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Language Education and Foreign Relations in Vietnam

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A study of the history of Indo-China makes it very easy to understand why foreign language learning has been problematic for recent governments of Vietnam. Four decades of conflict with five different enemies preoccupied the Vietnamese and soured relations with a large number of countries in the aftermath of the various wars. The languages of Vietnam's enemies disappeared from the school curriculum. Moreover, the enormous cost of keeping a large standing army and reconstructing the country after massive damage, together with a period of economic mismanagement, kept the education budget severely depleted. There has not even been enough money to make primary education universal and free. Thus, skill in many of the international languages was not only undesirable for patriotic reasons; it could not be afforded.

Nor was widespread language education necessary. The ideological division of the world and the isolation of Vietnam, gravitating in turn to one or another of the factions of the Communist world, limited the international networks in which the Vietnamese were involved and restricted both the desire and the need for foreign language acquisition.

When the Vietnamese government decided in 1986 to change political direction, liberalize the economy, and attract foreign investment, it was clear that it would also need to implement educational changes so that

the Vietnamese population could benefit from these developments. If incoming companies could not recruit suitable staff from the autochthonous population, they would go elsewhere or, if allowed, bring in staff recruited abroad. Thus, in the past decade, improving foreign language skills among the population has become one of the prime requirements for Vietnam's successful incorporation in the world economic market. Yet this task has not been easy, given the weight of Vietnam's history. This chapter will examine how foreign language study in Vietnam historically has been a barometer of Vietnam's relations with other countries and how the foreign language curriculum has been directly affected by those relations.

THE MANDARIN LEGACY

The Chinese ruled Vietnam for 1,000 years, from 111 BC to 938 AD. During this time, they created a system of schools to train first their own children and subsequently the children of the Vietnamese aristocracy to staff the state bureaucracy, the mandarinat. Under the Tang dynasty (618-907), the competitive examination system was introduced. Education was in Chinese and followed the Chinese model. Outstanding students were sent to study in China.

In 939, Vietnam became independent. As a number of relatively stable feudal dynasties succeeded each other during the medieval period, the influence of China remained strong. An institution of higher education, Quoc Tu Giam, was established in Hanoi in 1076, in the first instance to teach the royal family. In the 13th century, this school, renamed Quoc Tu Vien, admitted commoners as well to prepare them for the mandarinat. Chinese remained the language of state; formal education was conducted in Chinese using Chinese text books (Lo Bianco, 1993). The Chinese system of competitive examination, which had lapsed, was also reintroduced at this time. The Van Mieu, the Temple of Literature, was of great importance as a center of Vietnamese literature and Taoist-Confucian thought (Pham Minh Hac, 1998). It was here in the course of the 13th century that scholars developed Nom, a script for the Vietnamese language based on Chinese characters. A complex diglossia resulted, with Chinese used as the written language appropriate for law and government, Nom used as the written form for Vietnamese culture, and the various (mutually intelligible) dialects used in spoken exchange (Nguyen Phu Phong, 1995).

From the 16th to 18th centuries, Vietnam was torn by civil strife. In the unstable conditions of this period, European adventurers and missionaries were able to gain a toehold in the country. The Portuguese arrived in 1516,

with Dominican missionaries following in 1527, Franciscan missionaries in 1580, and the Jesuits in 1615. The Church had much greater success in penetrating Vietnamese society than the traders. Although the French were not the only Christian missionaries in Vietnam, their influence was the greatest, particularly after Bishop Pigneau de Behaine recruited French adventurers to help put down the Tay Son rebellion and establish Nguyen Anh as emperor.

Taking the name Gia-Long, Nguyen Anh brought political unity to the country and founded a dynasty that would last until 1945. State power was centralized, as Gia-Long created a new legal code, strengthened the army, and invested in education. A national academy was built in the imperial city of Hue (Osborne, 1997). Gia-Long was open to French influence in that he saw, for example, the utility of fortresses constructed on the Vauban model. Nevertheless, in cultural and political spheres, French influence did not extend very deeply and was comprehensively rejected by Minh-rienh, Gia-Long's successor.

Minh-Menh was a Confucian scholar who built a solid administrative framework for the country and elaborated and extended the competitive examination system, using it to recruit his elites. Although the mandarinate was chosen by merit, certain families dominated, taking on the character of hereditary public servants. Their children inherited cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1989) that gave them greater opportunity to achieve the levels of scholarship necessary to succeed in the meritocracy. However, as Osborne (1997) argues, it was possible for a scholar with no connections to rise through ability alone. An advanced Vietnamese scholar in this period would master the Four Books that collated the precepts of Confucius and his followers, as well as other important works of the Confucian canon. Literacy was primarily in classical Chinese. Most scholars also had a knowledge of Nom that allowed access to the Vietnamese literary tradition.

