

## VIETNAM'S REGIONAL AND ETHNIC DIVERSITY: STATE EFFORTS TO RECONCILE CULTURAL ASPECTS (\*)

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Vietnam is a united country with many coexisting ethnic groups. Each ethnic group has its unique characteristics, which constitute the richness and diversity of the common culture – the Vietnamese culture. According to ethnological studies, there are at present fifty-four ethnic groups from eight different linguistic groups in Vietnam. Over the past three years, ethnologists have identified three main linguistic families, namely:

1. **The Austro-Asiatic linguistic family** with 74,416,900 people, accounting for 97.50 percent of the population<sup>1</sup> (General Department of Statistics, 2001), comprising forty ethnic groups from five different language groups, namely: Viet-Muong, Mon-Khome, Hmong-Yao, Tay-Thai and Ca Dai;

2. **The Malayo-Polynesian linguistic family** with 832,687 people, accounting for 1.09 percent of the population. This family in Vietnam has only one language group and only five ethnic groups; and

3. **The Sino-Tibetan linguistic family** with 1,032,727 people, accounting for 1.35 percent of the population, comprised of nine ethnic groups from two language groups: Chinese and Tibeto-Burmese.

When considering the population of each ethnic group, a discrepancy becomes apparent. For example, the Viet (Kinh) group

<sup>1</sup> Including both foreign nationals and those ethnically unidentified, Vietnam has 76,323,173 people.

is composed of 65,795,718 people, accounting for 86.2 percent of the population, while there are other groups of some 300 people such as the O-du, Brau, and the Romam, each of these accounting for only 0.004 percent of the population. Maintaining their languages and preserving their traditional cultures present challenges for ethnic groups with very small populations.

Situated in a favorable position, the crossroads of East-West and North-South exchanges of ancient times, Vietnam was the melting pot of many ethnic groups with varied linguistic and cultural characteristics. Some ethnic people are considered to be indigenous; others were migrants from neighboring areas throughout the course of Vietnam's development. Whether indigenous or migrant, all of Vietnam's ethnic groups help preserve the tradition of solidarity, mutual assistance and love contributing to the protection and construction of the country.

From an ethnological and historical viewpoint the "Indochinese Peninsula" and Southern China shared very similar characteristics. Like many other regions in the world, ethnic boundaries and national territorial boundaries do not coincide. In the past, ethnic groups residing on either side of the border were culturally or ethnically connected and their interaction was a natural

(\*) *This article was issued in the Anthropology Review, No. 1 in 2002 in Vietnamese.*

phenomenon. Thus, the notion of indigenous or non-indigenous people is relative.

In general, Vietnam can be divided into two main ecological regions, namely, the plains regions (including urban areas) and the hilly and mountainous regions. Ecologically and culturally, each of these regions is, in turn, composed of different sub-regions. The plains region is divided into three different sub-regions: the Red River Delta, the central coastal plain, and the Mekong Delta. The hilly and mountainous region is divided into three sub-regions, namely, the Northeast, the Northwest-North central and the Truong Son-Central Highlands. Ngo Duc Thinh and his associates in *“Regional Culture and Cultural Regionalization in Vietnam,”* (Ngo Duc Thinh, ed., 1993) and *“Nuances of Local and Ethnic Culture in the National Development Strategy,”* (Phan Huu Dat et al., 1998) divided Vietnam into seven different regions and twenty-five cultural sub-regions. Each of these regions has a distinctive ecological system, affecting the way people relate to the environment. Seemingly irrational and uneven distribution of the population is an age-old issue. This irregular population distribution is common from the North to the South, both in the delta and the inland plain, the urban and rural areas, as well as in the plains regions and the mountainous regions. The plains areas account for roughly one-fourth of the territory but are inhabited by up to three-fourths of the population. In contrast, the mountainous regions and the highlands, which account for three-fourths of the territory, are inhabited by only about one-fourth of the country’s population.

