

# Việt Nam

## *Tradition and Change*

*Hữu Ngọc*

*Edited by Lady Borton and Elizabeth F. Collins*

OHIO UNIVERSITY RESEARCH IN INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

SOUTHEAST ASIA SERIES NO. 128

OHIO UNIVERSITY PRESS

ATHENS

NHÀ XUẤT BẢN THẾ GIỚI — WORLD PUBLISHERS

HÀ NỘI

# Table of Contents

Foreword by Elizabeth F. Collins	xi
Introduction by Lady Borton	xix
<b>The Vietnamese Identity</b>	<b>1</b>
<i>Nghĩa</i>	3
The Vietnamese Character	4
The Vietnamese “I” and “We”	7
The Vietnamese: A Warlike People?	8
Are There Differences in the Mentality of Northern and Southern Vietnamese?	9
On Naming a Child	11
The Traditional Village: For and Against	13
A Village Landscape	17
The Traditional Vietnamese House	18
The Communal House	22
The Head and the Heart of the Traditional Village	25
<b>The Four Facets of Vietnamese Culture</b>	<b>27</b>
The Four Facets of Vietnamese Culture	29
Back to the Source in Southeast Asia	32
In Việt Nam, Rice is the Source of Life	33
Myths Die Hard in Việt Nam	35
The Lord of the Sacred Drum Finally Regains His Artefact	37
The Worship of Mother Goddesses	38
Ancestor Worship	42
Village Alliances	44
Vietnamese Cultural Identity	46
A Hyphen between Two Worlds: Indian and Chinese Influences	47

Vietnamese Culture: Southeast Asian Roots Facing Chinese Confucianism	51
French Culture in Việt Nam Today	53
Franco-Vietnamese Karma	55
“Asian Values” and “Family Values”	57
Vietnamese Culture and <i>Đổi Mới</i>	58
<b>Việt Nam’s Confucian Heritage</b>	<b>61</b>
How to Translate “ <i>Văn Miếu</i> ”	63
Confucius Set Free	64
Filial Piety	66
Confucian Scholar-Administrators	67
Confucius and Machiavelli	69
Confucian Contempt for Commerce and Finance	71
Confucianism and the Vietnamese Revolution	73
Revolutionary Confucian Scholars	74
Confucian Scholars and Modernization	77
<b>Buddhism in Việt Nam</b>	<b>81</b>
The Layout of a Vietnamese Buddhist Pagoda	83
The Buddhist Goddess of Mercy	85
The Bearded Indian in Vietnamese Village Pagodas	86
Mount Yên Tử: The Cradle of Vietnamese Zen	88
<b>Exemplary Vietnamese</b>	<b>91</b>
The Trưng Sisters (Hai Bà Trưng)	93
Lady Triệu (Bà Triệu)	94
Lý Thường Kiệt	95
Chu Văn An: Spiritual Master	98
Trần Hưng Đạo	99
Nguyễn Trãi: Việt Nam’s Greatest Humanist?	102
Lê Lợi and Lam Kinh, Capital of an Ancient Kingdom	105
Quang Trung and His Unfulfilled Vision	107
Ngô Thì Nhậm: A Confucian Scholar’s Difficult Choice	110
Hoàng Diệu	112
Trương Vĩnh Ký: A Controversial Figure	114
Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh	118
Nguyễn Thái Học: Hero of Thổ Tang Village	120

