

Vietnam

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Profile of Vietnam

Vietnam (Việt Nam in Vietnamese) is officially called the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. It is a one-party communist state with an estimated population of 83.6 million (UN figures, 2005).

The border countries of Cambodia, China and Laos all played a part in the -political-making of modern Vietnam. Nowadays, Vietnam still exerts a strong influence on the decision-making in neighbouring Laos!

As a South-east Asian country, it is one of the fastest growing economies and its government has pledged to become a developed nation by 2020 by implementing economic reforms and fighting corruption. However, in terms of freedom of speech and human rights, the development is much less significant as the Communist Party continues acting as censor and controls the press, broadcasting and the Internet through its Ministry of Culture.

As a result, Cyber dissidents have been imprisoned and some publications shut down.

In terms of ethnic minorities ¹, the Kinh, also known as Viet, account for 87% of the population ² and preside politically and economically over 54 ethnic groups.

As the Kinh have settled in the deltas and coastal plains, the other minorities –apart from the Khmer Crom and Hoa- mostly established themselves in the highlands covering two-thirds of the Vietnamese territory.

Vietnamese authorities have been criticized for their ongoing religious and political persecution of Montagnards (i.e. Montagnard Christians).

In a report dated from June 2006, Human Rights Watch, an organization dedicated to defending human rights worldwide, condemned the Vietnamese government's persisting persecution of Montagnards and pleaded with Cambodia "to continue to provide temporary asylum to Montagnards" ³.

Ethnic Hmong Christians from the Northwest of Vietnam and Hre Christians from the north-eastern province of Quang Ngai have also suffered repression, detention and pressure by local authorities "to renounce their religion and cease religious gatherings". In February/March 2005, a certain number of Hmong Christians took refuge into bordering China, Laos and also Myanmar in order to flee "religious repression and a heightened military presence in Lai Chau province."

On July 12, 2006, Human Rights Watch sent an open letter to the newly selected Prime Minister, Nguyen Tan Dung, to encourage his government to set priority on improving "its promotion and protection of human rights".

1 The Vietnamese government only recognize 54 "national minorities"

2 Note that the latest national census dates back from 1999. Since then, only the UN and other organisations have provided reliable population statistics.

3 Montagnards is the name given to the indigenous communities in Vietnam's Central Highlands region. Montagnards is a French term meaning 'People from the Mountains' or 'Mountaineers').

Ethnic Groups in Vietnam

Introduction

The Vietnamese government recognize 54 ethnic groups.

The Shan are an ethnic group not officially recognized as a “national minority”.

The Viet, also called Kinh, totals approximately 87% of the country’s population (i.e. 65.8 million people).

The remaining 53 ethnic groups account for an estimated eight to ten million people (depending on which statistics the count is based on!), and mainly inhabit the mountainous areas.

Eight Language Groups

The Vietnamese authorities classify the 54 different “national minorities” into eight language groups:

- The Viet-Muong Group includes the Chut, Kinh, Muong and Tho
- The Tay-Thai Group includes the Bo Y, Giay, Lao, Lu, Nung, San Chay, Tay and Thai
- The Mon-Khmer Group includes the Ba Na, Brau, Bru-Van Kieu, Cho Ro, Co, Co Ho, Co Tu, Gie Trieng, Hre, Khang, Khmer, Kho Mu, Ma, Mang, M’ong, O Du, Ro Mam, Ta Oi, Xinh Mun, Xo Dang and Xtieng
- The Mong-Dao Group includes the Dao, Mong and Pa Then
- The Kadai Group includes the Co Lao, La Chi, La Ha and Pu Peo
- The Nam Dao Group (Malayo-Polynesian languages) includes the Cham, Chu Ru, Ede, Gia Rai and Raglai
- The Han Group includes the Hoa, Ngai and San Diu
- The Tang Group (Tibeto-Burman languages) includes the Cong, Ha Nhi, La Hu, Lo Lo, Phu La and Si La.