In the old days, the Viet (Kinh) ethnic group resided mainly in the coastal plains. Over the past half century, a significant portion of the Viet group has moved to the mountainous region. Before the August Revolution of 1945, the Northern mountainous region (composed of Lai Chau, Son La, Hoa Binh, Lao Cai, Yen Bai, Ha Giang, Tuyen Quang, Bac Kan, Thai Nguyen, Cao Bang, Lang Son and Quang Ninh) was regarded as a “region of green forests and red mountains” or “region of the haunted and poisonous water”. This region used to be inhabited mainly by the ethnic groups speaking Tay-Thai, Hmong-Yao, Ca Dai, Tibeto-Burmese and Northern Mon-Khome languages. The area is now inhabited by more than thirty ethnic groups, of which the Viet people account for more than 40 percent of the population. A few decades ago, the average population density was 10 people/km<sup>2</sup>; a sharp contrast with the current 90 people/km<sup>2</sup>. The Central Highlands (Kon Tum, Gia Lai, Dak Lak, and Lam Dong) used to be inhabited by ethnic groups such as the Gia-rai, E-de, Ba-na, Xo-dang, Co-ho, Mnong, Ma, and the Chu-ru and is now inhabited by more than forty ethnic groups, of which the Viet group accounts for approximately 70 percent of the region’s total population.

The Tay-Thai linguistic group chiefly resides in the Northern Mountains. Traditionally, the Red River is considered the border between two ethnic regions: the right side or the Northwest region of the Thai and Northern Mon-Khome groups and the left side or the Northeast region of the Tay-Nung subgroup, comprised of the Tay, Nung, San

Chay, Bo Y, and the Hoa people groups (Hoa) (Khong Dien, 1995).

While the Hmong-Yao linguistic group mainly resides in the midlands and highlands of mountainous provinces north of Nghe An province, the Tibeto-Burmese linguistic group traditionally resides along the border between Vietnam and China.

Except the Khome, who reside mainly in the Mekong Delta, other ethnic groups among the Mon-Khome are scattered along the western strip of the country from Lai Chau to Binh Phuoc provinces.

The Malayo-Polynesian group, with characteristics dating back to matriarchal times, resides between the two Mon-Khome linguistic subgroups in the northern and southern central highlands in Gia Lai, Dak Lak, and Lam Dong provinces and in the western parts of the central coastal provinces such as Binh Dinh, Phu Yen, Khanh Hoa, Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan.

The Hoa people reside in almost all provinces and cities throughout the country. In Southern provinces, the Hoa people concentrate in cities and make a living from trade, while in Northern provinces, the majority live on agriculture and handicrafts just like their neighboring ethnic groups.

Since 1954 when the country was divided into two parts, Vietnam has undergone a tremendous upheaval in the distribution of ethnic groups. In addition to the movement of the Viet people, some ethnic groups, such as the Hoa people, Nung, Tay, Thai, and Muong, who previously resided in the Northern mountainous provinces, have started moving to the South

and to the Central Highlands. On the contrary, since 1954 some indigenous ethnic groups in the Central Coastal provinces were relocated to the North. A significant number of them moved to mountainous regions where they settled. After reunification in 1975, the majority of them returned to the South, but a large number still remain in the North.

Over the past decade or two, many individuals and families from ethnic groups in the north have, either of their free will or because of planned government relocation strategy, migrated to the Southern provinces, mostly to the Central Highlands and the Southeast. The panorama of ethnic distribution in the country has changed profoundly. The practice of different ethnic groups residing in the same commune is quite common now in the mountainous regions. However, based on economic, cultural and social specifications, we can still distinguish, although relatively, the traditional residential territory of one ethnic group from that of another.

Thus, in Vietnam, except the Viet, Hoa people, and Khome who reside in the plains and in the cities, the majority of the ethnic groups reside in hilly and mountainous regions. Due to varying natural conditions and environments they have different ways of life, ways of exploiting natural resources, and responding to nature.

On the plains, people have long known how to build dikes to prevent floods. In the South, almost every neighborhood digs their own ditches and very high-density canals to fight both drought and floods. People residing along the coastline have long known how to plant forests in submerged

and seaside zones to counter the detrimental effects of strong tides, waver, typhoons, and siltation. First, a dike was built to reclaim the sea. Next, canals and ditches were dug to desalinate the reclaimed land in preparation for subsequent cultivation. Nowadays, in the plains and hilly (even mountainous) regions, bamboo hedges enclose villages. Bamboo hedges serve not only as fortification to counter invaders, not only to prevent robbers and wild animals as in the past but also as solid fronts to resist storms, typhoons, and tornadoes resulting from the fierce tropical seasonal climate.