Teachers at Private Schools in Huế	121
Nguyễn Văn Huyền: My History Teacher	123
Hồ Chí Minh and Western Cultural Values	125
<b>Vietnamese Literature: An Expression of the Nation's Spirit</b>	<b>133</b>
Nguyễn Du and <i>The Tale of Kiều</i> :	
The Brigand and the Courtesan	135
Nguyễn Trãi: One of Our Most Famous Poets	137
Hồ Xuân Hương: Eroticism and Poetry	139
Lê Quý Đôn	141
Madame Thanh Quan	143
Nguyễn Gia Thiều: Poet of Destiny and Sorrow	144
Nguyễn Công Trứ: The Poet of Poverty and “The Solitary Pine”	145
Cao Bá Quát: Việt Nam's Rebel Poet	148
Nguyễn Đình Chiểu: A Poet Blinded by Tears of Grief	151
Nguyễn Khuyến	153
Phạm Tắt Đắc: His Incendiary Poem	154
Romantic Literary Currents in the 1930s	156
Tản Đà and Quang Dũng: Two Poets of the West Country	161
Hàn Mặc Tử: Finding Poetry in Suffering	164
Dương Quảng Hàm: The First Modern Literary	
History of Việt Nam	166
Women Writers Give Vietnamese Literature Some Oooh La La	167
<b>Culture and the Arts</b>	<b>171</b>
Vietnamese Lacquer: All Tradition Is Change	
through Acculturation	173
What do Vietnamese Water Puppets Say?	175
Ancient Graphic Arts of Việt Nam	176
Tradition and Revolution in Handicrafts	178
<i>Ca Trù</i> : Classical Arias—An Ancient Art Threatened	
with Extinction	180
<i>Tuồng</i> : Việt Nam's Classical Opera	182
<i>Chèo</i> : Popular Opera—An Art Unique to the	
Red River Delta	184
<i>Chèo</i> and <i>Cải Lương</i> (Renovated Theater): Conversations	
with Tào Mạt and Bửu Tiến	187
“Pre-War” Romantic Music Captures the Mood of an Era	191

Nam Sơn: A Meeting of East and West	194
The Four Pillars of Vietnamese Painting	196
<b>The Vietnamese Landscape and the Vietnamese Spirit</b>	<b>199</b>
Cao Bằng: Home of the Tày	201
From the Bronze Age to Medieval Doctors of Humanities	202
The North Country (Ancient Kinh Bắc)	204
Hà Nội: City of the Soaring Dragon	206
Old Hà Nội	209
At the Palace of the Trịnh Lords	210
The Cultivated Manners of Tràng An (Hà Nội)	213
Tết in Old Hà Nội and Tết Couplets	215
The East Country (Xứ Đông)	218
The West Country (Xứ Đoài)	220
The South Country (Sơn Nam)	221
Đội Tam: The Village of Drums	222
Tây Hamlet in Bắc Sơn District	223
Quảng Bình Province	226
Nghệ An and Hà Tĩnh	228
A Quick Visit to Cochinchina	230
Caodaism and Its Beginnings in Tây Ninh Province	233
Poulo Condor (Côn Đảo)	237
<b>Vietnamese Women and Change</b>	<b>241</b>
Teeth Lacquering and Chewing Betel Quids	243
Women Conquer the World of Science	244
Who Designed the <i>Áo Dài</i> ?	247
The Life of Single Women	248
Single Parenting	251
Vietnamese Youth and Virginity	252
<b><i>Đổi Mới</i> (Renovation or Renewal) and Globalization</b>	<b>255</b>
Vietnamese Culture Facing Globalization	257
The Traditional Family under Fire	261
The Market Economy and Matrimony	263
Divorce as Seen in a District of Hà Nội	266
The Young and Our Traditions	268
The Cicada Generation	269

A Story of Tomatoes and Watercress	271
A Traditional Village Facing the Market Economy	273
A Pedicab Driver	275
Respect for Teachers Re-Emerges	277
The Fight against Corruption	279
Saying Hello to the Past	282
<b>Appendices</b>	<b>285</b>
About the Vietnamese Language	287
A Chronology of Vietnamese History	291
Henri Oger's <i>Mechanics and Crafts of the Vietnamese People</i> (1909): Sketches of Hanoians' Vibrant Life	301
Oger Drawings	309
<b>Index</b>	<b>343</b>

## Foreword

Short, clear introductions to the cultures of Southeast Asian nations are difficult to find. For years, I cobbled together collections of short articles and selections of literature for my university-level introduction to Southeast Asia and presented the historical framework in lecture. My goal was to entice students to investigate the material on their own or in a more advanced class.

On a trip to Việt Nam, an area outside my own research field in the Bahasa world of Indonesia and Malaysia, I had a chance to meet Hữu Ngọc and was given a copy of *Wandering through Vietnamese Culture*, a collection of his essays, which is over 1,200 pages. It served as a wonderful guide, containing answers to so many of the questions that had presented themselves. When Ohio University Press was considering publication of an excerpted version of *Wandering through Vietnamese Culture*, I was asked in my role as editor for the O.U. Press's Southeast Asia Series to accept the Press's invitation to make the initial selection of essays.