A Wealth of Minorities and Multiple Names!

Please note that the same minority tends to have many different names, hence Tay also being called *Tho*, *Ngan*, *Phen*, *Thu Lao* or *Pa Di*. A bit confusing for the novice!

Among the official ethnic minorities, the ones that count ⁴ more than an estimated one million in population are the following ones:

- Tay (other names: Tho, Ngan, Phen, Thu Lao, and Pa Di; the largest minority in

⁴ The figures come from the 1999 census

Vietnam with 1,477,514 people)

- The Khmer (Khmer Krom, Viet of Mien origin; 1,055,174 people)
- The Thai (Tay, Tay Dam, Tay Khao, Tay Muoi, Tai Thanh, Hang Tona and Pu Thay; 1,328,725 people).

Ethnic groups with an estimated population of between 100,000 to 1,000,000 people are the following ones:

- Ba Na (other names: To Lo, Krem, Con Kde, Ala Cong and Krang) with a population of 174,456 people
- Cham (Cham, Chiem Thanh and Hroi) count 132,873 people
- Co Ho (Xre, Nop, Co Lon, Chil, Lat and Tring) with a population of 128,723
- Dao (Zao, Diu Mien, Lim Mien, Liu Giang, Lan Ten) sub- grouped as the Dao Quan Trang (Dao with White Trousers), Dao Quan Chet (Dao with Tight Trousers), Dao



- E De (Ede, Rade, De, Kpa Adham, Krung, Ktul, Dlie Rue, Bio, Epan, Mdhur and Bich) with a population of 270,348
- Hre (Cham Re, Chom Kre and Luy) with 113,111 people
- Mong (H'mong) subdivided as the Mong Do (White Mong), Mo Lenh (Variety Mong), Mong Si (Red Mong), Mong Du (Black Mong) and Mong Sua (Man Mong)



- Muong (Moi, Mual, Moi, Moi Bi, Au Ta and Ao Ta) with 1,137,515 people
- Hoa (Han) with 862,371 people
- Nung (Xuong, Giang, Nung An, Nung Coi, Phan Sinh, Nung Chao, Nung Inh, Qui Rin, Nung Din, and Khen Lai) with 856,412 people
- San Chay (Cao Lan, San Chi, Man Cao Lan and Hon Ban) with 147,315 people
- San Diu (San Deo, Trai, Trai Dat, and Man Quang Coc ['Man in Shorts']) with 126,237 individuals
- Xo Dang (Xe Dang, Ca Dong, To Dra, Ha Lang, Mo Nam, Ta Tri, Ka Rang, Bri La Teng, and Con Lan) with a population of 127,148.

Finally, among the ethnic groups with an estimated population of less than 100,000 we can find the following ones:

- Bo Y (other names: Chung Cha, Trong Gia, Tu Di, Tu Din and Pu Na) with 1,864 people
- Brau (Brao) with a population of 313 people
- Bru-Van Kieu (Tri, Khua, and Ma-Coong) with 55,559 people
- Cho Ro (Do Ro, Chau Ro) with a population of 22,567 people
- Chu Ru (Cho Ru and Ru) counting 14,978 individuals
- Chut (Ruc, Sach, Arem, May, Ma Lieng, Tu Vang, Pa Leng, Xe Lang, To Hung, Cha Cu, Tac Cuc, Ymo, and Xa La Vang) with a population of 3,829
- Co (Cor, Col, Cua and Trau) with 27,766 people
- Cong (Xam Khong, Mang Nhe, and Xa Xeng) with a population of 1,676

