

Integrating Việt Nam into World History Surveys

By Mauricio Borrero and Tuan A. To

It is not an exaggeration to say that the Việt Nam War of the 1960–70s remains the major, and sometimes only, point of entry of Việt Nam into the American imagination. This is true for popular culture in general and the classroom in particular. Although the Việt Nam War ended almost forty years ago, American high school and college students continue to learn about Việt Nam mostly as a war and not as a country. Whatever coverage of Việt Nam found in history textbooks is primarily devoted to the war. Beyond the classroom, most materials about Việt Nam available to students and the general public, such as news, literature, games, and movies, are also related to the war. Learning about Việt Nam as a war keeps students from a holistic understanding of a thriving country of about ninety-three million people, currently the fourteenth-most populated in the world. This brief article argues that history teachers should move beyond the typical exclusive focus on the Việt Nam War to introduce Việt Nam as a complex country and culture, while offering some new thematic approaches for teaching about Việt Nam in a world history survey for American high school and undergraduate students.

This state of affairs also extends to the teaching of world history, where even the leading texts in the field make scant mention of Việt Nam beyond referencing the war. Việt Nam takes up less than two pages in many world history textbooks, and of that small amount, close to 90 percent focuses on the Việt Nam War. *The World: A History* by Felipe Fernandez-Armesto spends most of its coverage about Việt Nam highlighting major developments of the war and its consequences, including the global anti-war protests, subsequent Communist successes in Cambodia and Laos, and how these successes contributed to undermining America's prestige and moral authority.¹ Similarly, both *Traditions and Encounters: A Global Perspective on the Past* by Jerry H. Bentley and Herbert F. Ziegler and *A History of World Societies* by John P. McKay et al. only provide explanations of US involvement in the Việt Nam War in the context of the Cold War.² *Worlds Together, World Apart* by Robert Tignor et al. does attempt to introduce the Vietnamese perspective by naming the war an "American war" and classifying it as a national struggle within the Cold War, but provides little more about Việt Nam other than two short paragraphs tracing major political developments in Việt Nam since 1945.³ However, there are exceptions to this trend. In Peter Stearns's *World Civilizations: The Global Experience*, discussions of the war take up only one out of approximately ten pages devoted to Việt Nam, while William Duiker and Jackson Spielvogel's *World History* features close to thirty references to Việt Nam, due perhaps to Duiker's long career as a scholar of Vietnamese history.⁴ Clearly, there are larger issues of selection and distribution of space that go into the making of history textbooks that may prevent a deeper treatment of Vietnamese topics. Nevertheless, it should be possible to introduce some variety beyond the standard references to the war.

Teaching world history by themes is an effective approach to introducing an immense amount of historical content in a thirteen-week semester or even a school year. Through selected themes, students learn how events change over time, how to interpret historic events in larger contexts, and how to understand their causality and complexity. There may be broad themes such as integration and difference, cultural diffusion and diversion, and human relations with other humans and with nature. There are also more specific themes to address, such as war and peace, the urban/rural divide, cores and peripheries, diaspora and migration, and cultural diversity. High school and undergraduate teachers can decide which themes to

emphasize to help students navigate the long span of world history surveys.

Another reason why world history teachers are often inclined to teach Việt Nam solely in the context of war is the abundance of teaching aids centered on the Việt Nam War. There is a large body of films and documentaries about the war. Many of these films feature popular American actors such as Sylvester Stallone, Tom Berenger, and Tom Cruise. There are also a large number of games and songs about the war, as well as substantial news coverage of veterans and the Việt Nam War whenever the United States engages militarily in any part of the world. American literature, too, has a large selection of memoirs, diaries, history books, and novels about the war. If a teacher looks for teaching aids about the Việt Nam War from an online store, such as Amazon.com, he or she will come up with over 84,000 results.

Twenty or thirty years ago, it was understandable that the war dominated discourse on Việt Nam. Like other Communist nations, Việt Nam itself was a relatively closed society. It was also sharply affected from the traumas of almost thirty years of continuous warfare. While the wounds have not completely healed, economic and cultural globalization, accompanied by greater travel possibilities, have created a more complex picture for teachers and students.