Few among the elite, either emperors or mandarins, showed great interest in the ideas or languages permeating Asia from Western Europe. However, Christian missionaries had adapted the Roman alphabet so that could be used to write Vietnamese. This endeavor is usually attributed to Alexandre de Rhodes, a French missionary working in Vietnam in the early 17th century, although the writing system is clearly based on other Romanized systems in Southeast Asia developed by Portuguese missionaries. Although Romanized Vietnamese is called *Quoc-Ngu*, or national language, in its first two centuries of existence it had very limited use, being the language of literacy for those converted to the Catholic faith and educated in the mission schools. It had, however, one vital advantage: It is much easier to learn than the ideograms based on Chinese.

THE FRENCH COLONIAL PERIOD

By the end of the 18th century the French had lost their first colonial empire to the British and so the French government, seeking to redress the balance in the race for colonies, looked to Vietnam as an area where French commercial interests could be furthered and imperial ambitions realized. This colonial interest in Vietnam coincided with the evangelical aspirations of the French Catholic Church, which was coming increasingly to see Indo-China as its preserve. In return for Louis XVI's help in his bid for the throne, Cia-Long had promised both exclusive commercial privileges to the French and protection of Catholics. After his accession to the throne in 1802, he reneged on both these promises. Under his successor, Minh-Menh, the persecution of Catholics was intensified. At first France was in no position to retaliate, but by 1843 part of the French fleet was permanently deployed in Asian waters, and there were several clashes between French forces and the Vietnamese. In 1862, the emperor, Tu Duc, was forced to sign a treaty with the French, granting them religious, economic, and political concessions. In 1867, the south of the country, which the French termed Cochinchina, became a French colony. In 1883, Annam and Tonkin in the north of present day Vietnam became French protectorates and in 1887 France created the Indo-Chinese Union, bringing together all the territory they had acquired: the protectorates, Cambodia, and Cochinchina.

French colonialism was marked by the theory of assimilation and the policy of direct rule. The French did not generally attempt to administer their colonies through the existing ruling class and according to prevailing social norms, as was largely the case during the British Raj in India. Indeed, there was a desire to assimilate the regime to French ideals and to create a francophone, francophile native administration. However much their actual deeds may have belied this, the French subscribed wholeheartedly to the idea that their colonialism was a *mission civilisatrice*, in which imperial ambition could be made to benefit the colonized as well as the colonizers. In 1898, Bishop Depierre, the bishop of Cochinchina, expressed this belief in the following way:

The precise honour of our country is to place intellectual, culture and moral progress above any other preoccupations. Instead of exploiting its subjects and pressuring them to death as is still done in the Indies and to some extent throughout the Anglo-Saxon world, Frenchmen have always made it a point of honour to bring to the nations in which they establish themselves their ideas, their civilization and their faith (quoted in Osborne, 1997, p. 42).

For the task of assimilation, France had a ready ally in the Vietnamese Catholics, who had benefited from French protection and shared the same

belief system. Educated in mission schools, they had become literate in Quoc-Ngu. The Vietnamese Catholics provided the local work force of the new administration and native soldiers for the French army. In the south, where French influence and power were most concentrated, Confucian thought and Chinese characters waned as the mandarins withdrew. A small minority of French colonialists, such as Luro and Philastre,¹ regretted this, seeing many qualities to admire in the mandarin; the majority of French colonialists, however, disagreed and the mandarin is portrayed in much French contemporary writing as corrupt and inefficient (Osborne, 1997). Quoc-Ngu soon became the written form of Vietnamese throughout the French Indo-Chinese Union. Colonial policy was to use the Romanized script for Vietnamese as a first step to an eventual shift to French (Osborne, 1997). By 1878, only Quoc-Ngu and French were permitted in official documents. Thus colonization brought about the fall of the old Mandarin class and the rise of a new elite of French-speaking Vietnamese administrators.

The first civilian governor of Cochinchina, Le Myre de Vilers, appointed in 1879, carried out a number of policies aimed at promoting French culture and language. The French legal system was introduced; French medium education, begun in 1861, was extended; and a branch of the Alliance Francaise was established to further promote the learning of French. A few young Vietnamese were sent to France to complete their education so that they might return "in some way impregnated with our national genius, informed of the causes and effects of our civilization" (Le Myre de Vilers, 1908, quoted in Osborne, 1997, p. 50). When six Vietnamese were appointed to sit on the Colonial Council, the action was criticized because they could not speak French.