In general, people of every ethnic group construct their houses according to the orientation of their piece of land. Whether in the lowlands or highlands, houses never allow the direction of the flow of water from streams, the alignment of the strips of fields or the direction of alleys point straight to the main door. Contiguous houses in the same village do not allow the roof beam of one house to aim straight at the main door of another house. This custom is practiced to avoid spells of “bad” wind or drafts. Nevertheless, when constructing a house, the direction it should face depends on the customs and traditions of each clan, family, and the age of the owner of the planned house.

People from Tibeto-Burmese, Ca Dai, Mon-Khome or Hmong-Yao ethnic groups usually reside in the highlands, near the border. Perhaps their previously nomadic way of life and farming necessitated that their houses were not very solid and strong. Meanwhile, ethnic groups accustomed to

fixed residence and settled agriculture, such as the Tay, Nung, Thai, and Muong, usually have solid and strong houses. Based on the customs of each ethnic group, some live in houses on stilts whereas some live in houses on the ground and even variations that are combinations of these two exist within the same linguistic group. For example, while the Viet people live in houses on the ground, the traditional houses of the Muong, Tho and Chut are house on stilts. The majority of the ethnic groups in mountainous regions still live in stilted houses, except the Hmong-Yao group in some places of the Nung, and some groups in the Tibeto-Burmese group who previously lived in houses on the ground. Due to changes in the environment, the current trend is to gradually change from houses on stilts to houses on the ground. Some groups which are in a transitional period still retain a small house on stilts with two or three compartments next to a decent house on the ground. Most of the family activities, especially those of the elders are still conducted in this small house on stilts.

Different views explain why ethnic people in the mountainous region live in houses on stilts. A recent view holds that a traditional house on stilts with people living upstairs and domestic animals such as pigs, chickens, buffaloes kept downstairs, helps keep away malaria-carrying mosquitoes. Our view is that people built houses on stilts, first and foremost, to adjust to the differences in height of the mountainous topography. On sloping ground, stilts of different heights make a floor level. In some places, the ground can be relatively level, but since they are usually in valleys, at the foot of the

mountain or near rivers or streams, forest rains bring partial floods which cause difficulty and damages for people living in houses on the ground. Besides, houses on stilts can keep away insects, reptiles, and wild animals. Keeping domestic animals under the floor mostly protects them from wild animals and robbers.

Ethnic groups such as the Hmong or Yao, although living at relatively high or high altitudes, usually look for level ground to build houses and set up villages. Sometimes a village has only a dozen houses, which are usually made from earth to resist cold winter winds, especially at an altitude from 800m and above. The roof of the house is usually very low, close to the ground and may seem dark, yet is cool in the summer and warm in the winter.

In every house in the mountainous region, especially in houses on stilts, there are two fires, one for cooking and one for heating. Because of draughts, on cold winter nights people need fire to heat the whole house. In some places, people believe that the fire and smoke can drive out flies and mosquitoes, resist worms, and ensure people's health.

Ethnic people who reside close to the Vietnam-Chinese border in the Northeast used to be faced with attacks by bandits. Therefore, they would live in earthen houses with thick walls like a fortress, and the village was set up for defense. Ethnic groups such as the Bru-Van kieu, Ta-oi, Co-tu or Gie-Trieng settled in the Truong Son range and in Quang Binh, Quang Tri, Thua Thien – Hue, and Quang Nam provinces. Since the

area used to be thickly forested with many fierce wild animals and headhunters, or blood hunters, people also built villages for defense purposes, in which the central communal house was surrounded by individual houses. The whole village was enclosed with heavy, solid fences. Houses were built close to one another and each village had only two entrances (one main and one auxiliary) which were heavily guarded. Among other ethnic groups, like the E-de and Mnong, many families lived together in one long house. Some villages consisted of two or three long houses.