The United States, for example, normalized its diplomatic relations with Việt Nam in 1995. Since then, exchanges between the two countries have increased remarkably in various areas, including trade, investment, health care, cultural activities, official visits, and military cooperation. Every year, a growing number of Americans travels to Việt Nam for research, work, study, or leisure. At the same time, there is an ever-growing flow of Vietnamese coming to the United States, particularly students. According to the latest data from the Institute of International Education, there were 16,579 Vietnamese students in American colleges and universities during the 2013–14 academic year, placing Việt Nam in eighth place, between Japan and Mexico, on a list ranking foreign students by places of origin.⁵ These Vietnamese students taking world history surveys or conversing with American students will find our history education somewhat outdated and inadequate as it refers to Việt Nam. With greater contact between Americans and Vietnamese, teaching about Việt Nam in a more nuanced way assumes greater importance and even urgency.

Teaching Việt Nam: New Themes and Approaches

Teachers wishing to depart from the traditional emphasis on the war find two major challenges when teaching about Việt Nam. The first challenge is how to fit Việt Nam into their overall themes for the class. The second challenge is to find good examples to help them illustrate these themes. However, if they were to look more closely into the history of Việt Nam, they would find that Việt Nam provides a wide range of examples for illustrating various world history themes.

Resilience, Resistance, and National Identity

Located in the eastern part of the Indochina peninsula with a long coastal line and two well-populated areas in the Red River Delta and the Mekong River Delta, Việt Nam has long served as a hub for north-south and east-west exchanges. Northern countries, such as China, Japan, and Korea, need to go through Việt Nam on their way south to Malaysia and Indonesia. Meanwhile, merchants from western areas such as India or, later, Europe use Việt Nam as a stopping point on their way to China. Việt Nam's geographical location, however, has drawn the unwelcome attention of outsiders to control it, thus leading to a history where national identity has

been strongly shaped by resistance to invaders and resilience in the face of foreign occupation. Various Chinese dynasties wanted to control Việt Nam, resulting in four periods of China's domination (111 BCE–40 CE, 43–544, 602–938, 1407–1427); the Mongols tried but failed to conquer the country three times in 1258, 1285, and 1288; the French colonized it from 1858 to 1945; and the Japanese occupied Việt Nam from 1940 to 1945. In the mid-twentieth century, Việt Nam's strategic location became more of a curse as France, the United States, China, and the Soviet Union turned the country into one of the major battlefields of the Cold War.

This intertwining of identity, resilience, and resistance is evident through several examples from folk culture, military history, and politics. In Vietnamese folk culture, there is a legend that over 4,500 years ago, Lạc Long Quân, a descendant of a dragon, and Âu Cơ, a daughter of a fairy, gave birth to a sack of 100 eggs from which 100 children were born, who later became the ancestors of ethnic groups in Việt Nam (or the Việt people). The first son of those children established the first government of Việt Nam, called Văn Lang, whose rulers were referred to as Hùng kings.⁶ The myth of Lạc Long Quân conveys a strong sense of national pride, because the Vietnamese believe that as descendants of a dragon and a fairy, their country will always rise to independence, regardless of their enemy's strength.

In military history, the revolution led by the two Trưng sisters (40–43) stands out as an early example of resistance to foreign control. When the husband of the older Trưng sister was killed by the then-Chinese governor, the two sisters ignited a revolution with the participation of female generals to avenge his death and overturn Chinese rule in Việt Nam. Although Việt Nam soon fell back into Chinese domination, it was Việt Nam's first revolution for national independence, heralding a frequent struggle against foreign domination. It also showed that women could play an active role in this struggle as witnessed by the popular proverb "*Giặc đến nhà, đàn bà cũng đánh*" ("When the enemy come, even women will fight back"). During the next 2,000 years, Việt Nam encountered and defeated many world powers of the time, including the Mongols at their peak of strength in the thirteenth century; China in the heyday of the Qianlong Emperor in the eighteenth century; and Japan, France, and the United States in the twentieth century.

