Persistent Ambiguities: Vietnamese Ethnology in the Doi Moi Period (1986 -2001)

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From the time ethnology was established as a field in Vietnam, one of its key tasks has been to foster and maintain national unity, while at the same time preserving and developing 'ethnic distinctiveness' and diversity. During the first thirty years of ethnology's development, the focus of ethnographic endeavours was to incorporate the different ethnic groups into the national whole, so as to develop and promote an ethnicity, history and culture which emphasized the 'national' and 'unified' nature of Vietnam's diverse ethnic components. Ethnographic research has traditionally tended to focus on three areas: ethnic classification, minority history and culture. This began to change in the doi moi era, as more attention has been given to socio-economic development issues.

Doi moi, which means renewal or renovation, refers to the economic reforms officially launched in 1986, during the Sixth National Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party. From liberalising and opening the economic sector, and to a lesser extent with the gradual decentralization of the political system, doi moi has affected almost all spheres of the national polity and society. Members of the media and communications, along with the academic
community, have been encouraged to embrace the 'spirit of openness' and to 'seek the truth' in their work. With regards to academia, *doi moi* has provided them some scope for flexibility and re-evaluation -- no doubt within accepted limits -- in their respective fields. Such changes were construed as necessary developments to move from a state-run command economy to a "Socialist-oriented market economy." In some respects, *doi moi* has led to changes in the way minorities are perceived and portrayed. Yet, there remain striking similarities and fundamental continuities from the earlier period.

The following discussion will examine the elements of continuity and change in ethnology during the *doi moi* period. Critical aspects of contemporary ethnology continue to be shaped by the previous discourse, with regard to specific themes, theories and ideology. Yet, there are also some noticeable changes which constitute a significant departure from the previous discourse, such as more positive and reflective approaches to minority culture. In the current discourse, certain aspects of minority culture appear to have undergone significant reconfiguration and re-evaluation. The section on the new museum of ethnology in Hanoi elucidates this aspect of *doi moi*. However, the goals and focus of Vietnamese ethnology continue to be intertwined with national politics and ideology, and certain key aspects of the state's national minority policies remain unchanged.

**I. Continuity**

The main topics of the earlier years, such as ethnic classification, minority history and culture, continue to dominate much of the official/public discourse on ethnic minorities.

**Ethnic Classification**

Contemporary scholarship on concepts like *ethnie*, nation and nationality continue to be based on Stalin's "National Criteria," i.e. language, culture and ethnic consciousness, and this continues to be the case.[1] The works of Soviet thinkers (Marx, Lenin and Stalin) and those of the pioneering Vietnamese ethnologists (the "old guard" of the discipline) continue to be the standard reference texts. In fact, in a recently published ethnology "textbook" on theories and research on ethnic classification, all the articles are basically reprints of the earlier writings.[2]

As a result, among the continuities in Vietnamese ethnology are the ambiguities and contradictions surrounding the "national criteria." The roots of this contradiction can be traced to Stalin's text itself. When applied to the colonies, Stalin's definition did not qualify most of them to be (or become) nations. In fact, Stalin hardly raised the issue of colonial nations in his famous tract. It has been pointed out that while Stalin's national criteria was adequate for the multi-national states of Eastern Europe, and to a lesser extent the nation states of Western Europe, it was "wholly inadequate for the world of colonies and semi-colonies of Asia, Africa and Latin America."[3] Applied to the Vietnamese context, the limitations of Stalin's criteria become immediately apparent. The sheer diversity of its ethno-linguistic make-up and landscape, not to mention the highly complex social, political and economic dynamics of the highlands, defied the logic of any "grid-filling" exercise and rendered Stalin's provisions highly problematic and
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mostly inapplicable. [4] If applied rigorously, these criteria would show that Vietnam was made up of several separate ethnic nations, debunking the "historical myth" of its national unity and indivisibility.

With regard to the concept of dan toc, the specific meaning and definition, as well as the distinction between "constituent components" of dan toc remain undefined and unclarified. The term, which is essentially a transliteration of the Chinese term, minzu, which is of Japanese origin, can refer to nation, nationality (in the Stalinist sense) and ethnie at the same time.[5] In part, its ambiguity can be traced to the lack of clarity and precision of Stalin's national guidelines, and their inapplicability to Vietnam's specific conditions. That Vietnam is a nation is an indisputable and sacrosanct fact, in official discourse at least. What is less certain (and more problematic) is the precise definition and scope of dan toc with regards to the minority peoples, for instance the term dan toc Tay could refer to the Tay ethnic minority at one level, and/or a hypothetical Tay nation and nationality on the other. Although this ambiguity was never clarified by party leaders and academics alike, it seems that in its narrower definition, and specifically with regard to minority groups or communities, the term dan toc refers to an 'ethnie' or ethnic group, not nation or nationality per se (at least not 'nationality' as commonly understood, i.e. in the sense of being part of a separate and sovereign independent nation-state).

In a recent publication, however, a well-known Vietnamese ethnologist attempts to clarify the inherent ambiguities and delineate the broad boundaries of certain key terms and concepts. While reiterating the established and accepted definition of the term dan toc -- i.e. the double meaning of ethnie on the one hand and nation on the other[6] -- Professor Dang Nghiem Van advocates the use of more precise terms to distinguish between ethnie (toc nguoi) and nation or national community (dan toc or quoc gia dan toc).[7] In his view, Lenin's definition of a nation as a community that comes into being only after having passed through the capitalist stage of development was problematic as it led to confusion when determining whether an ethnie was a tribe, clan or nation, since different communities possessed different levels of socio-economic evolution. Van points out that the term "nation" should preferably be "reserved for national communities with the general meaning of a nation, regardless of social regimes from slavery, feudalism and capitalism or socialism."[8]

At present, he writes, there are "no tribes (bo lac) in the strict sense of the word, nor are there nationalities (bo toc) with compact, mutually exclusive territories" in Vietnam.[9] His immediate explanation for the non-existence of tribes and clans in Vietnam (that these terms were too "primitive" in connotation, applying only to "human beings living thousands of years ago in the period of primitive communism," and was irrelevant to the current stage of development), however, is unclear and somewhat confusing.[10] Not without a sense of irony, he goes on to say:

These pitiful ethnicities still existing with a thin population in different countries have to endure the fate, of dependency on central or local organisation with a leader, in many cases, their relations rest on the ethnic consciousness - with any separate socio-political organisation being forbidden. The destiny of ethnic
minorities in Thailand, Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia pertaining to ancient groups called Kha and Xa, provides an example.\[11\]

In other words, although some ethnic minorities may have originated from another nation (for example the Hmong, Khmer, Thai) prior to their arrival or existence in Vietnam, they are now part of one common nation and do not form separate nations with separate political organisations. The only common ties they share with their country of origin (or members of that community) are those of ethnic consciousness.