- Co Lao (Ke Lao) counting 1,865 people
- Co Tu (Gao, Ha, Phuong and Ca Tang) with 50,458 people
- Giay (Nhang, Dang, Pau Thin, Pu Na, Cui Chu and Xa) with a population of 49,098
- Gia Rai (Jiarai, Gio Rai, To Buan, Hobau, Hdrung and Chor) are based mainly in Vietnam's Central Highlands with a population of 317,557
- Gie Trieng (Dgich, Tareh, Giang Ray, Pin, Trieng, Treng Ta Lieng, Ve, La Ve, and Bnoong) counting 30,243 people
- Ha Nhi (U Ni and Xa U Ni) with a population of 17,535
- Khang (Xa Khao, Xa Xua, Xa Don, Xa Dang, Xa Hoc, Xa Ai, Xa Bun and Quang Lam) with a population of 10,272
- Kho Mu (Xa Cau, Mun Xen, Pu Thenh, Tenh, and Tay Hay) with 56,542 people
- La Chi (Cu Te and La Qua) counting 10,765 individuals
- La Ha (Phlao, Xa Khan and Khla) with 5,686 people
- La Hu (Xa La Vang, Co Rung, Khu Sung, and Kha Quy) with a population of 6,874
- Lao (Lao Boc and Lao Noi) with 11,611 people
- Lolo (Mun Di, Lo Lo, and Lo Lo Den) counting 3,307 individuals
- Lu (Nhuon and Duon) with a population of 4,964
- Ma (Chau Ma, Ma Xop, Ma To, Ma Krung, and Ma Ngan) with a population 33,338
- Mang (Mang U and Xa La Vang) with 2,663 people
- M'Nong (Bru Dang, Preh, Ger, Nong, Prang, Pjam, Kuyenh, Chil Bu Nor, and M'Nong Bu Dang) with 92,451 people
- Ngai (Ngai Hac Ca, Lau Man, He, Sin, Dan, and Le) with a population of 4,841
- O Du (Tay Hat) with 301 people according to the census of 1999!
- Pa Thien (Pa Hung and Tong) with 5,569 individuals
- Phu La (Xa Pho, Bo Kho Pa, Mu Di Pa, Pho, Va Xo, and La Dun Dang) with a population of 9,046
- Pu Peo (Ka Beo, Penti, and Lo Lo) with 705 people! Ra Glai (Ra Glay, Krai, Orang Glai, No-Ana, and La Vang) counting 96,931 individuals
- Ro Mam with 301 people as per the census of 1999!
- Si La (Cu De Xu and Kha Pe) only count 840 people and are mainly found in the Lai Chau province

- Ta Oi (Toi Oi, Pa Co, Ba Hy and Ba Ghy) with a population of 34,960
- Tho (Keo, Mon, Cuoi, Ho, Tay Poong, Dan Lai, and Ly Ha) with 68,394 people
- Xinh Mun (Puoc and Pua) with a population of 18,018
- And the Xtieng (Xa Dieng) counting 66,788 people!

Some of these minorities, such as the O Du, Ro Mam and Pu Peo, are threatened as their populations are on a steep decline. We are now going to explore a few of these minorities.

The Dao (or Zao)

Introduction

The Dao migrated from China (where they are known as Yao) some 200 years ago and settled in the northern border region of Vietnam, and also along the Vietnamese-Lao

The Dao in Vietnam are related to the Yao of neighbouring countries such as China, Laos, Thailand and even Northern Myanmar.

The Dao Origins and Language

The Dao language is part of the Mong-Dao group.

The Dao have a high illiteracy rate and mainly rely on oral tradition to pass on their knowledge.

According to the Ministry of Education, 64.4% of 16-40 years old Dzao were illiterate as of

According to a Dao legend, the origin of the twelve Dao clans goes back to Ban Ho, a powerful dog of five colours! After defeating his enemy, Ban Ho was granted marriage to a

To this day, Dao worship their ancestor, *Ban Ho*, and celebrate him through the five colours of Dao embroidery.

Dao Clanship

Dao people live at different altitudes.