In politics, the official names used by different governments of Việt Nam clearly convey a strong sense of national identity. Since the tenth century, Việt Nam has used four official names: Đại Cổ Việt (968–1054), Đại Việt (1054–1400, 1428–1804), Đại Ngu (1400–1404), and Việt Nam (1804–present). Vietnamese feudal dynasties used the names Đại Cổ Việt (the Great Great Việt) and Đại Việt (the Great Việt) to reaffirm their perception of Việt Nam as a great country on par with China, despite its tributary status. Đại Ngu (the "Great Peace") used by the Hồ dynasty suggested that Việt Nam could remain a great but peaceful country. In 1804, when the Nguyễn dynasty wanted to rely on China against the West, it changed the country's name to Việt Nam (the Việt people in the South), removing the concept of "Great" used by previous dynasties. However, a strong sense of national identity endured by emphasizing that the country belonged only to the Việt people. In 1839, the Nguyễn dynasty again changed its name to Đại Nam (the "Great in the South") to show greater independence from China. However, that change was mostly nominal, because a few years later, the French divided Việt Nam into three parts and incorporated them into their French Indochina.

Cultural Diversity

The result, though, of Việt Nam's long-standing exposure to outside forces, stemming from its geographical location, is a high degree of cultural diversity and diffusion, of which the Vietnamese language itself is a powerful example. Việt Nam's proximity to China has resulted in a heavy influence of Chinese culture on Vietnamese culture. Like other tributary states to China, *Nôm*, the Vietnamese writing system, borrowed and modified Chinese characters to represent Vietnamese words until the nineteenth

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Source: Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection, University of Texas Libraries website at <http://tinyurl.com/7btm2t6>. The map does not show Hoàng Sa (Paracel) and Trường Sa (Spratly) Islands. China and several Southeast Asian countries contest Việt Nam's sovereignty.

century. However, different from Mandarin Chinese but similar to other Southeast Asian languages, Vietnamese follows the subject-verb-object word order and is an analytic language, which does not change the words with tense, gender, and number. Beginning in the seventeenth century, European missionaries, most notably Alexander de Rhodes (1591–1660), began to transcribe Vietnamese in romanized script. Later, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the French colonizers widely used the romanized script while ruling Việt Nam, laying the foundation for *Quốc Ngữ*, the modern-day Vietnamese writing system. As such, Việt Nam is the only former tributary state of China that uses romanized characters as its national writing system.

Vietnamese history Significant events

2879–258 BCE	Legendary Hùng dynasty
111 BCE–40 CE	The first domination of China over Việt Nam
40–42 CE	Trung sisters gained independence from China
43–540 CE	The second domination of China over Việt Nam
541–602	Early Lý dynasty
603–937	The third domination of China over Việt Nam
938	Việt Nam regained independence
1009–1225	Later Lý dynasty
1225–1400	Trần dynasty
1258–1288	Mongols fail three times to conquer Việt Nam
1400–1404	Hồ dynasty
1407–1428	The fourth domination of China (under the Ming dynasty) over Việt Nam
1428–1780	Lê dynasty
1600–1770	Trịnh and Nguyễn clans rule behind the scenes
1771–1802	Tây Sơn brothers unified Việt Nam and defeated conquest by China's Qing dynasty
1802–1945	Nguyễn dynasty
1804	Việt Nam is used as the official name of the country
1858–1945	France's colonialization of Việt Nam
1930	Hồ Chí Minh helps found the Communist Party of Việt Nam
1940–1945	Japanese occupy Việt Nam
1945	Hồ Chí Minh declares Việt Nam's independence.
1946–54	First Việt Nam War with the French
1954	Geneva Conference divides Việt Nam at the seventeenth parallel (Democratic Republic of Việt Nam [DRV]) in the north and Republic of Việt Nam [RVN] in the south)
1964–65	President Johnson orders major increases of American troops in Việt Nam, following Tonkin Gulf Resolution of 1964
1973	Paris Peace Conference establish a cease-fire and withdrawal of US troops from Việt Nam
1975	Republic of Việt Nam falls to the Democratic Republic of Việt Nam. The following year, a united Việt Nam becomes known as the Socialist Republic of Việt Nam
1986	Việt Nam starts đổi mới (economic renovation). Within a decade Việt Nam is the world's second-fastest-growing economy
1995	Normalization of US–Việt Nam relations
2007	Việt Nam joins the World Trade Organization

Source: Modified timeline from Shelton Woods, "The Story of Việt Nam: From Prehistory to the Present," *Key Issues in Asian Studies* (Ann Arbor: Association for Asian Studies, 2013).