The constant reiterations, as well as the attempt to clarify the scope and content of dan toc (as Professor Van sought to do in the above discussion), can perhaps be better understood in the context of the ethnic unrest that has persisted in the highlands (particularly in the Central regions) in the doi moi period. The causes for the above predicament are complex, but it is likely that the "strong and profound" tribal consciousness of certain ethnic groups has been perceived as the driving force behind their continuing call for greater autonomy and religious freedom, unifying them in their goals and strengthening their sense of distinctiveness from the "greater Vietnamese family," thus constituting a continuing source of friction and antagonism with the state. The academic effort to clarify and verify the concept of the Vietnamese nation and nationality, while at the same time denying and dispelling the notion of the existence of other socio-political communities, can be seen as a measure to deal with the problematic nature of Soviet provisions on this matter in the face of Vietnam's unresolved "ethnic problem." Yet, despite efforts to clarify and define the term dan toc, its persistent ambiguities continue to dominate contemporary ethnological discourse. The more specific term quoc gia dan toc used by Van for instance, has not been appropriated and used by other scholars in their discussions, and hardly figures in any of the other writings I have come across.

One of the main tasks, and perhaps one of the notable achievements, of the ethnic classification process during the earlier phase of ethnology was not just that it placed members in their "rightful" ethnic group(ing), but that it succeeded in giving each group a "correct" name, one at least recognised as such by its givers, chiefly ethnologists and the state. From the late 1960s to the early 1970s, the main task of ethnology was to verify (xac minh) ethnicity and thus verify how many ethnic groups there were in Vietnam, a process known as "determining ethnic classification" (xac dinh thanh phan dan toc). These classification exercises were intended to provide the state with a more detailed and accurate map and census of the ethno-linguistic and geo-political landscape of Vietnam. These efforts culminated in Decision 121 of 1979, with an official list of 54 ethnic groups. The classification exercise also sought to "determine the relations between different ethnic groups," so as to develop and strengthen national unity.\[12\]

Following the major classification survey of 1979, another similar "scientific investigation" was carried out in 1989. This basically reaffirmed that there were (still) 54 ethnic groups in all of Vietnam. The only change was the reclassification of a number of groups into different ethno-linguistic categories. This primarily concerned groups formerly classified as belonging to the extensive and all-encompassing Austroasiatic language family. A number of groups from this category were reclassified as a separate language family in the 1989 list, such as the Hmong-Dao
(regrouped as the Hmong-Dao language family), the Tay-Thai, and certain groups formerly classified as "the others" (for example the La Ha, La Chi, Pu Peo and Co Lao), which were reclassified under the Thai-Kadai language family. In the list of 1989, the 54 ethnic groups in Vietnam belong to five language families, comprising eight language groups, whereas previously they had been grouped in three very large language families. No explanation seems to have been given for the reclassification of these groups in 1989, but they are certainly closer and more in tune with the general system adopted by linguists outside Vietnam, and are perhaps reflective of the greater exposure to foreign scholarship.

A number of authors have also noted the likely statistical or numerical inaccuracy of the 1989 investigation. This, as one writer explains, was inevitable given the increased level of migration, physical movement and cultural exchange (and change) among the different ethnic groups over the past few decades.[13] Ethnic borders and boundaries have become more porous, fluid and complex, particularly in minority-inhabited regions. Most writers agree that there should, or ought to be "an up-to-date, more scientifically grounded and documented list of ethnic groups in Vietnam."[14] Based on the research findings of a recent investigation in several minority regions, it is likely that the figure is much higher than the present 54. The researchers noted that a significant number of minority groups wanted to be reclassified as a separate or different ethnic group.[15]

Despite the awareness of the inaccuracies of the existing List of Ethnic Groups in Vietnam, it seems unlikely that a more updated and accurate survey will take place any time soon. This reluctance is probably due to a number of factors, for example the huge administrative costs and work involved, or the need for more in-depth research and understanding of minorities before undertaking such a major task. The heart of this reluctance though, would seem to be the unresolved differences among ethnologists regarding respect for the wishes of ethnic groups and their prerogative to choose their own ethnonym. A number felt that should the wishes of all ethnic groups for separation be fulfilled, it would not only fragment the country's "ethnic map" and slow its socio-economic development, but also hinder the "convergence of the different ethnic groups," an outcome contrary to the law of historical development.[16] Yet, there were also those who felt that integration should not be rushed or forced upon groups concerned, "even if science had reified the accuracy of this process."[17] If this was the case, and should the wishes of ethnic groups be disregarded, as one well-known scholar warns, this would lead to unpleasant consequences for the whole country.[18] Either way, the issue of classification or reclassification remains a complex and delicate issue. Such efforts could open a "Pandora's box" of minority issues such as land rights and political self-determination, which could in turn encourage separatism.

**History**

The instrumental role of ethnic minorities in National History (with a capital H to denote it as a state project and distinguish it from other modes of portraying the past) has been a prominent theme in Vietnamese ethnographic writings. Yet, as one ploughs through these materials, two things stand out: first, there is actually very little dealing specifically with minority history.
Second, the materials are limited in scope; they tell us more about Vietnam's National History than about the history of the minorities themselves. Only aspects that were positively instructive and inspirational were deemed worthy of representation or to have a place in National History, while those that were controversial or ambiguous were either glossed over, simplistically and unsatisfactorily explained, or else omitted altogether.