While the groups living at low altitudes have a steady income from growing rice and breeding livestock, the groups who settled higher into the mountains experience very

In spite of a hard material life, the Dao preserved their culture. They also developed a legacy of traditional medicine, which is passed down through one generation of a family to

Lineage is of utmost importance for the Dao. People of the same lineage are defined by

their middle names and their position within that lineage.

Dao Clothing

The Dao use a number of techniques such as embroidery, surface embroidery, reverse appliqué and appliqué to achieve their striking traditional dress.

Each clan has its own dress code: the Red Dao display red headgear for instance.



Dao men used to wear their hair long tied in a chignon low on the neck or on top of their head, but they now often sport a short hair cut!

Their attire consists of trousers and a short vested top.

Dao women still shave their eyebrows, and more rarely their heads, and cover their skulls in wax. Most Dao women wear their hair long though.

Dao girls cover their head by a black or red scarf whereas married women wear an elaborate turban that may take various shapes.

Dao women's headgear is always either embroidered or decorated with silver coins, beads and colourful tassels.



Both men and women wear silver or copper jewellery and tasselled shoulder bags.

The Co Tu

Introduction

Co Tu people mainly live in the Hien and Giang districts of Quang Nam province and A Luoi and Nam Dong districts of Thua Thien-Hue along the Lao border (and across the Lao border!) in Central Vietnam.

According to their ethnography, the Co Tu belong to the Austro-Asiatic family although their specific descent is unknown.

The Co Tu belong to the Mon Khmer language ethnic group.

Co Tu Villages: the Guol House

A typical Co Tu village consists of about 30 houses on stilts set out in the form of an ellipse with the Guol, or communal house, at its centre.

The communal house is a large and beautiful building towering over the whole village. It represents the soul of the village as its social, cultural and religious centre.

The Co Tu villagers use the Guol as a place of worship to the gods and spirits.

They believe in *Giang* (Genie) and decorate the altar area and walls with the horns and heads of animals they hunted.

For the buffalo-killing rite, one of the most significant ceremonies for Co Tu people, a village pole is erected in front of the communal house, for the sacrificial animal to be hung to it.

Co Tu villagers also use the Guol as a symbol of wealth and power, where they collect their art. The bigger the Guol, the more successful and prosperous is the village!

Finally, the Guol is a meeting place from where the village elder heads the community and welcome guests.

The Elder is in charge of enforcing tribal customs and judges over rule infringements as well as preside over rituals and cultural performances.

The Guol, is also called as the Men's House as women are traditionally not authorized to enter it.

Patriarchy and Spiritual Power

In Co Tu villages, the man is the head of the household and the final decision-maker. Women are responsible for the household maintenance, bringing up the children and also for much of the agrarian work.

Although the Co Tu society follows a patriarchal pattern and men hold political power, women embody spiritual power. Co Tu people believe that floating souls live around them, and because women are weaker, they can easily integrate with them and talk to them.

Co Tu Clothing

Co-Tu people have simple attires.

Men wear loincloths and leave their torso bare. Women wear skirts and short vested tops.

Nowadays most Co Tu people wear clothing similar to the Kinh (the ethnic majority in Vietnam) and traditional customs such as face and body tattooing, teeth filing and men with long hair tied in a bun are on the vane.

The Gia Rai

Introduction

Gia Rai people are mainly based in Vietnam's Central Highlands.

They live primarily in the Gia Lai, Kon Tum, Dac Lac, Phu Yen, and Khanh Hoa provinces.

The Gia Rai represent the largest of the upland ethnic groups of the Central Highlands known as the Montagnards or Degar ⁵.

⁵ Degar is the name given to the ethnic minorities of Vietnam's Central Highlands. In 1958, the Degar launched a movement known as BAJARAKA to resist the Vietnamese. The aim was for the Degar to become autonomous.

In the 1960s, during the Vietnam conflict, many Degar sided with U.S troops.

After the fall of Saigon, which marked the end of the war, many of the ethnic minorities from the Highlands fled Vietnam for fear of reprisal.