Hữu Ngọc originally wrote his essays as newspaper columns for international readers who, living in Việt Nam, had some acquaintance with the country. Yet all of us working on this project,

including and especially Hữu Ngọc, wanted also to think of those for whom Việt Nam is completely new. Starting from an early draft Table of Contents, with Hữu Ngọc as expert and author, we worked together to crystallize his oeuvre into a first-taste introduction to Vietnamese history and culture, emphasizing the structure, factors, and individuals he feels are particularly important.

*Việt Nam: Tradition and Change* shimmers with Hữu Ngọc's thoughtful reflections and insight. The collection is designed for students in introductory classes and for other readers interested in Việt Nam. I hope they will also fall in love with the rich cultural heritage of the people and nation that is Việt Nam.

Hữu Ngọc's central thesis—"All tradition is change through acculturation"—twines through each of the book's ten sections and through many of these short essays. In the first section, "The Vietnamese Identity," Hữu Ngọc portrays what it means to be Vietnamese. He describes the values that shape Vietnamese character, such as the untranslatable word "*nhĩa*," and explores the meaning of the customs that embody Vietnamese ideals: ancestor veneration, worship of mother goddesses, the naming of a child, the arrangement of a traditional Vietnamese house, and the deep emotional attachment Vietnamese have to the communal houses of their home villages. In encounters with "others"—the Chinese, French, Japanese, and American overlords who have tried to rule Việt Nam—the Vietnamese absorbed new values, translating them into their own Vietnamese vernacular. Hữu Ngọc shows that the Vietnamese are martial, but not militaristic; they are willing to fight to defend their nation but never forget the anguish that war brings. We see how the Vietnamese have blended their ancient Austronesian cultural heritage and language together with Buddhist traditions brought from India and China, with the value that Confucian ethics from China place on order, harmony, and scholarly learning, and then with the Western influence of humanism and individual liberty. Nevertheless, for Hữu Ngọc, Buddhism remains the "heart" of the Vietnamese village, while Confucian ethics and learning and rites are still its "head." The ancient, quintessentially Vietnamese rites of ancestor veneration that bind a family, clan,

and village together and the awe at the legendary powers of the spirits of nature as well as the spirits of national and local heroes are the roots that anchor Việt Nam today.

The second section, “The Four Facets of Vietnamese Culture,” illuminates how the ancient Việt (Kinh) ethnic group had its roots in Southeast Asia and defines the Việts’ earliest cultural descriptors (e.g., a wet-rice-growing culture and bronze drums) that Việt Nam shares with other Southeast Asian countries. However, Hữu Ngọc specifies the cultural aspects (e.g., matriarchy, mother goddesses, myths, and legends) that are quintessentially Vietnamese. He clarifies the four major facets of Vietnamese culture—the original Southeast Asian roots and the subsequent Indian-Chinese, French, and regional-global branches—and shows how the Southeast Asian base of Vietnamese culture persists today within a dynamism created by tradition and change through acculturation. Central to the features specific to Việt Nam and important in the Việts’ preservation of their cultural essence during foreign occupations is the Vietnamese language. Vietnamese has been the mother tongue of the Việt for millennia and, today, is the mother tongue for 85 percent of the country’s population, which includes fifty-four ethnic groups. Many nations, particularly former colonies in Africa and Asia, do not have this unifying feature of a common language, which is both ancient and modern.

Hữu Ngọc takes us deeper into Vietnamese Confucianism and Buddhism in the sections, “Việt Nam’s Confucian Heritage” and “Buddhism in Việt Nam.” Hữu Ngọc helps us understand the ethics Confucianism espoused and the cultural overlay it brought. He contrasts the Machiavellian *Realpolitik* of twentieth century international relations with the Confucian ethical spirit that condemns corruption, but he also criticizes Confucianism for its conservatism, for its contempt of commerce (an attitude, which produced poverty) and for its misogyny (which altered the deep roots of Vietnamese matriarchy and institutionalized rigid and destructive gender inequality).

Like Confucianism, Buddhism is a theme spreading throughout this book. We meet the “Bearded Indian,” who played an early

role in Vietnamese Zen Buddhism. We also learn about retired King Trần Nhân Tông, who established Việt Nam's Bamboo Forest Zen branch at Yên Tử Mountain, which we as readers visit. The section on Buddhism features an essay devoted to the female Bodhisattva, Avalokitesvara (Quan Âm or Quan Thế Âm), the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy, who appears quite often in other sections, helping us to feel her pervasive cultural presence. We can sense how Vietnamese Buddhism honors the fragile and impermanent beauty of nature and inspires aesthetic sensibilities. Taken together, these Buddhist traditions constitute a rich spiritual heritage without dogmatism or rigidity.