The history of the minority groups is epitomised in two essential themes: their origins and their tradition of resistance (to protect the Fatherland, i.e. Vietnam). Writings on minority origins serve to illumine the origins of ethnic Vietnamese people or the nation as a whole, rather than reveal anything much about minorities themselves. Such a history became encapsulated in their long tradition of resistance and defence of "their" homeland against "foreign" enemies.

The former discourse on the origins of minority groups continues to dominate contemporary discussions on this aspect of minority history. As with the earlier writings, the emphasis is not just on the common origins of most ethnic groups in Vietnam, but also the primordial nature of these ties. In a recent publication on the origins of ethnic groups in northern Vietnam, the author, Nguyen Chi Huyen, basically reiterates the common origins of most ethnic groups in the region. At the same time, there is a broader emphasis on the primordial roots and relations between Vietnam and its Southeast Asian neighbours. Huyen argues that:

The 'Hundred Viet' or Bach Viet [the ancestors of the major or majority of the ethnic groups in Vietnam and mainland Southeast Asia] were super tribes (sieu toc) in an ethno-historical region, or during a period in Southeast Asia when ethnic groups had yet to be clearly differentiated according to language groups: Austronesian, Tay-Thai and Austroasiatic, that present day science recognises as the indigenous history of Southeast Asia.[19]

This emphasis on ancient Southeast Asian roots and ties in Vietnamese ethnology is also complemented by parallel research efforts in other related disciplines like archaeology, cultural studies, linguistics, geography and biology (including genetics). In a standard archaeology textbook (for university students) on the origins and development of the Dong Son culture, the author points out the basic and unmistakable similarities in the architectural style, symbols and language of the peoples in the region (such as that of the ancient Vietnamese, and present day Toraja and Dayak peoples of Indonesia) which belonged to or bore a striking resemblance to that of the Dong Son culture.[20] The implication here is that (an) ancient Vietnamese culture and civilisation had a significant role in shaping the content and form of Southeast Asian culture. It is also interesting and important to note that the emphasis on the Southeast Asian roots and commonalities of the Dong Son culture is specific to Vietnamese archaeological scholarship; the conclusions of most scholarship outside Vietnam on this subject are quite different. Well-known scholars in this field like Goloubew and Higham, for instance, have paid more attention to the indelible and undeniable Chinese influence (i.e. that from Southern China during the pre-Han and Han eras) on the Dong Son cultural legacy.

With regard to the unresolved debate among scholars about whether the origins of this culture
were indigenous or foreign, Higham highlights the tendency to politicise or nationalise the origins of the Dong Son. He criticises this deterministic, "black or white" approach to the issue -- i.e. that it either "belongs" to the Vietnamese or the Chinese -- and makes a rather convincing and cogent argument for the need to appreciate and understand that Dong Son was a product of the dynamic, complex and symbiotic interaction and exchange of ideas and goods that took place as a result of or in response to Chinese expansion.[21]

According to the current discourse on minority origins, not only do most ethnic groups share common origins, but such primordial ties and commonalities are also (necessarily) Southeast Asian in content and extent. This may be seen as a continuing effort on the part of Vietnamese ethnologists, and academics in general to "decolonise" Vietnam from the shadows of Chinese cultural domination, by emphasising its pre-colonial, indigenous Southeast Asian roots and heritage. The current "Southeast Asian focus" must also be understood in context of Vietnam’s becoming a member of ASEAN in the 1990s. Contemporary ethnological and academic endeavours in Vietnam can be seen as an effort to promote better understanding about Southeast Asia in Vietnam on the one hand, and among other Southeast Asian countries on the other hand, as well as to foster closer inter-regional ties and cooperation among the member nations.

Under doi moi, the theme of the minority peoples' long tradition of resistance and defence of the country is reiterated and replicated over a much wider variety of media and forms; such as in the newspapers, television programmes, films, museums, official/political speeches, and so on. It seems this tradition of resistance -- with its emphasis on the patriotism, heroism and indomitable will of the minorities in defending and building the nation -- is all the more necessary during the current stage of socio-economic development and change. Now, rather than facing foreign invaders, the main challenge for all Vietnamese peoples is to muster their patriotic and heroic tradition for the socio-economic development and advancement of the country. The new "battle front" is in the area of "building and developing the national economy;" continuing to implement the "Fixed Cultivation and Fixed Settlement" program in the highlands; "building new social relations;" "developing culture, education and training, and healthcare and family planning."[22]

In the current discourse, minorities remain an anonymous, faceless and somewhat "unreal" historical force to be reckoned with. In various ethnographic publications, as well as in museum displays, minority history of resistance is quite simply reduced to a matter of statistics: numbers, names, weapons and geographical areas. Two recent publications on minority history delve into rather lengthy detail on their deeds and sacrifices, listing page after page of "type-set" information about the minority "national heroes," including their name, place of origin, and their specific contributions to the national struggle.[23] Most of them were made or became heroes in the context of the war, including soldiers who made valuable contributions to the war effort and/or died in battle, as well as their mothers, also considered heroic. Again, this discourse on minority heroes does not differ significantly (if at all) from the wider, "popular" historical discourse on national heroes, thus emphasising the "fact" that all minority heroes were first and foremost National/Vietnamese heroes.
At the History Museum in Hanoi in a section dedicated to Vietnam's National Heroes, the names of the minority heroes in the "Anti-French Movement of the Highland Ethnic Groups (1864-1929)," as well as the details about their ethnic origins are prominently displayed alongside those of the Great National Heroes of Vietnam, who are invariably ethnic Kinh. It is interesting to note that while the Great National Heroes had easily recognisable names and individual portraits to accompany their names, by contrast, none of the names of the minority heroes are as well-known; nor do they have portraits displayed alongside their names.[24] If minorities are featured in pictures or illustrations, they are usually depicted as supporting or contributing to the war front. Even in these depictions, minorities still appear characterless and nameless, as none of them are recognisable heroes; the only distinguishing marker of their identity is their ethnic attire.