Eating habits and clothing styles of ethnic groups in the mountains also vary, depending on natural conditions and the local flora and fauna. In Vietnam, however, the staple food is rice. In hilly and barren regions, people may have only manioc for their meals and in the uplands people have maize as their staple food. People residing in the Western side of the country used to eat glutinous rice or steamed food and have sauces in their meals. They seldom had soup. Wine is a popular drink in mountainous regions where the climate is colder than in the lowlands. Besides wine the Yao people have *ruou hoang*, a kind of rice wine like that in the lowlands. Other ethnic groups like the Muong and Tay-Thai in the Western part of the country, or the Mon-Khome and Malayo-Polynesian, from the Northeast to the Central Highlands have "straw wine". Ethnic people from the Mon-Khome group living North of the Truong Son range, such as the Co-tu, Ta-oi have a special kind of wine extracted from a type of coco-palm tree.

Clothing varies from one ethnic group to another. Favorite colors of many ethnic groups are gray and green colors - the colors of the mountains and forests. Each ethnic group and neighborhood has their own way of tailoring, ornamenting, and dressing up, but in general, they are usually comfortably dressed for easy movement in the mountainous regions. The styles are usually short-sleeve or body-hugging shirts, short skirts or pants, long pants with a loose seat or a long loose dress, which are convenient when climbing slopes or passes.

In rural plain areas or even in towns and cities, the Viet people prefer long flexible bamboo shoulder poles to transport goods conveniently, which is not suitable in the mountains. Ethnic people living in the Northeast transport items with very short basket-holders, not with long ones. Sometimes, they even carry the baskets without basket-holders by putting the pole through the handles of baskets. When carrying ripe rice, they use a ridged pole with two pointed ends. The Tibeto-Burmese, Hmong and ethnic groups living in the western part of the country, from north to south, carry baskets on their backs. The Cham people and some of the Viet people (who live in wetlands or lowland areas) usually carry things on their heads. In places close to big rivers or streams people transport materials on rafts or boats, of which the shallow-tail boat and the pirogue are quite popular since they are small and can ride the waterfalls. In mountainous regions, horses carry both goods and people. Horses adapt easily to trails and they do not require much investment.

Economically, ethnic groups, whether living in the highlands or lowlands, in the plains or in the mountains, mainly cultivate rice. Since the mountainous environments are diverse, natural resources used to be rich and plentiful. In the olden days, besides cultivating crops and raising livestock, hunting and collecting forest products were very popular. For the Viet people in the hilly regions, an economy based on hunting and gathering food are evident only in cultural relics manifested in games played on festive occasions (Khong Dien, 1975). However, for other ethnic groups like the La Hu, Cong, Si La, and Mang in the Northwest or the Chut in the Western part of Quang Binh, and Ha Tinh provinces, before 1954, hunting and collecting food was still considered an essential part of their economy. When hunting, the Ha Nhi people usually organize a collective hunt, while the La Hu or Hmong people prefer hunting individually. Ethnic people residing in the Truong Son range, such as the Ta-oi, Co-tu, Gie-Trieng, and the Xo-dang, usually uses traps and hidden spikes.

In addition to hunting and collecting food, most ethnic groups, especially those living in the midland or at high altitudes, practice slash-and-burn agriculture. In comparison to wet rice cultivation, slash-and-burn agriculture is highly efficient, economical, and saves on labor and money spent on fertilizer and irrigation. Although this farming method destroys the environment and forests-given an acceptable population density and the rotation of this farming method, whereby

after two or three years of farming the land is left unused for ten or fifteen years - the tropical flora can revive and soil fertility is still guaranteed. Moreover, when burning forests to clear the land for cultivation, people have learned from experience where to set fires and how to avoid forest fires and land erosion. This is an art passed on from one ethnic group or one region to another and from one generation to the next (Hoang Huu Binh, 1998).

As already mentioned, connected to the farming methods on sloping topography are forests which are forbidden, haunted, or holy. Actually, they are primarily forests from which local inhabitants collect water for farming and daily life. In such forests, there are temples and legends about "holiness" and "responsiveness," taboos and restraints are taken seriously and people observe them of their own accord (Khong Dien, 1996).