The term in the literature for the French-speaking elite required by the colonial regime is "collaborateurs," which may have a pejorative sense, depending on the stance of the author. Because of the language issue, it was perhaps inevitable that linguists would play a central role in the collaboration process. For instance, Petrus Ky and Paulus Cua, two noted linguists, were Catholics educated in the French missionary schools and literate in Quoc-Ngu. Ky was one of the first interpreters for the French, working both with the army in the south and with the negotiators of the treaties. He then taught in the College des interpretes, produced French-Vietnamese teaching materials, edited *Gia-Dinh Bao*, the French government sponsored

¹ Luro and Philastre were in the Service of Native Affairs in Cochinchina. They may have admired the Vietnamese, but they were nonetheless men of their time and committed to the colonial adventure, even if they wished conquest to be "by peace and good administration, by the propagation of our civilisation" (Luro, 1975, quoted in Osborne, 1997, p. 440).

newspaper published in Quoc-Ngu, and acted as an advisor to the French administration. Cua joined the French administration in the south in 1861 and remained a colonial civil servant until 1907. He was also a scholar, translating numerous Chinese texts into Quoc-Ngu and French. In 1896, he published a Quoc-Ngu dictionary. He too was closely associated with the newspaper, *Gia-Dinh Bao*.

Nevertheless, it is important not to overestimate the numbers of Vietnamese who were educated in French. French medium education continued to be available only to a tiny minority until the end of the colonial period. Although statistics are scarce and sometimes unreliable, this general point is incontrovertible (see Osborne, 1997).

The early colonial regime had started its education program rigorously, requiring each commune to provide one or two children to be taught Quoc-Ngu and French in government schools, yet there was scant enthusiasm among the Vietnamese. Communities often fulfilled their obligations by paying the children of the poorest families among them to attend. The bourgeois class still valued Confucian education, which continued in private establishments. In 1919, however, these were banned.

Having acquired a small core of French speakers for the administration of the colony, the French were concerned to develop education "horizontally not vertically," in the words of Governor General Merlin in 1924 (quoted in Pham Minh Hac, 1998, p. 4). Primary schools were the main concern, together with technical training colleges. These schools were to provide the workforce and medium-level technicians necessary for the colonial economy. The higher education sector remained small. From 1919, there was a university level Natural Science Faculty, and beginning in 1923, a Medical Faculty. A Legal Faculty opened in 1941 and Agriculture in 1942. These schools constituted the Indo-Chinese University. Enrollment in the 1939-1940 school year was only 582 students.

Despite Merlin's goal of extending participation in the school system, numbers remained low. Pham Minh Hac (1998) gives the figures in Table 11.1 for the public school system at the end of the colonial period.

TABLE 11.1
Public School Enrollment

<i>1941-1942</i>	<i>Number of Schools</i>	<i>Number of Pupils</i>
Senior secondary level	3	652
Junior secondary level	16	5,521
Primary level	503	58,629
Basic primary	8,755	486,362
Total		551,164

Source: Pham Minh Hac. 1998.

When the figures in Table 11.1 are taken together with private, education (mainly Catholic establishments) and compared to the total population of 22 million, the restricted nature of education becomes clear. Only about 3% of the Vietnamese were in school in 1941-1942, the great majority enrolled only for three years, to a level that could not guarantee literacy in Quoc Ngu nor competence in French (see also Sloper & Le Thac Can, 1995).

Only a small Vietnamese elite was educated in French to secondary level. The traditional French practice was to deliver the same curriculum as in the metropole with the same rigor, to the same standards, and leading to competition in the same examinations. A small proportion of this group could progress to third-level education, either in France or in Indo-China. As events developed, it included both those who served the colonial power and those who would fight to depose it. Ho Chi Minh and many of the revolutionaries of his generation were educated in the French tradition. For instance, the Thang Long school a private establishment set up in 1919 to increase the very limited provision for Vietnamese in Hanoi, functioned on the French model and was overseen by the colonial administration. Nonetheless, it became the nursery of the revolution, with a teaching staff that included Vo Nguyen Giap and Dang Thai Mai. In 1938, the group associated with this school created an organization to promote Quoc-Ngu (Nguyen Van Ky, 1997).

Dang Thai Mai, president of the Writers Association, expressed the complexity of the position for many of this group:

Although we fought the French we grew up with a life plan derived from French culture. We had schooled ourselves in French literature and art. We oriented ourselves according to European philosophy.... French literature, classic as well as modern, was close to my heart. I found in it the will to think things through and to analyse the human condition. I found high moral and ethical values (quoted by Weiss, 1971, p. 45).

At the other end of the spectrum, however, the vast majority of the population received no schooling. Most were peasants or workers on the tea, coffee, and rubber plantations, in the coal, tin, tungsten, and zinc mines, and in other industrial enterprises run by the colonialists. For most of these people, contact with the French was minimal. Of course, some Vietnamese did speak French in their capacity as servants, employees, and workers. However, for the vast majority the language of contact was a Vietnamese/French pidgin, with a limited vocabulary and simple syntax, and documented in much French literature where the pidgin is reproduced (e.g., Delpey, 1964).

It would thus be erroneous to believe that the colonial period left a reserve of French language skills in Vietnam. In present day Vietnam, those

who were educated through French are a very tiny and aging proportion of the population. Moreover, the colonial regime was a harsh one, the French colonialists notorious for low wages and inhuman treatment. The great majority of Vietnamese who served (rather than profited from) the French were unlikely to cling to an idiom associated with "so painful a period of social and political turmoil that even five decades later the scars still remain visible" (Nguyen Xuan Thu, 1993).