At the Fine Arts Museum in Hanoi, for instance, an untitled lacquer painting depicts a scene reminiscent of the "Vietminh/Revolutionary days in the highlands" artistic genre. A young soldier, whose ethnic origins are unknown, since he is dressed in 'plain clothes,' is surrounded by a small crowd of what appears to be Hmong villagers, as suggested by their traditional attire and the agricultural implements that some of them are carrying. The focus is not so much on who they are individually, but what they represent. The young man represents the presence of the Viet Minh in these regions, whilst the Hmong people highlight minority support for the Viet Minh cause, or more precisely, the multi-ethnic dimensions and nature of the resistance movement. The overall scene, of which the focus is the exchange of a firm handshake between this cadre and a Hmong man, who also places his hands on the young man's shoulders, suggests a sense of trust, warm relations and solidarity between the minorities and the Viet Minh. On the whole, however, it seems as though the (only) purpose of the minority presence is to add some colour and variation to these portrayals, and highlight the mass appeal and popular support for Vietnamese Communists. Certainly, such portrayals emphasised the idea of Vietnam as a "multi-ethnic nation."

The tradition of resistance of the minorities, or of minority history in general, is frequently represented in and epitomised by weapons and geographic areas. At the Revolutionary Museum in Hanoi, for instance, the significance and contributions of the minorities to the national revolutionary struggles are represented by the weapons they used in the heroic battles against the foreign aggressors (apparently that is), such as crossbows, javelins, gun barrels, tridents etc. [25] A bronze sculpture display at the Fine Arts Museum depicts two minority men in combat-ready poses and with lethal-looking weapons. One is armed with a crossbow and arrow, whilst the other is shown setting up a spiked trap. Their ethnic origins are unknown, although their garb does distinguish them as being distinctly minority: both wear loin-cloths, and a narrow length of cloth drapes from their shoulders covering their upper bodies. Both figures are also wearing bandanas on their heads. This attire also has the effect of enhancing the martial feel of the display, giving the scene a kind of raw and potent energy. Beyond the explicit meaning of such displays, which emphasise the patriotism and tradition of resistance of the minorities, they imply that the only context in which the martial potency of the minorities can be portrayed and commended is that of the united national struggles against outside aggressors, not in combat.
against the Kinh.

The historical value and importance of the minorities are also essentialised and commemorated in geographic spaces or areas. Historically important and strategic regions in the northern highlands like Viet Bac, Tay Bac, Dien Bien Phu, Son La, Pac Bo and Thai Nguyen continue to be commemorated and celebrated as the cradle(s) of resistance or revolution (cai noi cach mang). [26] At the Ho Chi Minh Museum in Hanoi, the importance of these regions to the national struggle and in National History is prominently and vividly displayed in a section commemorating the National Revolution in the Pac Bo area of Cao Bang Province (northeastern Vietnam), where the resistance movement was based in its early stages. This display is modelled to resemble what looks like the interior of the human brain, and props that are synonymous with the 'Pac Bo days' occupy or fill up this 'brain:' such as the famous 'rock' table and chair where Ho apparently spent much time reflecting on the state and fate of his country and where he also devised brilliant strategies to win the war, as well as certain aesthetic and idyllic scenes of the region and its geographical features. Yet, it is also important to point out the lack of an explicit reference to any distinctive or separate contribution of minorities to the national revolution, or any part of National History for that matter. The section depicting the revolutionary period in Pac Bo highlights and commemorates the importance of that geographical space to the success of the movement, rather than the importance of the people who inhabited that space; most of the displays center on Ho and personalities or events related to him and the national struggle. The conspicuous absence of minorities in this museum is surprising, if not ironic, given the prominence and priority Ho accorded to minorities in the areas of national defence and development, and with regards to equality and equal rights -- in various political speeches and the Constitution, as well as in national policy.

As with the earlier discourse, persistent ambiguities continue to characterise doi moi writings on history. History is still dominated and shaped by a Marxist-Leninist framework, with emphasis on class conflict and imperialist manoeuvrings. Questionable or dark spots in this History are conveniently glossed over or entirely omitted in the post-colonial rendition of minority history. "Complicated" ethnic relations between the Kinh and other groups are explained as being the result of what "history has left behind" (do lich su de lai), or enemy provocation (do dich gay ra). [27] Examples include the "anti-August Revolution" uprising staged by the Hmong in Ha Giang province between 1945-1946, and the persistence of inter-ethnic conflict in the Central Highlands, which continues to be written off as the work of reactionary and imperialist forces both within and without the country (such as the FULRO movement), seeking to sow discord and break national unity.[28]

The implications of Vietnam's southward expansion (nam tien) receive short shrift, as demonstrated by the remarks from a well-known scholar:

Everyone knows that the Kinh ethnic group, in the process of historical development [and] in the task of southward expansion that spanned a few hundred years, at times had clashes with the Cham and Kho me [Khmer] ethnic groups. Nevertheless, the clashes mentioned above are also a historical reality. Presently,
under the leadership of our Party, [which is] based on Marxist-Leninist foundations, and Ho Chi Minh's ideology, [we now have] an accurate national policy to guide us, we are more concerned about the Cham and Kho me ethnic groups, help each other, create development conditions, just like for the rest of the minority siblings in our country.[29]

Although there has been more academic interest in recent years, most of the materials continue to gloss over the political and territorial impact of nam tien, focusing instead on the euphemistic "cultural exchange" (giao luu van hoa) that resulted from this process.[30] For the most part, Cham history has been essentialised and epitomised by its cultural splendour and legacy. The following description about the history of pre-Vietnamese entities is typical of this cultural focus, and is a rather interesting, if not refreshing perspective, as it defines the Cham and Khmer in relation to the latecomers to the local scene, i.e. the Kinh.

Southern Vietnam was a new area for the Vietnamese, however, this was not a "culture bare" land [dat trang van hoa, or land without pre-existing culture], but before the Vietnamese arrived there, there was already a "pre-Viet" culture that had also developed quite splendidly.[31]

This persistent ambiguity and 'cultural reductivism' or essentialisation is succinctly and poignantly expressed in the display on the Cham civilisation at the History Museum in Hanoi. In this display, which covers quite a wide and conspicuous floor area on the second level of the museum, items of recognisable and distinctly "Cham" (i.e. Hindu-Indianised) style occupy and dominate this space. It is obvious to the visitor that the Cham once had a great kingdom and civilisation, and have inherited a splendid artistic and cultural tradition. Yet, the fundamental and nagging question still remains: what happened to this once great civilisation and culture? What brought about its demise? Certainly neither the museum displays, nor contemporary historical writings are illuminating in this respect.