Slash-and-burn agriculture, however, can only continue and develop in conditions of acceptable population density, which according to some, is 5-10 persons/km<sup>2</sup>. Beyond that limit, the slash-and-burn agriculture brings difficulties, and farmers would inadvertently harm the environment. The present population density in the highlands of Northern Vietnam has reached 90 persons/km<sup>2</sup> which surpasses tenfold the allowed limit of 10 persons/km<sup>2</sup>. Obviously that is excessive overloading, although one should take into consideration the fertility of the land areas concerned. Talking again about the relationship between population and environment, the latter is bound to suffer from rapid degradation with rapid population

growth. In 1943, for instance, Vietnam had 14.3 million of hectares of forest land, accounting for 43 percent of total natural land area, but in 1993, or half a century later, there only remained about 9 million hectares of forests, accounting for 28 percent of the total natural land area. In recent years, we have had a fairly developed reforestation movement, but that cannot make up for the lost forest areas and the resources therein. Further, planted forests only involve a few specific tree types, lack diversify and provide only low vegetation cover.

Only the inhabitants of the lowlands and valleys at the foot of mountains, as in the case of Tay, Nung, Thai, Muong, E-de, Muong, and Co-ho ethnic groups, are engaged in wet rice cultivation. But the inhabitants of the midlands, such as the Yao, San Chay, Tho, Hre ethnic groups, and some sub-groups of the Hmong are adept in turning flat lands and hilly land into paddy fields, including terraced paddy fields.

While the Kinh (Viet) in the coastal plains were able to construct a system of dikes, canals and ditches to cope with floods and water logging, to regulate irrigation and water drainage and to desalinize coastal land, in the highlands and valleys the minority ethnic groups (particularly the Thai, Muong, Tay, and Hre) were able to invent a viable system of canals, ditches and irrigation water wheels.

Being aware of the negative impact of rapid population growth on socioeconomic development, the Vietnamese government formulated a family planning policy as early as forty years ago. But this policy was not

strictly enforced among ethnic groups living in the highlands, and for a period of time population growth was even encouraged there (see Government Decision No. 94-CP dated May 1970). Consequently, the natural population growth rate of a number of ethnic groups was very high. For example, during the 1989-1999 periods, the natural population growth rate was 3.3 percent for the Hmong 3.5 percent for the Si La ethnic, 4.1 percent for the Pa Then ethnic, 5 percent for the Xinh-mun, as compared to the average nationwide growth rate of 1.7 percent and the 1.6 percent rate for the Kinh (Viet). “Mechanical” population growth resulted from free migration, which went on in parallel with planned migration, to the central highlands, the coastal highlands of Central Vietnam and the Eastern part of Southern Vietnam, creating a headache for local authorities.

Free migration of highlands minority ethnic groups from one mountain to another continues, which is not an effect of the urbanization process on their lives. The destinations of such migrations are hilly areas that may still have available forest land or nearby forests, in which slash-and-burn agriculture can be practiced. The continual shifting of villages to new, distant and strange abodes, while people still practice the old pattern of cultivation, makes it difficult to apply and develop the indigenous knowledge of each ethnic group and to pass it on to the next generations as was done by the ancestors for millennia. Further, as the ethnic groups now live closer to each other and particularly in the case of ethnic groups with small populations living in contiguity

with ethnic groups that have a much bigger population, there are more opportunities for ethnic groups to come into contact with and learn from one another. However, it makes it difficult to preserve and develop the cultural traditions of the ethnic groups concerned and may easily lead to assimilation.

In addition to physical diversity in culture, ethnic groups in Vietnam also have rich nonmaterial assets, such as customs and mores, family relations, birth and education of children, weddings, funerals, festivals, music, songs and dances, religions and religious beliefs. According to the 1999 population census, Vietnam has, on a nationwide basis 14,718,917 inhabitants who profess a religion, thus accounting for 19.3 percent of the total population. The percentage breakdown is Buddhist (48.3 percent), Catholic (34.7 percent), Hoa Hao (8 percent), Cao Dai (5.8 percent), Protestant (2.8 percent), Islamic (4.0 percent).

