mon-tahn-YAHRD)

"Minorities that live in the mountainous regions are known by their generic name, Montagnards. The Vietnamese also disparagingly call them 'moi,' meaning savage. The government attributes the backwardness of the Montagnards to the overwhelming influence of their history as exploited and oppressed peoples. They are darker skinned than their lowland neighbors."

(Among these minorities, the Tay, Thai, Khmer, Muong, Nung, Hmong, and Zao each have between 346,000 to 901,000 members.)

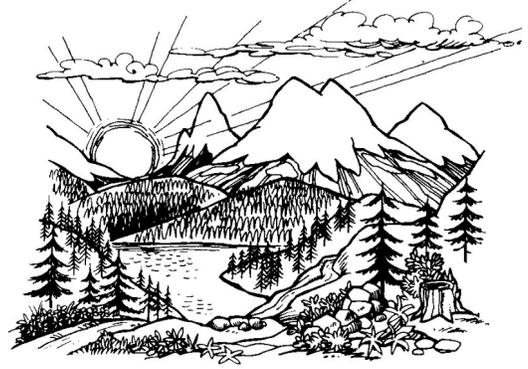
"The non-Chinese minority peoples, however, are for the most part highlanders who live in relative independence and follow their own traditional customs and culture. They are classified as either sedentary or nomadic. The sedentary groups, the more numerous of the two kinds, are engaged mainly in the cultivation of wet rice and industrial crops; the nomadic groups, in slash-and-burn farming where forested land is cleared for a brief period of cultivation and then abandoned.

Religious practices among highland minorities tend to be rooted in [indigenous] beliefs. Most worship a pantheon of spirits, but a large number are Catholics or Protestants.

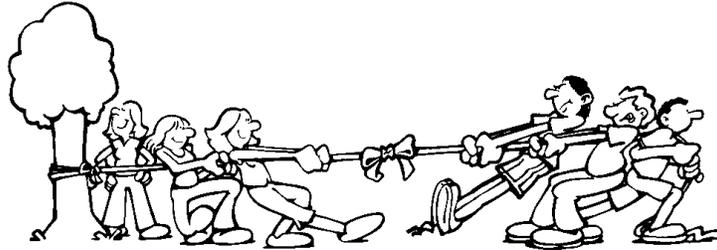
In contrast to the Mahayana Buddhist beliefs of the majority of Vietnamese, the Khmer practice Theravada (or Hinayana) Buddhism, and the Cham subscribe to both Islam and Hindu beliefs.

Before the arrival of the French in the nineteenth century, the highland minorities lived in isolation from the lowland population. Upon the consolidation of French rule, however, contacts between the two groups increased.

*The French, interested in the uplands for plantation agriculture, permitted the highlanders their linguistic and cultural autonomy, and administered their areas separately from the rest of Vietnam. Conferring this special status gave the French a free hand in cultivating the largely unexploited highlands, where their administrators and Christian missionaries also set up schools, hospitals, and leprosariums."*



### 3. Gender Issues



**a. Domestic violence** *"Although the law addresses the issue of domestic violence, there is credible evidence that the problem is on the rise, and that the laws are not enforced adequately. International NGO workers and many women have stated that domestic violence against women is common.*



*Most divorces are due to domestic violence, although many women remain in abusive marriages rather than confront the stigma of divorce. Domestic abuse appears to be more prevalent in rural areas." (Unless otherwise stated, all quotations are from the U.S. Department of State Report on Human Rights for 1996--Vietnam.)*

**b. Prostitution** *"The Government, international NGO's, and the press reported a marked increase in recent years in the trafficking of women both domestically and abroad for purposes of prostitution.*

*Organized rings reportedly lure poor, often rural, women with promises of jobs or marriage and force them to work as prostitutes. Some are kidnapped and sold as wives to men in other countries. The press and anecdotal sources indicate that the problem of sex tourism is growing, with increasing prostitution of children. The Government is working with NGO's to supplement law enforcement measures in these areas."*

**c. Discrimination** *"While there is no legal discrimination, women face deeply ingrained social discrimination.*

*Despite extensive provisions in the Constitution, in legislation, and in regulations that mandate equal treatment, and although some women occupy high government posts, in general few women are able to compete effectively for higher status positions. The Government has not enforced the constitutional provision that women and men must receive equal pay for equal work."*



## 4. Conflicts

### International disputes

*"Maritime boundary with Cambodia not defined; involved in a complex dispute over the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea with China, Malaysia, Philippines, Taiwan, and possibly Brunei; unresolved maritime boundary with Thailand; maritime boundary dispute with China in the Gulf of Tonkin; Paracel Islands in the South China Sea occupied by China but claimed by Vietnam and Taiwan; offshore islands and sections of boundary with Cambodia are in dispute." (1996 CIA World Factbook)*

## 5. Holidays/Observances (The following material, adapted from Holidays, Festivals and Celebrations of the World Dictionary, compiled by Sue Thompson and Barbara Carlson, [Detroit: Omnigraphics, 1994], is instructive).