In essence, doi moi writings on minority history continue to gloss over a number of important issues. Vietnam's minorities still remain a faceless and inadequately understood historical entity in public knowledge and popular culture. Along with ethnicity and history, culture is also critical to the development and assertion of a common national identity among Vietnam's diverse ethnic groups. The discourse on minority culture continues to focus on certain key areas that would facilitate the socialist transformation and development of Vietnamese society as a whole.

**Culture**

Culture is doi moi... doi moi as we often call it is a revolutionary process, of which we are only at the beginning stage. doi moi must be based on and rooted in the cultural aspects: the cultural traditions of the ethnic groups, cultural essence of the contemporary period...[32]

The above abstract from the late Pham Van Dong's commentary on culture and doi moi highlight...
certain key aspects about culture in the current period. Firstly, it elucidates the importance and instrumentality of culture. Next, it is also telling of the (greater) preoccupation with preserving the distinctiveness, i.e. the cultural traditions of the ethnic groups. Lastly, it points to the continuities from the earlier discourses on culture: the ambiguous and abstract nature of key terms and concepts, as well as the continuing emphasis on change and transformation. In general, as is true of this quotation, the contemporary discourse on minority culture does not significantly differ from that of national culture on the whole.

Certain key features of the discussions from earlier years continue to dominate and shape the current cultural discourse. Culture still appears to be conceived and conceptualised in a rather deterministic manner as an entity or aspect of national life that can be "scientifically managed and corrected," to eradicate the backward, ugly or wrong aspects and promote the beautiful and correct aspects.[33] Some authors still maintain an iconoclastic tone, calling for the continual need to be vigilant against and eradicate "backward" and superstitious practices, such as polygamy, under-aged marriages, excessive wedding ceremonies, etc.[34]

As with the preceding discourse, the need to continue to develop and promote a "new culture" in Vietnam continues to dominate discussion of culture under doi moi. Yet, specifically what makes for and distinguishes this "new culture" from that of the former "new socialist movement" is not discussed in much detail. To a significant extent, the inherent ambiguities and imprecision of the earlier discourse persist in the contemporary period. For instance, just what is involved in the process of "developing and preserving" culture, or what constitutes "ethnic distinctiveness" or national culture to begin with (the term van hoa dan toc could refer to either or both of these entities at the same time) has yet to be specified and clarified.

With regard to minority language, the focus, goals and problems of the current language policy remain the same as those of the preceding phases. More than thirty years after Decision 153, the goals of the language policy remain basically unfulfilled. Minority scripts have never seemed to gain popularity among the minorities themselves, and the majority of ethnic groups still do not possess their own writing system.[35] The reasons for this lack of success are numerous, complex and unclear. One author suggests that it could be due to the lack of administrative commitment and resources (for example teaching staff and materials) and the tough socio-economic conditions that many minority groups continue to face (such as poverty and the lack of physical infrastructure).[36] Yet, another likely explanation for this situation is that Decision 153 also states that:

It is necessary for all groups in the Vietnamese territory to study speaking and writing Vietnamese which is the common language of the whole country. The state must make efforts to help minority people to rapidly learn to speak and write in Vietnamese.[37]

Ultimately, the end goal and main priority of the minority language endeavours in the current period is still to develop and promote the use of Vietnamese, over that of minority languages. In the area of language policy, as with minority education in general, doi moi has yet to have any
significant impact.

II. New Trends In *Doi Moi* Ethnology

While some authors still maintain the dichotomous categories and the iconoclastic jargon and tone of the preceding discourse, on the whole, such tendencies are less common in current writings. Most authors tend to take a more moderate, objective and positivistic approach towards cultural topics. In fact, some discussions reveal greater reflectiveness, sensitivity and even cultural relativism toward minority culture.

In the current discourse, the distinction between formerly antithetical dichotomic categories is not as definitive and clear-cut as it once was. In fact, what is "positive" (*tich cuc*) or "negative" (*tieu cuc*) in culture is no longer so clear. There seems to be an awareness that what had hitherto been considered "bad" may not be so "bad" after all, and could in fact be beneficial and necessary to the development of a modern society. One author makes a rather convincing argument for the need to judge each culture on its own terms for what it is, not from another culture's or group's terms and standards:

> Until now, there is still the mistaken perception that ethnic minority culture is primitive culture. For a long period, with an approach that follows a narrow path, not a few people often take the development index of society to measure the development standard of culture. [However], if culture is the essence of every ethnic group, then we cannot take the 'high-low standard' [approach] as criteria. The Vietnamese and some [other] ethnic groups who follow the patriarchal system will use the term "to marry one's husband" (*lay chong*)... the situation is the same with some ethnic groups who follow the matriarchal system... and use the term "to marry one's wife" (*lay vo*). We cannot compare [and come to the conclusion] that this way is more backward than the other way or vice versa.[38]

Perhaps the most significant departure from the earlier discourse is the more positive and favourable reconfiguration and revaluation of aspects of ethnic and/or national culture. This is particularly so with regards to beliefs, customs and practices formerly written off as "superstitions." In the current period, some of these hitherto undesirable practices are being recast in a more positive light, and "upgraded" to more acceptable "popular" beliefs or culture (*tin nguong / van hoa dan gian*), or "religion" (*ton giao*).