Religious followers are mainly concentrated in the eastern part of Southern Vietnam (33.4 percent) and in the Mekong River Delta (36 percent) which account for 2/3 of the total religious population of the country. In general, there is a great disparity in terms of religious distribution throughout the eight geographical areas of the country: most Buddhist followers (44 percent) and Hoa Hao followers (99.9 percent) live in the Mekong River Delta, while the followers of the four remaining religions are concentrated mainly in the Eastern part of Southern Vietnam. In the Red River Delta and the Northern part of Central Vietnam, Catholics account for a relatively high ratio (18 percent and 12 percent respectively). The

religious followers account for an insignificant ratio in the remaining four geographical areas (General Department of Statistics, 2001). It is impossible, in the scope of this paper, to make an exhaustive presentation of these issues, but it would be at least necessary to say a few words about the languages and scripts.

**Languages.** The language community is the least affected by polarization (Tsebocrasov, 1967). Language does not merely act as a vehicle for contacts and transactions, but is a means for developing the most important configurations in the cultural and spiritual life of an ethnic group. Only the native language mastered from childhood can make it possible for the inhabitants to understand the most subtle nuances and shades of spiritual life, and for the members of the same linguistic family to understand each other adequately. It is no accident that in the majority of cases, the names of the ethnic groups reflect their native languages (Kozlov, 1977).

All fifty-four ethnic groups of Vietnam have their own languages. But some of them are no longer in use, as in the case of the language of the O-du ethnic group. Each ethnicity also has its local subgroups whose languages in some cases have their own nuances and shades, thus giving rise to quite a rich picture. Thus, Vietnam has probably over 100 different languages and dialects.

**Scripts.** The written languages are also quite diverse. While some ethnic groups have had their own script since ancient times, most groups have no script or have

just acquired a new Romanized script. This is reflected in the following list.

1. Ethnic groups that have had script since ancient times: Thai, Lao, Hoa people, Cham, and Khome.

2. Ethnic groups having a demotic script which is of Chinese origin: Tay, Nung, Giay, San Chay, San Diu, Ngai, Lo Lo, Muong, Tho, and Yao.

3. Ethnic groups having Romanized scripts are: Hmong, Bru-Van Kieu, Ta-oi, Co-tu, Gie-Trieng, Co, Xo-dang, Hre, Ba-na, Gia-rai, Mnong, Chu-ru, Rag-lai, Co-ho, Ma, Xtieng, and Cho-ro.

4. Groups that do not have written script: Pa Then, Phu La, La Hu, Cong, Si La, Ha Nhi, La Chi, La Ha, Co Lao, Pu Peo, Lu, Bo Y, Kho-mu, Khang, Mang, Xinh-mun, O-du, Brau, Ro-mam and Chut.

Vietnam's highland environment is quite rich and diversified but is also very fragile. Highland ethnic groups have a rich life, in the economic, social and cultural senses. However, rapid population growth, depletion of natural resources, and degradation of the environment, the negative aspects of national industrialization and modernization and of the market economy, have exerted serious pressure on them. The natural conditions and the social basis that gave rise to indigenous knowledge and ethnic knowledge have now undergone changes. Thus, the decision of what to do in order to preserve the file of ancient values while coping with the rapid changes taking place constantly in their lives is not an easy one.

From its very inception, the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) has paid much attention to the question of nationalities and the cultural heritage of ethnic groups living in Vietnam. It has regarded the formulation of policies on nationalities and their effective implementation as a strategic task of Vietnam's revolution. From 1945, when the country won its independence, for over a half a century now, in addition to the Constitution (which has been amended at various stages) and the system of enacted laws which have dealt with the diversity-related issues of nationalities and culture, the CPV and Government of Vietnam have adopted hundreds of resolutions and decisions about the economic, social and cultural aspects of the highland ethnic groups. In particular, since reform was initiated and implemented by the CPV, specific policies have been worked out in this respect. The Resolution of the Sixth Congress, which started the reform process said: "We must carry out research in order to grasp the specific differences among various regions and nationalities, and on that basis, amend, specify, and implement more efficiently the policy on nationalities, avoid mistakes, stereotypes or imposition of organizational forms that are not appropriate in the process of economic, social and cultural construction, and development in areas inhabited by various ethnic groups".