Gia Rai Language and Culture

The Gia Rai language is part of the Malayo-Polynesian branch of the Austronesian language group.

As such the Gia Rai language is related to the Cham language of Central Vietnam.

A typical Gia Rai village is small in size -50 to 500 community members- and laid out in a square with at its centre a communal house, *nha rong* .

For the Gia Rai, as for other ethnic minorities in the Western Highlands, the communal house is a symbol of power and community life.

Hence, when completing the construction of the *nha rong* , the Gia Rai villagers attach a buffalo to the *cot gung* , a bamboo-pole planted in front of the communal house, before offering it in sacrifice to appease the spirits and protect the village ground.

Surrounding houses are either communal longhouses or single-family homes.

Bamboo was the traditional material of choice for house building, but it has been progressively replaced with wood and steel (for roofs) due to their resilience to the natural elements.

The Gia Rai follow a matrilineal culture where ancestry is traced through the mother rather than the father.

Gia Rai Religion and Persecution

Gia Rai's native religion is animism.

They believe that demons may inhabit all living things, and as a result, sacrifices of pigs, cows and buffaloes are cyclically performed to appease the spirits.

In the nineteenth century, French Catholic missionaries visited the Central Highlands region, and later, in the twentieth century (1930s and 1970s), American missionaries made quite an impact on the Gia Rai.

As a result, many converted to Christianity.

In 2002, Human Rights Watch reported that Jarai people were still persecuted for their faith and their affiliation to the Degar movement.

The Lolo

The Lolo Origins and Language

Lo Lo people are mainly based in the districts of Bao Lac (Cao Bang), Dong Van and Meo Vac (Ha Giang) and Muong Khuong (Lao Cai).

It is thought that the Lo Lo originated from southern China regions such as Sichuan and Yunnan where they are still known as *Pu* - included in the Yi national minority . (See Yi section in China's ethnic groups) .

In China, the term 'Lo Lo' is deemed derogatory as it was used to refer to the small baskets that the Yi carried around, which they believed carried the souls of their dead ancestors.

Though they started their migration by the end of the first millennium, the Lo Lo people only migrated en masse to Vietnam in the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The Lo Lo call themselves *Mun Di* or *Man Chi*.

The Lo Lo language is part of the Tibeto-Burman family of languages.

This ethnic group used to have a pictographic script, which was used for rituals and known to shamans only, but which has been mainly forgotten.

The Lo Lo can be divided into two sub-groups: the Lo Lo Den (Black Lo Lo) and the Lo Lo Hoa (Multicoloured Lo Lo).

These two groups have very different costumes (particularly women's), traditions and rituals.

Lo Lo Villages

The Lo Lo set up their villages on mountain slopes surrounded by forests. According to Lo Lo animist beliefs, nature is the residence of spirits; hence it must be protected from harm.

Lo Lo houses are of three different types: the stilt houses, mud houses and stilt-with-mud houses.

The door of the house always face down slope.

Lo Lo Patriarchal Culture

The Lo Lo people follow a patriarchal pattern of society. Hence, the father -or the unmarried eldest brother if the father has died- is the final decision maker for his household. He must take care of his entire family and represents his family in its relations with other families and the ancestors.

The patriarch is indeed the only person in the house allowed to worship the house ghost. Together with the *Thau Chu*, the family line chief, the patriarch has final say on important affairs of the family.

The Lo Lo also worship their ancestors which they divide between *Duy Khe*, the near ancestors, dating back from up to five generations; and the *Po Xi*, distant ancestors dating from more than five generations back.

Each house has its own altar to worship *Duy Khe*.

However, rituals surrounding *Duy Khe* are often performed at the *Thau Chu* house during the Lunar New Year and on the Mid-Seven moon (the day of the dead).

Lo Lo also turn to their ancestors when a member of the family becomes ill or is a victim of an accident.

Adultery and robbery are frowned upon and severely punished under the Lo Lo customary law.