In one article, Phan Huu Dat attempts to clarify the outstanding and persistent "misconception" about the role and function of religion in Communist regimes, while at the same time verifying and affirming the importance of popular (or folk) culture in the national community and life. Re-evaluating Marx's famous line: "Religion is the opiate of the masses" as a starting point in his discussion, Professor Dat reaffirms the Party and state's respect for the people's fundamental right to religious freedom in Vietnam, and points out that Marx's stance on religion has been read out of context and inadequately understood by many. He argues that Marx was not so much
against religion *per se* as he was opposed to the political use (or abuse) of religion as a "tool to preserve the dominance or rule" of a certain class of groups of people. He reiterates the point that since the Party recognises and considers religious beliefs a "spiritual need" of certain sectors of society, religion should be allowed to develop and expand, not controlled or restricted.[39] However, Dat also notes that not all beliefs and practices were necessarily "good" for the people or the national community in general. In particular, practices such as head-hunting, worship of ghosts and witchcraft are not "wholesome," and should not be encouraged but prohibited as being detrimental to national unity, stability and development. On the other hand, customs like ancestor worship, rain prayers, buffalo sacrifices and other festivals -- once construed as being backward, primitive or superstitious -- are educational traditions and an important part of popular beliefs and culture, which could strengthen the community consciousness of the people. Fundamentally, he concludes, beliefs are an important aspect of culture, and are therefore intrinsic to national culture on the whole, and should be respected and developed as such.[40]

This article is interesting not only because it is indicative of the *doi moi* tendency to "rehabilitate" some formerly undesirable aspects of culture, but also because it highlights the flexible and fluid, not to mention arbitrary, nature of the labelling and categorising process. The boundary between "superstition" and "popular belief" or "culture" appears to be quite a thin and porous one; buffalo sacrifices and rain prayers could just as easily been construed as being the worship of ghosts or witchcraft. In the *doi moi* period, it is still the Party and the state that decide which cultural practices end up in what category.

Although no specific explanation has been given for such reassessments, it is plausible to suggest that it represents an effort on the part of ethnologists and the state to give credence to their claim to respect and preserve the cultural distinctiveness of ethnic groups. Perhaps it is prudent, if not necessary to appease certain ethnic groups in these areas, which are more harmless and less controversial compared to other issues which may be politically sensitive and explosive.

Yet, it should also be noted that not all cultural "distinctiveness" can and will be preserved and developed. It will still be national goals and priorities (such as those of the current socio-economic development) that determine what kinds of culture will be preserved and developed. Anything that impedes the current development process is deemed "unsuitable" hence "undesirable."[41] "Suitable" traditions to be preserved and developed include patriotism, productive labour, safe and clean eating habits, housing and dress styles --- which ironically (though not surprisingly or unexpectedly) are strongly reminiscent of the "New Socialist Man and Culture" of the preceding era, though without the iconoclastic overtones. [42] A number of recent publications also discuss the general issue of ethnic distinctiveness or minority culture in economic terms, i.e. the economic potential and value of preserving and developing minority culture and distinctiveness. Developing and promoting "cultural tourism" (*du lich van hoa*) in the minority regions, along with (specific) ethnic cultural traditions (like weaving, embroidery, basketry and wine-making etc.), are construed as being not only economically viable and valuable, but also as a good opportunity and means to promote "cultural education" and exchange among ethnic groups and with foreign countries.[43]
Applications of Doi Moi - The "New" Museum of Ethnology

Officially opened in 1997, the Vietnamese Museum of Ethnology (VME), lauded as "the most attractive ethnology museum in Asia,"[44] succinctly embodies the coming together of the "old" and the "new" aspects of ethnographic discourse on minority culture. The cultural representations at the museum can be seen as a magnified, physical and three-dimensional version of the "old." conventional ethnographic knowledge. Here, Vietnam's 54 ethnic groups can be viewed in five sections, divided according to the five language family groupings. Within these sections, there are subsections of the "main" ethnic groups of each language family, such as the Kinh, Muong, Tay, Thai, Hmong, San Diu, Dao, Ngai, Cham, Hoa and the Mon-Khmer peoples of the North, Truong Son-Tay Nguyen regions etc. The culture of each group is displayed within a structure that resembles the traditional house of that group. Each house is intended to be a "mini-museum" of that group's culture.[45] In this sense then, the museum's classification and representation of minorities essentially constitute an extension or projection of conventional ethnographic practice and knowledge: the ethnic groups are 'boxed' into different sections of the museum according to their ethno-linguistic characteristics, within which their culture is once again 'boxed' in ethnic houses and glass cases. Furthermore, the physical structure of the museum and the nature of its displays serve to reinforce the quintessential themes of Vietnamese ethnology, i.e. ethnic diversity, antiquity and unity. The sign at the start of the exhibits reads, "Vietnam -- Historical and Cultural Passages" (Viet Nam - Nhung Chang Duong Lich Su Van Hoa). The external structure of the museum, built in the shape of the Dong Son drum, was designed by a Tay architect while the architect of the interior was French.

What is "new" about the museum representations, on the other hand, is that its displays are intended to take on additional goals and functions. Firstly, it seems that the museum planners seek to present the culture of the ethnic groups as objectively as possible, i.e. to portray various aspects of their culture "as it is" or from the standpoint of its owners. The short monographs that accompany each display provide concise and standard ethnographic details: such as the group's name, the region they came from, the name of the artefact/custom/event that is portrayed, its function/significance for the people etc. In this sense, the Kinh are presented as just one of the 54 ethnic groups on display at the museum.

Secondly, there is also a concerted effort to make the culture of ethnic groups more real and a "lived" experience for the visitors. The focus of the exhibits is not so much on the cultural artefacts per se as on its users and producers, who are considered the "agents of culture." Nguyen Van Huy, the director of the museum, a well-known ethnologist and also the son of the late Professor Nguyen Van Huyen, who was one of the "founding fathers" of the discipline, elucidates this point:

One of the renovated perspectives in [the] exhibition of VME is its special attention to the agents of culture. In an old type museum too much attention was paid to objects and too little on their creators. In the new ethnographic museum the exhibition itself is originally designed through the lenses of culture bearers/agents. A culture agent participates in the process by recording his or her narratives, his or
her comments of the artefacts and their making, and on various social and cultural event.[46]

In other words, these representations seek to give a "voice" to the people being portrayed. Beyond their educational and entertainment value, these displays also have the "higher goal" of instilling acceptance and respect of the diversity of cultures and its values in Vietnam. Ideally, the museum not only strives to be a place where culture is presented and preserved, but a meeting place of cultures, and can generate dialogue and understanding between the cultural bearers and visitors such that the minorities "can move towards development without losing themselves."[47]