THE FRENCH WAR, 1945-1954

The seven decades of French colonial rule were marked by active defiance, revolt, and resistance. The harsh economic exploitation of the colony led to inevitable unrest that nationalists were able to harness. In the period between the two World Wars, the leaders of those who were opposed to French rule were a cohesive and increasingly revolutionary group.

When the metropole capitulated in 1940 and the French government collaborated with the Germans, the colonies followed suit. The Governor General accepted the Japanese occupation of Indo-China and continued to govern in collaboration with them. The only resistance in the country was led by Ho-Chi-Minh and the Viet Minh, which he founded in 1941. As the sole opposition to the Japanese, they were given a small amount of logistical support by the Americans.

In March 1945, under the pressure of the advancing Allied forces, the Japanese demanded that French troops in Vietnam be put at their disposal. When this was refused, they took over, declaring the country independent under the rule of their puppet, the emperor Bao Dai. The meeting of the Allies at Potsdam in July came to the agreement that the Chinese would liberate Indo-China from the north, the British from the south. When Japan capitulated in August 1945, the Allies had not yet arrived in Vietnam and thus there was a power vacuum. On September 2nd, Ho Chi Minh declared the independence of a united Democratic Republic of Vietnam. During September, Chinese, British, and Free French troops arrived in the country. When the French declared a colonial crisis, the country was divided between a reinstated colonial regime in the south and a Vietnamese nationalist regime in the north. After elections in the north in January 1946, confirmed Ho Chi Minh as leader, the French offered to recognize Vietnam's independence within the French Union, a newly conceived body which would replace the colonial system with a kind of commonwealth. However, what both sides understood by this was irreconcilable. Ho Chi Minh wanted a unified Vietnam; the French wanted to retain control in the south. In 1947, negotiations broke down and the French attacked Haiphong

in the start of a campaign to retake the north by force (Aldrich, 1996). The Franco-Vietnamese war lasted until 1954, when the French were defeated at the battle of Dien Bien Phu. The Geneva Conference of 1954 divided Vietnam along the 17th parallel, pending national elections. Refusing to participate in the nationwide elections, Ngo Dinh Diem, the prime minister in the south, took power in a coup d'etat. In the context of the Cold War, the communist regime of Ho Chi Minh in the north and the American-backed regime in the south were poised for conflict (Karnow, 1994).

COMMUNIST POLICIES AND, CHINESE BACKING

In his Declaration of Independence, Ho Chi Minh promised that his government would combat famine, ignorance, and foreign aggression. To achieve the second aim, the revolutionaries started to establish basic education for the masses, with a goal of full literacy throughout the population. Literacy was to be in the national language, and Quoc-Ngu was the script to be used. Additional educational goals included free and obligatory schooling the primary years, improvement in peasants' agricultural and technical skills and an increase in the education of women.

Despite the war footing of the society and the incredible economic difficulties and pressures of the period, the government claimed moderate success in its main educational aims. The literacy campaign, begun in July, 1948, in the areas controlled by Ho Chi Minh's forces, included education for adults who had not received schooling as well as schooling for primary age children. Nineteen schools of secondary professional education were established between 1947 and 1950 to train teachers and agricultural specialists. Three university centers were set up: higher level teacher training in Thanh Hoa and Nanning,² and medicine and pharmacy in Viet Bac (Sloper & Le Thac Can, 1995). During the literacy campaign, a reported 10 million northerners became literate (UNESCO, 1979). During the nine years of resistance to the French, literacy levels in the national language rose to a reported 90% or more in the cities, lowlands and midlands of the north, although it needs to be understood that "literacy" covered a wide range of competence (Pham Minh Hac, 1995).

In terms of foreign language acquisition, the situation changed dramatically after 1947. Obviously knowledge of French was not an asset in the

²Nanning is actually in China, just across the border, a detail that underscores the close relationship between Vietnam and China at that time.

Viet Minh controlled areas. Bui Tin³ (1995) recalls that possessing copies of Baudelaire and Lamartine was considered evidence of bourgeois leanings in the purges of the 1950s. He was accused of decadence because of his French medium schooling and was only saved by being able to prove that he had been a member of the Communist Party as early as 1945. As the People's Republic of China supported the Vietnamese Communists with military and civilian aid, there was a steady stream of cadres from Peking to advise the Vietnamese. Thus French was replaced by Chinese as the most desirable foreign language (Bui Tin, 1995). Chinese books, films and songs poured across the border. Young Vietnamese were encouraged to learn to read and speak Chinese, and a favored few were sent to university in China.

However, education to degree level, indeed past primary level, was a luxury in a society where the young were needed as soldiers. Bui Tin's memoirs refer to the fact that the political elite that took over from the Ho Chi Minh/Giap generation were generally uneducated in the traditional sense. They had been formed in prison and battle. Bui Tin sees many of the mistakes of the post war era as stemming from the lack of formal education among that group of political leaders.