Thereafter, in the course of reform, a resolution of most important strategic significance with respect to minority and highland ethnic groups was Resolution No. 22-NQ/TW, dated 27 November 1989, of the

CPV Politburo, entitled "A number of major policies on socio-economic development in the highlands". The Resolution reviewed what was done in the past, and pointed out, without mincing words; the shortcomings and mistakes committed in terms of policy, and made a comprehensive approach on all issues facing the highland ethnic groups.

In the economic field, Resolution No. 22 states: "We must readjust the relations of production in the highlands so that they would be in keeping with the nature and level of productive forces, genuinely respect the right of self-determination of the people in selecting the appropriate economic forms and management mechanisms, taking efficiency as the foremost criteria, avoiding by all means formal and mechanical approaches, imposition and stereotypes... We should develop the economic structure of the highland areas along the line of a commodity economy... With respect to areas where a very high population density and shortage of cultivatable land has caused the people to express the desire to move to another place for better living conditions, the Government should voluntary migration and the migrants would be given a policy treatment similar to those engaged in the construction of new economic zones".

With respect to health, culture, arts, and scripts, that Resolution also said: "We must adopt a preferential treatment policy toward the minority ethnic groups in the supply of essential goods, water, lamp oil, medicine, paper and exercise books for school children, cultural and arts services... We must create favorable conditions for

ethnic groups to learn their own scripts successfully”.

The provision dealing with the scripts of the ethnic groups in the above resolution was a continuation of the previous decrees and decisions, such as Decree No. 206/CP dated 27 November 1961, of the Government on approval of the Scripts for the Tay, Nung, Meo (now called Hmong), and Thai ethnic groups; Decree No. 153-CP, dated 20 August 1969, of the government on working out, improving and using the scripts of the ethnic groups said: “The language and scripts of each ethnic group in Vietnam is a valuable asset of the specific ethnic groups concerned and also a part of the cultural assets of the whole country. In the areas inhabited by the minority ethnic groups, their languages and scripts should be used in parallel with the Vietnamese language and script” (The National Assembly Council for Ethnic Affairs, 2000). Of course, the task involves many difficulties ranging from working out the scripts, teaching them, and disseminating them among the people, all of which the social scientists, educators and cultural officials must overcome. It must be admitted that so far they have not been able to meet the requirements of the CPV, the government, and the people from a number of ethnic groups.

Over three months after the adoption of Resolution No. 22 by the CPV Politburo, the government of Vietnam issued Decision No. 72/HDBT, dated 13 March 1990, which states, “A number of specific policies with respect to socioeconomic development in the highlands areas,” which was designed to materialize Resolution No. 22 and to carry

out socioeconomic reform in the highland areas and move vigorously toward a commodity economy.

From 1990, the National Assembly of Vietnam has adopted and enacted a number of laws with respect to the minority ethnic groups and their ethnic culture, such as the Land Law 11, and the Education Law 12 enacted in December 1998, and the Law on Marriage and Family 13 adopted on 9 June 2000. Of these, the Education Law deals substantially with policies designed to enhance the people’s knowledge and to preserve the cultural heritage of the ethnic groups. Some of these provisions are as follows:

**Article 5.** “The State creates the conditions which make it possible for the minority ethnic groups to learn their own languages and scripts. The teaching and learning of these languages and scripts will be carried out in accordance with Government regulations”.

**Article 9.** “The State creates the conditions, on a priority basis, for children of minority ethnic groups, children of families affected by especially difficult socio-economic conditions, children of families that are recipients of preferential treatment policies, handicapped persons, and recipients of other social welfare policies to implement their rights and obligations to study”.

**Article 55.** “The State will establish ethnic secondary boarding schools, ethnic secondary semi-boarding schools, and college preparatory schools for ethnic minority children destined for higher

education. Children of families residing in areas affected by especially difficult socioeconomic conditions on a long term basis with a view to training officials for these areas. The above ethnic secondary boarding schools and semi boarding schools and ethnic preparatory schools for higher education is given priority in terms of teachers, technical basis, equipment, and budget.”