The distinguishing feature of the museum displays is its "interactive" approach to culture. In each of the ethnic-cultural houses for instance, life-size models of minority peoples, dressed in their traditional attire, are depicted engaging in a variety of cultural activities, such as spinning thread, weaving, making baskets, playing musical instruments, ancestral worship, farming, fishing etc. Audio-visual tapes are also another medium used to present and instruct on ethnic culture. In some of these "houses," there are short video-clips showing actual footage of certain ceremonies, rituals and festive celebrations of that group. In the Tay house, for example, the visitor not only gets to see the *The Lau Then* (Praying to Heaven for Luck) ceremony of the Tay in its three-dimensional form (through the mannequins and ceremonial props on display), but also witness the "live" event performed by its real practitioners on video. Apart from this, the buffalo sacrifice (or slaying) ceremony of the Ba Na and the *non* (palm leaf conical hat) production of the Kinh are permanent video exhibits at the museum.

In recent years, the museum has also incorporated "folk art performances" or "on-the-spot-making of traditional handicraft articles" as part of its cultural exhibits. [48] One recent event was on the Hmong cloth culture, which include aspects of weaving, batik making, embroidery, indigo dyeing and hemp production. In this event, eight "live models," most of them elderly Hmong women, were invited to come to the museum to demonstrate their craft. Not only were the visitors able to see the cloth production process from start to end, they were also encouraged to interact with the producers, and ask them questions about their culture.[49]

Despite its strengths (such as making minority culture more accessible and approachable, and contributing to the preservation and public interest in ethnic culture), there are also inherent limitations to the "museum method of anthropology" not just in Vietnam but elsewhere.[50] The most fundamental of these limitations is that of realism, or the lack of it. Although the exhibits aim to make culture as real and 'lived' an experience as possible, these are but "cultural snapshots," re-enactments or reproductions of the original event, not the real events themselves. The various scenes on display capture the ethnic subject in the act of cultural (re)production: these aspects of the group's culture are frozen in time and space, and propelled forward to a foreign geographical and cultural setting. No doubt the displays strive to be as authentic and as close in detail to the "real thing" as possible, ultimately, such authenticity remains a staged one. In these exhibits, the ethnic group's culture is de-contextualised from its original setting and symbolism, and is condensed so that it can be performed to so that it can be performed for
museum visitors. There are a number of implications involved in the process of staging and reproducing ethnic culture: what was a private ritual becomes a public "spectator" affair; the sacred becomes the secular; and what was unique and personal to that ethnic group becomes an indistinguishable part of Vietnam's diverse cultural landscape and "shared National Culture." The main problem with the museum method is the impossibility of depicting an ethnic group's culture in its entirety.

The other limitation lies in the problem of repetition and the massive scale of the display areas. With the sheer number and variety of artefacts, models displays and space, it is inevitable that after some point, these repetitions start to have a "dulling effect" on the visitor. As Franz Boas succinctly put it: "with the undue multiplication of groups of the same type. the impressiveness of each is decreased by the application of the same device."[51] While one might be awed by the splendid array of ethnic cultures on display when walking through the "cultural houses" of each ethnic group in Vietnam, after a while, it all begins to look the same. It is possible for the visitor to leave the museum none the wiser about what minority culture really is; apart from the fact that it is colourful, distinct, possess remarkable skills and technology, and has a long history. Although the focus of the displays is supposed to be on the cultural agents, calling for meaningful exchange between them and the visitors, it is unlikely that any interaction actually takes place between the two parties. Neither the minority mannequins nor the participants in the video clips can speak for themselves or answer questions about their culture. Interestingly, most of the participants at the workshop on Hmong cloth culture could not speak Vietnamese. The non- Hmong speaking visitors could only sit and watch the cultural demonstration. With the museum method of ethnology, as with the textual representations, there is still a sense of looking in at minority culture from the outside, albeit through the lenses of the ethnic Other. If minorities were supposed to have a voice in the representations of their culture during this period, it comes across as a silent one. The paradox of such representations is that in the museum on minorities, minorities are the silent majority.

Ultimately, the process of "cultural preservation" and the emphasis on "ethnic distinctiveness" in the doi moi period has been a selective one. As in the preceding period, it is not the minorities themselves who determine the content of their ethnic "distinctiveness" but the ethnic others, the Vietnamese nation and state, which are essentially Kinh.

Conclusion

More than fifty years after the end of colonial rule, twenty-five years after national reunification, and fifteen years since the start of doi moi, the minority issue remains "complicated" (phuc tap) and "sensitive" (te nhi) in popular discourse and national policy alike. Ethnology's intrinsically political nature explain the fundamental continuities in the discourse on minorities both before and during doi moi. Therein also lies the fundamental limitation of ethnology. In its effort to create a unified and homogenised masterpiece, it has effectively blotted out the minorities themselves, or at least muffled their voices. In the current period, minorities remain somewhat faceless, even unreal entities in official discourse and public knowledge. As with the earlier discourse, it is still the ethnic "outsiders" -- the state and the ethnologists -- who determine the
To its credit, it should be noted that Vietnamese ethnology has made some commendable achievements. It has successfully mapped and placed the various ethnic components into compact 'boxes' or categories, such that each ethnic group has a name, identity and position in the wider culture and nation. It has also made extensive and detailed studies of minority culture and lifestyle. Endeavours in these areas have helped to make sense of and put in order the 'chaotic disarray' that characterises Vietnam's ethno-linguistic landscape. In this manner, other ethnic groups have been brought into existence in official discourse and public knowledge, partly as a measure to fulfil the national ideal of "preserving and promoting ethnic distinctiveness." In the doi moi period, the minorities issue has received much more coverage and attention, both in academia and in official or popular discourse through a much wider range of media. Discussions of their culture and history, the economic and ecologic value of the regions they inhabit, and the persistent socio-economic hardships that they face have been linked by common themes: first, that the minorities have always been an important aspect of the nation's history and development; second, and more importantly, that the Vietnamese people and nation as a whole are united in -- or in spite of -- their diversity. On paper at least, all ethnic groups are equal members of the greater Vietnamese family, whose distinctiveness is valued and celebrated. To this extent, it has succeeded in integrating the ethnic Other with the Vietnamese whole.