THE AMERICAN WAR, 1955-1975

American involvement in Vietnam brought English into the linguistic equation. English had no presence in the area before World War II. The first contacts with English speakers in any numbers were with the Allied troops who appeared briefly in 1945. The next contacts were the American "advisers" who arrived to train soldiers to fight the Communists, beginning in January 1955.

From 1964, U.S. involvement in the war between the north and the south escalated. At its height, there were more than half a million U.S. troops in the country (figures from 1968). Obviously, a large number of Southern Vietnamese had to acquire some competence in English, including politicians and bureaucrats, as well as ordinary soldiers who fought with the GIs. Outside the barracks, drivers, shop keepers, servants, bar staff, and prostitutes who serviced the needs of the largely monolingual U.S. military were also pushed to accommodate to the English speakers. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the situation replicated the accommodation of the

³Bui Tin was a noted North Vietnamese soldier and journalist who documented the land reform purges, the fall of Saigon, and the Cambodian war before leaving Vietnam in 1990 in order to be able to comment freely on the situation in Vietnam.

French colonial period, with many South Vietnamese in lowly positions developing an English-Vietnamese pidgin to meet communication needs.

As the southerners adapted to the developing situation, the foreign language learning statistics for South Vietnam for the period 1958 to 1968 reveal the shift from French to English. In 1958-1959, 34,774 secondary pupils were learning French and 18,412 English. In 1968-1969, with more children being schooled, the number learning French had doubled to 76,628, but the number learning English had increased sevenfold to 112,657 (Republique du Vietnam, 1968-1969). The utility of French was still very evident; South Vietnam continued to employ it for administrative purposes. Nonetheless, the elite in Saigon saw the advantage in their children acquiring the language that gave access to American military and political influence. Outside the school system, there was a mushrooming of private English language schools hoping to profit from the need of so many to acquire some English (Crawford, 1966).

This is not to say that American involvement in Vietnam left significant numbers of English speakers. First, the period in which large numbers of English speakers were present on Vietnamese territory was very limited. (The Paris cease fire agreements, ended U.S. military involvement in the war in March, 1973.) Second, the victory of the Communists and the fall of Saigon in 1975 led to a massive exodus of perhaps 100,000 people, though exact numbers are unclear (see Terzani, 1997). Finally, the violence of the war, including 1.5 million civilian deaths (Vietnam Courier, 1982), fuelled a virulent anti-Americanism. Those who had acquired a smattering of English found it expedient to forget it quickly in the aftermath of the Communist victory.

After the victory of the north, the southern Vietnamese who had opposed the Communists were portrayed as *nguy* (puppets) under the influence of decadent "American imperialist" influences. The end of the war was to be seen as the defeat of the foreigner and the victory of all Vietnamese. Thus a key national goal of the post-war period was the need "to eliminate the enslaving decadent culture that destroys the old and beautiful traditions of the Vietnamese people" (quoted in Terzani, 1997, p. 176). Two carriers of this decadent culture were the English and French languages. Thus both disappeared from the educational system and from individuals' linguistic repertoire.

REUNIFICATION AND ISOLATION

Because of financial difficulties and the demands of reconstruction after the war education was severely under-funded in the first two decades after

reunification. The lack of formal education of the majority of the leadership may also have led to education being a low priority. For whatever reasons, education was not generally a success in this period and the focus of the curriculum narrowed. After the 1981 reform, emphasis was on ideological and moral training first and acquisition of technical and scientific skills second (Pham Minh Hac, 1998). The traditional humanities, including foreign languages were largely absent. Funding was never adequate. State investment was low, amounting to only 1 % of GDP in 1989, much less than in neighboring countries such as Thailand (3.5%) and China (3.4%). Participation was never 100%. This stems in part from the fact that schooling is not free in Vietnam, and although the fees are modest, for the poorest families they are a considerable disincentive. Universal education has still not been achieved despite the National Assembly's 1991 law which aimed to make it so. Groups such as the hill tribes in the north and the fishing communities of the Ha Long Bay and Mekong Delta areas continue to have very low rates of participation. Finally, the average number of years of attendance remains low, only 4.5 years in 1990 (Chan Weng Khoon et al., 1997). The poor in both rural and urban areas do not stay in education long enough to acquire significant skills. Thus, the fight against illiteracy, apparently so successful in the early years of the revolution, has been undermined by new cohorts of young illiterates (Pham Minh Hac, 1998).

After 1975, education at all levels suffered from staffing difficulties. Teachers' pay was not enough for the teachers to support themselves or their dependents; a tradition evolved of teachers having other work to supplement their incomes. The deleterious effect that this has on their performance and commitment is recognized (Khoon et al., 1997). In addition, many teachers were under qualified for the work that they were doing in comparison with neighboring countries. In the late 1990s, only 30% of teachers had relevant qualifications; in the universities only 19% of the lecturing staff possessed postgraduate qualifications (Khoon et al., 1997).