The essays in the section entitled “Exemplary Vietnamese” tell the stories of the national heroes (known and not well known) who embody Vietnamese values and love of country. These include the Trưng sisters, Việt Nam's first historical personages, who defeated the Chinese in 40 CE, and Lady Triệu, who took up arms against the Chinese two centuries later, “her flag raised, breasts tossing, her elephant charging.” We have the great generals, Lý Thường Kiệt and Trần Hưng Đạo, who defended Việt Nam from Chinese and Mongol invasions in the 1000s and 1200s respectively, as well as Lê Lợi, who also defeated the Chinese and then became King Lê Thái Tổ in the 1400s, and we have the Tây Sơn rebel leader who defeated the Chinese and became King Quang Trung in the late 1700s. In his essay about Hoàng Diệu, whose warning to the emperor in 1882 about French intentions to attack Hà Nội went unheeded, Hữu Ngọc reminds readers that the cost of failure in a Confucian society was disgrace or an honorable suicide. He explores the dilemmas faced by Vietnamese searching for the best way to serve their nation under colonial rule. Particularly poignant are his essay on the Catholic Trương Vĩnh Ký (Pétrus Ký) and on Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh, who are seen by some as traitors to their country.

We hear stories of the teachers, writers, artists, and activists who fostered a love of Vietnamese literature and history and who kept alive the dream of an independent nation despite colonial repression. Hữu Ngọc's essay on Hồ Chí Minh explores how the founder of modern Việt Nam himself embodied tensions that

animate Vietnamese culture and history—tradition and revolution; idealism and realism; reason versus heart; and Eastern versus Western values. Hữu Ngọc shows us Hồ Chí Minh through the eyes of Western contemporaries, those who admired him and those who fought against him, describing how Hồ Chí Minh learned from the West while never losing the love of his country and its people that was at the center of all he did.

The essays in “Vietnamese Literature: An Expression of the Nation’s Spirit” are the heart of this book. Hữu Ngọc begins with *The Tale of Kiều*, which he describes as “the Vietnamese soul,” for “as long as *Kiều* lives on, our Vietnamese language shall live on. And as long as our language lives on, our nation will not die.” The love story at the heart of this narrative poem, the national epic written in Vietnamese ideographic script (*Nôm*), gives expression to the conflict between Confucian duty and the rebellious call of freedom. This tension appears over and over again in the writings of the Vietnamese poets we meet—the anti-Confucian feminist Hồ Xuân Hương, the bitter scholar-administrator poet Nguyễn Công Trứ, the rebel poet Cao Bá Quát (who was such an exception), and poets Nguyễn Đình Chiểu and Nguyễn Khuyến (who wrote about patriotism and not just about love).

In 1926, Phạm Tất Đắc, a high school student and author of the incendiary poem “Invocation for the Nation’s Soul,” set Việt Nam on fire with his call for revolution by joining Confucian piety to rising nationalism. Hữu Ngọc also describes the 1930s New Poetry Movement that gave voice to the young writers who sought to escape from traditional Vietnamese and Chinese literary conventions and who altered Vietnamese literature into a dynamism shifting between the romantic and the realistic. He quotes poet Xuân Diệu to help us understand the tectonic shift to the appearance of the personal pronoun “I” in common usage and in literature. The poems, short stories, and novels from the New Poetry Movement explored the individual’s struggle in a society that had stifled individualism with outmoded customs and conventions. We feel the “I” most profoundly in the excerpts of poems by the “leper poet,” Hàn Mặc Tử, a devout Catholic succumbing to Hansen’s Disease

yet both proclaiming his faith in “Ave Marie” and portraying deep angst in *Poems of Madness*.

Hữu Ngọc celebrates “Culture and the Arts” with essays on contributions unique to Việt Nam, including the Đông Hồ folk woodcut prints, *tuồng* (Vietnamese classical opera), *chèo* (popular opera), *ca trù* performances in villages of the Red River Delta in northern Việt Nam, and the *cải lương* (renovated theater) of the Mekong Delta in southern Việt Nam. He brings alive the water puppets (unique to the Red River Delta of northern Việt Nam) by taking us to a local performance in one of the villages where the puppets originated some two thousand years ago. This essay gives us a taste of rural, farming life devoid of urban influences. We see this both through the visit to the village and in the characters and skits the farmer-puppeteers create. The essays on the romantic music of the 1930s and early 1940s and the paintings by Nam Sơn (co-founder of the Indochina Fine Arts College in 1925) and the “four pillars” of successive generations of Vietnamese painters embody the push-pull, repulsion-attraction of the Vietnamese response to French influences.