At present, the highland areas have a number of higher education establishments: the Thai Nguyen University which serves the Northeast region and comprises the Teachers Training College, the Medical College, and the Agricultural College; the Central Highlands University located in Buon Ma Thuot province; the newly set up Northwestern Region University located in Son La province, two preparatory schools for higher education (one in Northern and one in Southern Vietnam); and a system of ethnic boarding and semi-boarding schools which exist not only at a regional level but also in all highland provinces and districts, and even in some highland communes. In many such schools, children wear their traditional costumes, and many folk songs, dances, and games have been revived and popularized. In some of these schools, some elements of indigenous knowledge and ethnic culture have been selected and incorporated into the curriculum.

With respect to the cultural policy applied since 1990, mention must be made of Resolution No. 05 NQ-TW, dated 16 July 1998, of the fifth Plenum of the CPV CC (Eight Congress) on “Building and developing a culture marked by national

identity in Vietnam”. This is a resolution dealing specifically with culture and, therefore, it approaches the tasks and solutions both theoretically and concretely, in a comprehensive manner and on a long-term basis. For example, Resolution No. 05 points out:

“Over 50 ethnic groups living on Vietnam’s territory have their own cultural values and nuances, which are mutually complementary, which enrich Vietnam’s culture, strengthen its national unity and constitute the basis for sustaining equality and developing the cultural diversity of all its fraternal nationalities.”

“Cultural heritage is a most valuable asset that provides cohesion for the national community, is the core of our national identity and the basis for creating new values and promoting acculturation. We must attach utmost importance to the preservation, inheritance and development of traditional cultural values (academic and folk culture) and revolutionary culture, both physical and nonphysical.”

“The policy of preserving and developing the national cultural heritage involves both physical and nonphysical assets. We must at an early date take inventory, investigate, and revise traditional cultural assets (both academic and folk culture) of the Kinh (Viet) and the minority ethnic groups and translate and introduce to the public the assets of Sinicized Vietnamese culture. We must preserve the monuments and places of historical and cultural interest, scenic spots, traditional trades and villages engaged in such trades. We must give high

regard and due treatment to master artisans in various traditional trades” (Resolution No. 05 NQ-TW dated 16 July, 1998 of the 5<sup>th</sup> Plenum of the CPV CC (VIII<sup>th</sup> Congress).

For twenty to thirty years now, there have been vigorous efforts in Vietnam to preserve cultural relics in general, and to revive, inherit, and enhance national and local cultural values. The Resolution of the fifth CC plenum has breathed a new life into these efforts, and many programs and projects have been implemented in various provinces to investigate and preserve the national cultural relics, both physical and nonphysical. While the areas of the Kinh (Viet) ethnic group have a movement to work out village rules, the areas where minority ethnic groups dwell also have a movement to work out conventions, for villages and communes, based on customs and customary laws and taking into account problems that have been and are cropping up due to changes in the natural and social environment. Some conventions call for the restoration of national costumes, at least on festival days, or lay down methods of organizing local festivals with due continuation of ancestral traditions. In recent years, at the level of ethnic groups, provinces and regions, and also at the national level, many sporting contests, literature and arts performances, contests relating to costumes and food, displays of calligraphy and family clan archives, displays of handicrafts and handcrafted artwork, and displays of trade villages have been held with a view to preserving and developing cultural relics and treasures of

various ethnic groups. In addition to the central Voice of Vietnam radio, many provincial radio stations have broadcasts in the languages of ethnic groups that account for the majority of the population in the concerned provinces. Many publishing houses, at the central and provincial levels, have disseminated many scientific and cultural works written in the languages of certain minority ethnic groups or in two languages: Vietnamese and the language of the concerned minority group.

In view of the present situation and the impetus given by the Resolution of the Ninth CPV Congress which comprehensively approaches the question of national culture and ethnic cultures (The Communist Party of Vietnam, 2001), we are confident that Vietnam will remain forever a country with a rich culture that is both united and diverse.

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**Red Yao Women in Cho Don District, Bac Kan Province**

*Photo: Nguyen T. Thanh Huyen*