The departure of thousands of Vietnamese by boat, beginning in 1978, and more recently by other means, had unplanned side effects on the nation's language skills. First, the "boat people" of 1978-1982 were disproportionately Vietnamese of Chinese origin; perhaps a half million of this group may have left (Bui Tin, 1995; Rigg, 1997). Although not all spoke one of the varieties of Chinese, many did, and as they left the country, so too did a pool of competence in Chinese and literacy in the Chinese script. Second, the boat people often came from the old bourgeois - the people most likely to be educated and perhaps to have received education in French and English.

Yet the language competence of the population was not of great official concern in the immediate post war period. By 1978, Vietnam was at war again, intervening in Cambodia to stop the genocide of the Pol Pot

regime and to counter the threat from Khmer Rouge incursions along the Vietnamese border. In 1979, war broke out also along the border with China. Though lasting only a few weeks, the war caused the two countries to sever relations, which were not renewed until November 1991. Thus Chinese joined French and English as the language of an enemy of the Vietnamese state. From 1975 to 1986, provision for these three foreign languages almost completely disappeared (though they were not banned). There were other priorities for the education system and no sufficient reason to institute large scale teaching of the languages of states with whom Vietnam had no diplomatic relations. A limited number of special secondary schools provided foreign language courses and one institute of higher education specialized in foreign languages. Outside the education system, the acquisition of a foreign language could be suspect. Language learning for the purpose of studying Confucian or Catholic teachings or to prepare for leaving the country clandestinely could bring retribution.

A continuing issue was the ideological and experiential gap between those who fought the war and those who did not. Bao Ninh's novel, *The Sorrow of War*, describes the distance between the guerrilla fighters and those who did not share their terrible experiences. The novel paints a bleak portrait of soldiers' lives as they struggled to come to terms with the legacy of their experiences. The narrator has contempt for the college graduate who spoke two foreign languages and lived "an easy life" (Bao Ninh, 1993, p. 56).

SUPPORT FROM THE USSR AND EASTERN EUROPE

One consequence of the American war was an increasing flow of aid, material, and advisors from the Eastern Bloc to Vietnam. Of particular interest for patterns of language use were the university scholarships granted to Vietnamese. Between 1965 and 1974, 26,000 Vietnamese gained first degrees in the Soviet Union (USSR) or Eastern Europe and 3,000 gained postgraduate qualifications (Vietnam Courier, 1982). In the period 1975-1991, the USSR became the main supporter of an impoverished Vietnam, isolated from the Western capitalist world by the U.S.-led trade embargo, from China after the 1979 border war, and from the rest of its neighbors because of fears of Vietnamese expansionism after the invasion of Cambodia. The COMECON countries (communist trading block) became the principal trading partners of Vietnam and the sole providers of technical assistance and training.

Thus Russian became the most commonly taught language in the secondary school system. A number of "friendship schools" were set up to give school children some contact with the world outside Vietnam and

to promote the learning of Russian and to a lesser extent the other Slavic languages. The only non-Slavic educational links in 1990 were those with Cuba and the Netherlands (Vietnamese Ministry of Education, 1990). Pham Minh Hac (1998) records that Vietnamese pupils were among those winning prizes for Russian-speaking in international competitions in 1987. Despite such achievements, the number of Vietnamese learning Russian was not large, and the number of pejorative terms for Russians coined in that period suggests that the Vietnamese never accepted them wholeheartedly.

The reliance of the Vietnamese on COMECON was so great that its collapse in 1991 nearly brought economic ruin to Vietnam. Trade aid relationships ceased and the Russian language quickly disappeared. Although prior to 1991 Russian was learned at secondary school level by the brightest pupils and many of the political and technological elite completed their studies in the USSR, there is little evidence that significant numbers of Vietnamese still possess this foreign language skill. Few of the present generation are now learning it. Indeed, teachers of Russian are being retrained (interview, Vietnamese Ministry of Education, 1999). Thus the large collection of Russian language books donated by Moscow to the National Library is now a resource impenetrable to many of the young students who use the library. In a study on higher education, Pham Thanh Nghi and Sloper note that study is difficult for this generation because "materials are either written in languages they do not understand or from ideological perspectives that are no longer dominant" (Pham Thanh Nghi & Sloper, 1995, p. 114).

***DOI MOI* AND THE END OF ISOLATION**

In 1986, under the influence of Russia and following the pattern of Gorbachev's economic reforms, the Vietnamese introduced their own version of *perestroika*. Called "*Doi Moi*," this change was to entail economic liberalization only, accepted as a necessity after a disastrous period of incompetent government and economic isolation that had brought the country close to famine. Like Deng Xiao Ping's reforms in China, *Doi Moi* did not include a political thaw. However, it did involve increased contacts with other countries, as Vietnam set out to build economic relations with the West. In consequence, the early 1990s witnessed exchanges between Hanoi and non-communist regimes on an unprecedented scale, including France and neighboring Thailand.