### a. Doan Ngu (dwan new, June)

- Celebrates Summer Solstice
- Offerings made to spirits and ghosts
  - Burnings of human figures provide souls to staff the spiritual army

### b. Hungry Ghost Festival (Aug-Sep)

- Remembrance of souls of dead through grave visitation
- Known as Yue Lan, Vu Lan Day, Day of the Dead, Trung Nguyen (chung new-when)

• Second most important festival after Tet

- Incense offered at grave sites
  - Home altars: one prepared for Buddha with incense, fruit and rice; one for ancestors with rice soup, fruit, and meat

### c. Mid-Autumn Festival (full moon nearest 15 Sep)

- Called Trung (chung) Thursday, a children's festival
- Parade with candle-lit paper lanterns, some like animals, others white like a full moon
- Dancers parade with dragons of paper and cloth

### d. Tet (usually late Jan or early Feb)

- Vietnamese New Year, an abbreviation for Tet Nguyen Dan, "first day"
- Start of new year with family reunions, respect given departed ancestors, payment of debts





"At midnight on the New Year the return of the Spirit of the Hearth is welcomed with firecrackers, gongs, and drums. The festival then continues for a week..." (Holidays, Festivals and Celebrations of the World Dictionary, ed. Sue Thompson, p. 335).

### e. Thanh-Minh (tang ming)

- Similar to U.S. Memorial Day, Thanh-Minh day honors the dead
- Flowers, food, incense and other offerings brought by family members to the graves of departed relatives

### f. Other Holidays



- (1) International New Year's Day (1 Jan)
- (2) Day to remember the defeat of the South Vietnamese Government (30 April)
- (3) Labor Day (1 May)
- (4) National Day (2 Sep)
- (5) Anniversary of Ho Chi Minh's Death (3 Sep)

## 6. Customs

### a. Gestures

- **Head** Avoid touching young children upon the head
- **Pointing** Using the index finger to point may be considered rude. Waving the palm down with four fingers is an alternative.
- **Passing** Both hands are used to pass materials

### b. The Vietnam Conflict

The following perspective, adapted from Culturgrams, The Nations Around Us, Vol. II, (Garrett Park, MD: Garrett Park Press, 1995), p. 282, offers insight.



The Vietnamese tend to focus on the future. In part, American involvement in the Vietnam War is past history. Other wars were fought before and after. Many Vietnamese have a genuine interest in American ways and harbor little ill-will over the conflict.

### c. Freedom of religion

*"Both the Constitution and government decrees provide for freedom of worship, but the Government continues to restrict severely religious activities it defined as at variance with state laws and policies."*



The Government generally allows people to practice the religion of their choice, and participation in religious activities throughout the country continues to increase. However, the Government also maintains policies designed to control religious hierarchies and organized religious activities, in part because it fears that organized religion may undermine the Party's authority and influence.

Religious organizations must obtain government permission to hold training seminars, conventions, and celebrations outside the regular religious calendar, to build or remodel places of worship, to engage in charitable activities or operate religious schools, and to ordain, promote, or transfer clergy. All religious groups continue to face difficulty in obtaining teaching materials, expanding training facilities in response to the increasing demand for clergy, and publishing religious materials.

The Government requires all Buddhist monks to work under the party-controlled Buddhist umbrella organization. The Government has sought to control the Catholic Church hierarchy, in part by requiring that all clergy belong to the government-controlled Catholic Patriotic Association. It has also insisted on approving Vatican appointments. The Government prohibits the Catholic Church from educational and charitable activities because it will not accept government supervision and authority, as Buddhist congregations do.



The Government allowed bishops and priests to travel freely within their dioceses, but continues to restrict their travel outside these areas. The Government has limited the Church to operating 6 major seminaries

*throughout the country, totaling approximately 700 students. The Government allows the Church to recruit new students only every 2 years. All students must be approved by the Government, both upon entering the seminary and prior to ordination as priests. The number of graduating students was insufficient to support the growing Catholic population, estimated at 5 million.*

*The Christian Missionary Alliance of Vietnam, the only government-approved Protestant organization in the country, enjoys slightly greater freedom to operate. Church attendance grows despite continued government restrictions on proselytizing activities. Nongovernmental organizations (NGO's) report continued arrests and government harassment of some ethnic Hmong Protestants for proselytizing in northern Vietnamese villages.*

The Government restricts exit permits for Muslims seeking to make the hajj."

#### **d. Foreign area officer perspectives**



The following narrative, adapted for a trip report to Vietnam by FAO CPT Ralph A. Skeba, is instructive.

**(1) Meeting with the Malaysian embassy staff.** "Mr. Mohamad had spent the last four years representing his country in Vietnam and provided the following insights:

- *He told me that most businesses wanted to locate in the South. Because of this, the North was not developing as rapidly as the South. He stated that the government was giving foreign companies a difficult time unless they located their Headquarters in Hanoi, and put branch offices in Ho Chi Minh City. He stated that getting a business license in Vietnam was just the start of many headaches in Vietnam, and once the license was given, there was no guarantee of renewal, or even retention of this license.*