In the final analysis, doi moi has brought both the elements of change and the opportunity for change in Vietnamese ethnology. Although many aspects from the earlier discourses persist in the current one, there are also some positive and promising developments, such as greater reflectiveness, the willingness to question and address critical issues, and greater receptiveness towards new approaches among ethnologists. The critical question at hand is what shape the discipline should take, and who it should ultimately represent, the minorities or the state.

Endnotes


[4] In this paper, the term 'highlands' is used to distinguish a particular geography, demography and socio-economic characteristics in relation to the rest of the country. It refers to the mountainous regions in north, north-western and in the plateau region of central Vietnam, which are primarily inhabited by ethnic minority peoples. The term is frequently juxtaposed with 'lowlands,' which refers to the plains and delta regions populated by the ethnic Vietnamese.
(Kinh) and other minority peoples like the Khmer, Cham and Hoa.

[5] During the early decades of the 20th century, the Chinese extensively borrowed Japanese terms to describe new concepts - such as Marxism and the anthropological sciences. It has been estimated that fully half of all modern loanwords in Chinese are of Japanese origin, including the terms for sociology, ethnology and evolution. These terms have in turn been incorporated into the Vietnamese lexicon. Gregory E. Guldin, *The Saga of Anthropology in China - From Malinowski to Mao* (New York: M.E. Sharpe Inc., 1994), pp.23-24.


[7] Dang Nghiem Van, "Relationship between Ethnic Communities (Ethnicities) and Socio-Political Communities (Nations) in History", Ibid., p.62. Toc nguoi is a Vietnamese neologism, whereas *dan toc* is borrowed from Chinese. It is worth pointing out that whilst *quoc gia* is a perfectly good word for 'nation', and can be used by itself, it is not a standard practice among Vietnamese scholars to do so - possibly because it is too closely associated with non-Communist regimes. I would like to thank Dr. Lockhart for pointing this out to me.


[10] Ibid., p.63.

[11] Ibid.,p.82.


[16] Phan Huu Dat, p.582.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.


[24] 'Readily recognisable' and 'easily identifiable' in the sense that most of these heroes are well-known personalities in standard history textbooks, and whose names figure prominently in the physical landscape of Hanoi - i.e. all of these historical figures have major streets named after them. It is worth noting that although the famous anti-French rebel emperor Ham Nghi was betrayed by upland tribesmen, this fact is not mentioned in the exhibition.

[25] Typically, the inscription accompanying the weapon would read as follows: "Cross-bow used by Hoang Dinh Kinh (Tay ethnic group) to fight the French in Lang Son."


[27] Phan Huu Dat, "Qua Trinh Toc Nuoi Va Moi Quan He Dan Toc o Nuoc Ta" [Process of ethnic group formation and ethnic relations in our country], *Mot So Van De*, p.473.

[28] Phan Huu Dat, "May Suy Nghi Ve Viec Giai Quyet Moi Quan He Giua Cac Dan Toc Nuoc Ta Hien Nay" [Some opinions about solving the relations between ethnic groups in our country presently], *Phan Huu Dat*, p.642.

[29] Phan Huu Dat.

[31] Hoang Nam, Buoc Dau Tim Hieu Van Hoa Toc Ngquoi Van Hoa Viet Nam [First steps to understanding ethnic culture, Vietnamese culture], (Ha Noi: NXB Van Hoa Dan Toc, 1998), p.112.

[32] Pham Van Dong, Van Hoa Va Doi Moi Tac Pham Va Binh Luan [Culture and doi moi works and commentaries], (Ha Noi: Bo Van Hoa Thong Tin, Year?), p.38.

[33] Nguyen Duy Quy and Do Huy, Xay Dung Nen Van Hoa Moi o Nuoc Ta Hien Nay [To build a new cultural background in our country presently], (Ha Noi: NXB Van Hoa Dan Toc, 1992), pp.41-42.

[34] Be Viet Dang, 50 Nam, p.191.

[35] Khong Dien, Nhung Dac Diem Kinh Te-Xa Hoi Cac Dan Toc Mien Nui Phia Bac [Socio-economic characteristics of ethnic groups in the northern highlands], (Ha Noi: NXB Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi, 1998), pp.205-106. It is worth noting that, by contrast, the Republic of Vietnam printed bilingual primers in all the minority languages using Vietnamese-based scripts devised with the help of American missionaries.


[37] Le Ba Vinh, "How to achieve combined teaching of the Meo language with Vietnamese," Translations on North Vietnam 908, p.382.

[38] Lo Giang Pao, Tim Hieu Van Hoa, p.25.


[40] Phan Huu Dat, p.6.

[41] Be Viet Dang, Cac Dan Toc, p.245.

[42] Hoang Nam, Buoc Dau Tim Hieu, pp.170-180.

[43] Le Ngoc Thang, "Van Hoa Toc Ngquoi Va Hoat Dong Du Lich" [Ethnic culture and tourism], Dan Toc Hoc 3,111 (2001), pp.16-20. It is worthwhile to point out that the doi moi interest in and attention to 'ethnic culture' is reflected in popular or consumer culture as well. "Ethnic culture" is a prominent feature in public spaces, such as museums, films and television programmes, as well as in commercial art and 'ethnic craft' shops that have been sprouting up in
Hanoi in recent years. These shops specialise in the sale of 'authentic' minority crafts such as traditional clothing, tapestry, accessories, musical instruments etc. Consumers of ethnic culture are not only foreign tourists, but increasingly (young) Vietnamese as well.


[46] Nguyen Van Huy, "How an ethnographic museum can contribute to the preservation and development of ethnic cultures?" Paper presented at the Leadership Conference on Conservancy and Development in Kunming and Lijiang, China, September 12-18. I would like to thank Professor Huy for giving me a copy of this paper.


[49] This event was part of the program entitled "Our Folk Culture" and was held in March, 2001 at the Vietnamese Museum of Ethnology.


[51] Quoted in Jacknis, p.103.