Commercial relations increased rapidly under a 1987 Foreign Investment Law that permitted foreign business to invest in joint ventures (Sadec Asia Pacific, 1999). From 1988 to 1995, capital flowed into the country from Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea, Japan, Australia, Switzerland, and

France (see Vietnam Investment Review figures, 1996; Nguyen Tri Dung, 1998). After ten years of liberalization, Vietnam had developed trade relations with more than 100 countries and direct investment from more than 50 countries.

Analyses of this rapid increase in international business in Vietnam cite two major difficulties. The first was a shifting legal environment, in which "officials trained in the universities of Eastern Europe or in the guerrilla camps of the war" were often out of sympathy with developments and interpreted legislation inconsistently and unsympathetically (Birolli, 1999; Carlson, 1998). The second difficulty was lack of foreign language competence. Investment analysts advising foreign businesses reported that those Vietnamese who had completed 12 years of national education were well prepared for technical work but had low levels of competence in the languages of potential investors (Carlson, 1998; Dickson, 1998; Sadec Asia Pacific, 1999). Nguyen Tri Dung suggests there were cultural as well as language barriers: "The lack of knowledge on business practices, laws and a poor knowledge of foreign languages are some of the main reasons many people fail to perform in foreign companies" (Nguyen Tri Dung, 1998, p. 10).

In the late 1990s, foreign investment slumped by as much as 40%, in part due to the Asian financial crisis (Pham Ha, 1998 Economist, 2000). However, in this period, Vietnam normalized its foreign relations: ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) admitted Vietnam in 1995 and the United States established diplomatic relations after having lifted its trade embargo. Vietnam also became a member of AFTA (Asia Free Trade Area) and APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation). The language of business in these groups is mostly English or Chinese (Cantonese or Mandarin), leading to a demand for Vietnamese who speak these languages (CNN, 1996). This is not a demand that can be easily met.

THE RETURN OF ENGLISH AND FRENCH

Although in the latter half of the 1990s, the interest of most foreign investors in Vietnam decreased, investment from France tripled. The French were also present in Vietnam as participants in a large number of non-profit programs in medicine, psychiatry, dentistry, pollution control, environmental health, and sustainable development operated by non-governmental organizations and private associations. Indeed, the French government seems to be using the former colonial links between France and Vietnam to create a special relationship in the diplomatic and educational spheres. Its motivation stems from the French belief that former Indo-China can

be cultivated as an area in Southeast Asia where Francophones can challenge Anglophone-dominated globalization. The French president, Jacques Chirac, was quite explicit:

Asia, already a major center for economic development and world trade, will also realize its full political importance in the near future, fulfilling the promise of its ancient and wonderful civilizations, and truly reflecting its dynamism and its power. . . Francophonie already possesses a historic base in Indo-China and in the Pacific. . . Francophonie is perhaps above all a certain vision of the world. We are building a political association founded on a virtual community, that of the language that we have in common and which unites despite our cultural diversity. . . Our raison d'être stems from a conviction that in the 21st century language communities will be key actors on the international political stage (Chirac, 1997).

Chirac admitted that competence in French had been "eroded" among the Vietnamese, but was optimistic that French could be reintroduced. This optimism was based in no small part on the generous funding and vigorous efforts that the French government was making to extend French-medium education and French language learning in Vietnam.

For its part, Vietnam has seen membership in Francophonie as one of the ways out of isolation. (South) Vietnam had become a member of the first institution set up by Francophonie, ACCT, the agency for technical and cultural cooperation, at its creation in 1970. This historical link provided a rationale for representatives of the SRV (Socialist Republic of Vietnam) to attend the first Francophone Summit in 1986. Vietnam then became a full member of Francophonie and in 1997, hosted the 11th Francophone Summit, the first intergovernmental meeting to be held in Vietnam.

Membership in Francophonie was also one of the ways to gain aid for the Vietnamese educational system. In the 1997-1998 school year, the Francophone agency, AUPELF, financed 14,000 school children in 491 bilingual (French-Vietnamese) programs staffed by teachers from Francophone countries, principally France. These programs are generously funded, with new text books and audio-visual and computer technology that are largely absent in the Vietnamese system. Entry is by competitive examination, with scholarships available for families unable to fund extended education. The scheme has acquired a reputation for high standards and rigor, and there is intense competition to be admitted. The bilingual secondary streams lead into a university program in which, in 1997, 5,000 Vietnamese students were being taught medicine, management, law, basic science, agricultural science, engineering, and computer science through the medium of French. Moreover, these students are then eligible for work experience in a variety of Francophone businesses that are in partnership in the scheme and recruit from among the graduates. These companies

include giants such as Alcatel Rhône-Poulenc, Credit Lyonnais, and Air France.