The Vietnamese vocabulary also reflects cultural diffusion. A majority of Vietnamese words are borrowed from Chinese, resulting in two major sets of vocabularies: an authentic Vietnamese and Chinese-Vietnamese. However, interactions with the French and Russians have enhanced Vietnamese vocabulary with foreign words, such as *sơ mi* (chemise), *khăn mùi xoa* (handkerchief), *ban công* (balcony), *cà rốt* (carrot) from French, and *Xô viết* (Soviet) and *bôn sê vich* (Bolsheviks) from Russian. Globalization has also enriched Vietnamese with English words such as *pít za* (pizza), *xì căng đăn* (scandal), *công tơ nơ* (container), *ti vi* (television), and Internet.

Changes in clothing fashions over time provide another example of cultural diffusion in Việt Nam. In the old days, both men and women wore Áo dài (long robes). They were loose-fitting and made in mostly dark colors such as black or brown. When the French came, the Vietnamese, inspired by the French gowns, made them tighter-fitting and in more vibrant colors. Vietnamese women adopted the use of brassieres, wore heels, used purses, and kept their hair down, following the fashions of French women. Áo dài for women gradually changed to reflect new conceptions of femininity. Meanwhile, Vietnamese men began to cut their hair short and abandon traditional clothing. Nowadays, Áo dài for men often appear in festivals or ceremonies, while women wear them on both formal occasions and in everyday life. In 2006, leaders attending the Summit of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in Việt Nam wore Áo dài as the traditional costume of the host country.

Food provides us with another example of cultural diversity, as seen through the evolution of the popular Vietnamese sandwich *bánh mì*, considered by many to be one of the world's best street foods. During their colonial rule, the French brought into Việt Nam the Western-style breakfast of milk, bread, cheese, and butter. Using the French baguette, the Vietnamese created the *bánh mì*, a sandwich stuffed with ham, cucumber, cilantro, radish, and carrot pickle. Besides the obvious French element of the baguette, the sandwich also reveals a Chinese influence in that the preparation of the ham follows a Chinese recipe. Several variations of the Vietnamese sandwich have emerged over the years, with grilled or roast pork, fish cake, or egg replacing the Chinese-style ham.

Convergence of Religious Beliefs

World history surveys can also approach the theme of religious diversity, diffusion, and convergence through the example of Việt Nam. Cultural exchanges over the centuries have resulted in the presence of most of the world's major religions in Việt Nam, including Buddhism, Islam, Hindu, Roman Catholicism, and Protestantism. Those religions have blended with local cultural practices and produced various religious outcomes.

Two important practices have influenced the development of foreign religions in Việt Nam: ancestor veneration and the worship of Mẫu (the Mother). As the Vietnamese believe they share the same roots, the scope of ancestors to be worshipped in Việt Nam is broader than in other societies. They can range from the specific (the deceased of the family or heroic figures who made great contributions to the village) to the broad (the Hùng kings). The ancient Vietnamese matrilineal society believed that the universe is under the control of the Mother, who incarnates herself in holy mothers of the sky, earth, water, forest, and various heroines. Therefore, although Việt Nam was later influenced by patrilineality and Confucianism, Vietnamese women continue to play important roles in society, and heroines are worshipped in various areas in Việt Nam. UNESCO recognized the worship of Hùng kings, the broadest form of ancestor veneration in Việt Nam, as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2012 and is currently considering Việt Nam's request for the worship of Mẫu to be given the same designation.