The section on “The Vietnamese Landscape and the Vietnamese Spirit” helps us understand the inextricably intertwining of these two determinants. Hữu Ngọc describes how the Vietnamese landscape has forged the character of Việt Nam’s people, how the harsher climate and floods in northern Việt Nam led to tight-knit communal villages, while a wilder frontier spirit prevailed in the southern part of the country. His essays introduce the reader to places beloved for their historical significance, beauty, and local customs as well as to the illustrious individuals and ordinary inhabitants associated with those sites. He takes us to Ancient Hà Nội and inside the Royal Palace in the 1700s, more than a century before French colonialism, through a long excerpt written by a Vietnamese doctor, Lê Hữu Trác, who arrives to treat the crown prince.

Hữu Ngọc also takes us to the Hà Nội of his childhood through his own reflections and a rich excerpt by Hoàng Đạo Thúy about traditional “Grand Tết” (Lunar New Year) in the early 1900s, “when the newly established colonial administration had only blurred the

festival's traditions." This section ends with Côn Đảo Island and its infamous prisons off the coast of Sài Gòn and a tribute to Confucian scholar Phan Châu (Chu) Trinh, whose sense of honor did not bind him to tradition but, rather, made him one of Việt Nam's most famous patriotic opponents to French rule. Phan Châu Trinh combined Confucian ethics with democratic ideals in an attempt to create a harmonious, independent country achieved through non-violence. Phan Châu Trinh's poem, "Smashing Rocks at Côn Lôn," which he wrote on the prison wall, weaves together landscape, Confucian ethics, patriotism, and Vietnamese endurance.

In the book's final two sections, "Vietnamese Women and Change" and "*Đổi Mới* (Renovation or Renewal) and Globalization," Hữu Ngọc turns his attention to more modern times. Once, teeth lacquering was thought to enhance one's beauty. In the 1930s, the *áo dài* was created, with French influence; it is now considered traditional Vietnamese dress. In these essays, Hữu Ngọc's subtle commentary suggests that customs and traditions must be thoughtfully assessed for the ways they shape people's lives. Some should be preserved, some reformed, others discarded. Hữu Ngọc reflects on the difficulties confronted by women in the era of *Đổi Mới*, which began in late 1986. He exposes the ways in which Confucian traditions once limited women's lives and the new challenges women face now. The essays on *Đổi Mới* consider the problems Việt Nam addresses as it builds an economy linked to global markets, a step that inevitably opens the society once again to outside influences.

Hữu Ngọc argues that national culture "must hold a central position and play the coordinating and regulating role" in economic development and that economic statistics are not an adequate measure of the quality of life of a people. The unfettered expansion of world markets poses a threat to the environment, and there is great danger that the wealth produced will be appropriated by a minority of elites, leaving the mass of people dependent and poor. To shape a different kind of identity, Việt Nam must restore a balance between national traditions fostering patriotism, a strong sense of community, and discipline on one hand and universal

values (such as human rights) and the need for economic development on the other.

We find here essays on the impact of a market economy on marriage, divorce, attitudes toward tradition in the “cicada” generation born after 1990, class differences, the traditional village, the value placed on education, and corruption in government. Hữu Ngọc suggests that the traditional family, which is at the heart of national culture, should be modernized, divesting itself of disdain for women. His reflections are nuanced, returning always to the theme, “All tradition is change through acculturation,” yet encouraging readers to make their own evaluation of the balance between national values and the values of the market.

Having read these essays, a foreigner sees Việt Nam through new eyes. Written during *Đổi Mới*, the essays reflect modern times but reach into the rich past of Hữu Ngọc’s memory and scholarship. These essays are also a reminder to young Vietnamese and to all of us of the vibrant cultural heritage that distinguishes Việt Nam. The essays can be read in any order. They invite readers to dip in here or there, according to impulse and interest. Taken together and read from beginning to end, they transform one’s understanding of Việt Nam, its culture, and its people.

Elizabeth F. Collins  
Professor  
Ohio University  
Athens, Ohio