The goal of this program is that 5% of all those completing 12 years of schooling (6-18 years) in the full Vietnamese primary and secondary system should do so in a bilingual French-Vietnamese stream. To this end, AUPELF plans to augment the number of classes available by 125 per year through 2010. In addition, there are small numbers attending the Lycee Francais and learning French with the Alliance Francaise. As the major funder of AUPELF, France now educates a greater number of Vietnamese than during the colonial period. Given present trends, it seems likely that French will continue to gain in importance in Vietnamese society.

COMPETITION FROM THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING WORLD

Although the French initiative has had some impact on language learning in Vietnam, English is the language that most Vietnamese wish to acquire. As the lingua franca of the ASEAN and APEC countries with which Vietnam does business and the language of globalization, it is widely perceived as having the greatest economic value. Australia is currently the major provider of long-term overseas scholarships and of English language training to teachers and personnel in key ministries in Vietnam, through AUSAID, the Australian agency for international development. More than 2000 Vietnamese students per year have studied in Australia in the last five years (for budgetary data, see Fatseas, 1998). The Australian International Education Foundation (AIEF) organizes links between universities and joint publications.

Despite the presence of government agencies from Australia and to a lesser extent other English-speaking countries, English language teaching is dominated by the private sector. International organizations have set up schools in the main towns and there has been a growth of small enterprises, often established by travelers who have decided to stay in the new *Doi Mai* Vietnam. These programs are of varying quality and often ephemeral. Their success and proliferation, despite their obvious deficiencies, are evidence of the strong feeling among the Vietnamese that English is now an important asset.

In the cash-strapped public education system, the main foreign language is English. There is no foreign language in the basic general provision, which now has well over 10 million pupils. There is a possibility for foreign language study in basic secondary (11-15 years), which has over four million pupils, although how far this part of the curriculum is fully implemented depends very much on the availability of teachers,

particularly in English. In upper secondary, there are over one million 15-18 year-olds in education, the great majority studying a foreign language for three hours a week (Pham Minh Hac, 1998). The Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) recognizes that this is an area where staff with appropriate qualifications are urgently needed (personal communication, MOET, 1998).

MOET also recognizes that English pedagogy needs to be reviewed. The traditional emphasis on accuracy in the written language rather than the acquisition of fluency in the spoken language is inappropriate for many Vietnamese today (Lo Bianco, 1993). Given the importance of spoken fluency, there is growing likelihood that changes in pedagogy will be forthcoming.

CONCLUSIONS

The history of Vietnam has been marked by war and troubled relations with the outside world. Given the strong sense of national identity and diplomatic isolation in the post-1975 period, it is understandable that formal foreign language provision has been a low priority and that individuals until recently have not taken the personal initiative to acquire foreign language skills. However, as Vietnam industrializes, language learning is necessary if the country is to participate in international networks and profit fully from foreign investment. The need for high quality language education can only grow as Vietnam seeks to create a new kind of knowledge based economy, where access to information is overwhelmingly in other languages, particularly English. Thus a sizeable investment and much effort is needed in foreign language education. This undertaking is understandably difficult. However, unless Vietnamese workers acquire the languages demanded by investors, *Doi Moi* is unlikely to succeed in bringing employment for the Vietnamese, except in the most modest roles.

The group that has begun to take advantage of the demand for language skills is the Vietnamese who left the country and are fluent in both Vietnamese and the language of their adopted country. In the late 1990s, the Vietnamese government abolished the heavy taxes on expatriate money, lifted other restrictions, and invited the overseas Vietnamese (Viet Kieu) to return. Of the two million overseas Vietnamese, the number returning is relatively small, and most returnees have kept their foreign passports as a precaution in case policies change and they are no longer welcome (Lamb, 1996). Since the Viet Kieu are primarily based in the United States, Australia, and France, most returnees have competence in the languages

most in demand. As the children of the capitalist and bourgeois classes expelled by the revolutionaries, they also have access to capital for investment. Yet their return involves a risk: If they are perceived as the main beneficiaries of economic development, resentment and conflict could result.

In Vietnam, foreign language learning has always reflected historical events and been a barometer of waxing and waning relationships with other powers. This is, of course, the case in all foreign language learning, which inevitably reflects economic and political association. The interesting aspect of the Vietnamese case study is the abruptness of the changes and the very evident cause-effect relationships.

In the future, foreign language learning will no doubt continue to be a barometer of social change in Vietnam and play a central role in the important economic and political developments taking place. In a follow up visit to South-East Asia in January 2001 I encountered an informal opinion among English mother tongue journalists that the communication difficulties they had been experiencing in Vietnam appeared to be easing, and that more English speakers could be found among the younger members of the Vietnamese political and business elites than was the case a few years ago. When this can be confirmed and quantified, it will indicate the beginning of a new phase in this narrative.

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