The encounter of foreign religions with Vietnamese local culture has been shaped by two main trends of religious convergence. The first is the adaptation of foreign religions to grassroots traditions to make them more

appealing to local populations. Buddhism took root in Việt Nam around the second century BCE through the work of Indian monks, particularly in the Lũy Lâu citadel (now in Bắc Ninh Province), making it one of the earliest Buddhist centers in East Asia. Chinese monks later expanded the Mahayana tradition in the northern region while the southern region embraced more Theravada Buddhism. In interaction with Vietnamese traditional beliefs, Buddhism started to change. In Việt Nam, Buddhist temples worship not only Buddha and Buddhist saints, but also Mẫu and heroic figures. Some temples even have separate shrines to worship the main donors for their construction or for local people to pray for their ancestors and lost ones. Roman Catholicism came to Việt Nam in the sixteenth century and flourished during the period of French colonization. Catholicism in world history provides us with many examples of syncretism and adaptation to local traditions, and Việt Nam is no exception. Even as Catholic practice remained fundamentally unchanged, it made important adaptations to local realities and traditions, such as the acceptance of ancestry worship, the emphasis on the Virgin Mary to match traditional matrilineal values, and the Vietnamization of Catholic names and songs. Adaptation to local traditions was also evident in the architectural design of churches, of which the Phát Diệm Cathedral in Nam Định Province, built in the form of a traditional Vietnamese temple, is the most impressive example.

The religious practices of the Cham ethnic community, living in the coastal areas in the center and south of Việt Nam, provide us with another fascinating example of religious adaptation and localization. The Cham

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have their own traditions of worshipping ancestors and the Mother figure. Hinduism came to the region, possibly through maritime trade, and prospered from the seventh to fifteenth centuries under the then-Kingdom of Champa. Hindu principles gradually faded away, leaving only the worship of the Shiva god, possibly because the destructive power of Shiva fits in well with the harsh climate and terrain of central Việt Nam that shape the lives of the Cham. Arab or Persian merchants introduced Islam to the Cham in a later period, but over the centuries, the Cham have modified the more strict Islamic principles. For example, the Cham believe in Allah, but not as the only God. They also worship Mother and other gods in charge of rain, mountain, and sea. Those deviations have created what the Cham call *Bà Ni*, or Old Islam religion. Unhappy with such changes, a group of Cham brought back into the community the conventional Sunni Islam in the early 1960s, resulting in the emergence of a New Islam. Followers of the New Islam retain fully and observe strictly Islamic rules and rituals practiced by Muslims around the world. As a result, the contemporary Cham

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population falls into one of three religious communities: Hindu, Old Islam, and New Islam.

The second trend of religious convergence is the creation of local religions that adopt concepts from foreign religions. The strongest example of this trend is the development of Caodaism, a local religion that first emerged in Việt Nam in the 1920s. Caodaism holds that history divides into three Amnesties, or periods of revelation. All current religions in the world, including Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism, belong to the two first religious Amnesties, while Caodaism is the embodiment of the Third Amnesty, which aims at uniting all religions. Built on the principle of “all religions as one,” Caodaism’s symbol of faith is a left Divine Eye that suggests that the Father of the Universe sees everything and everywhere. Caodai temples represent a host of sacred features and colors of various religions, including Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism. Its pantheon includes figures of Buddha, Confucius, Lao Tzu, Jesus Christ, and Vietnamese ancestor veneration. Its organizational structure follows that of the Catholic Church, with the Pope as its head and lower ranks such as cardinals, bishops, and priests. Beside Caodaism, Việt Nam is host to other faiths derived from foreign religions, such as Hòa Hảo, a simplified form of Buddhism that emerged in 1939, and Trúc Lâm, a Vietnamese Zen sect of Buddhism formed in the twelfth century with substantial input from Confucianism and Daoism but somewhat diminished after the Trần dynasty (1225–1400). Likewise, “Engaged Buddhism,” a currently popular form of Buddhism in the West that attempts to link Buddhist meditation with social action, originated from Việt Nam. Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh coined this term when he saw the sufferings of people in the Việt Nam War and advocated for peace efforts.

Forty years have passed since the end of the Việt Nam War. For the near future, the war will continue to remain the main gateway for Americans wishing to learn about Việt Nam, but it need not be the only gateway or the final destination. Vietnamese history provides us with a variety of examples and approaches, ranging from language to food to clothing to religion, which can only enrich our understanding of its contributions to world history. ■

NOTES

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