

## **The Magnetic Vietnam**

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### **Abstract**

S-shaped Vietnam bordering the Indo-China peninsula towards the Southeast of China, boasts of a history steeped in resilience and a continued fight for independence spread over a millennium. Independent since 1975, peace prevails over this nation. This has created a deep nationalistic pride in them. This patriotism welcomes tourists, to experience a culture shaped by Eastern and Western influences, fostering a unique identity. The nation's shared struggles against invaders have forged strong bonds among its citizens, strengthening their unity.

Its diverse landscapes, from mountains to coastlines, thick forests, rivers, and innumerable caves nurture rich wildlife, offering habitats for several species of flora and fauna. Amidst this natural beauty, Vietnam's religious inclination shines through serene Buddhist Pagodas tucked away silently in the high mountains. The Vietnamese cities in contrast infuse vibrance with a throbbing pace of activity, through the day and night. This captivating blend of history, culture, and natural splendor makes an exciting opportunity for JAACL to explore and share Vietnam with the world. A wealth tightly held by Vietnam despite its fight for survival. Its magnetism casts a spell to dwell deeper into it.

### **Keywords**

Vietnam, culture, history, art

## The Magnetic Vietnam

Ruled by the Chinese for over a thousand years, the Chinese youth even today are taught that Vietnamese territory was previously part of China. China is known in Vietnam as an aggressor par excellence, which largely contributed to the prevailing anti-China sentiments in the country. Việt means “people” and Nam means “south.” Therefore, Việt Nam means “People of the South,” where “south” is about the South-East Asian continent, especially south of China.

After being under the domination of various Chinese dynasties for over a thousand years, the French ruled Vietnam, from the 1800's to 1954, Vietnam became part of a French colony called French Indochina. French missionaries converted many Vietnamese to Catholicism, the religion of France. Throughout French rule, resistance brewed among the Vietnamese. When France was occupied by Germany, during the Second World War Japan seized the opportunity to invade Vietnam. This resulted in Japanese forces taking control of Hanoi and moving southwards. “Viet Minh” formed by a band of resisting Vietnamese, spurring communists and nationalists under Ho Chi Minh destabilized the Japanese, and by 1945, Japan surrendered to Allied forces. Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnam an independent nation in Hanoi’s Ba Dinh Square, the same day.

The United States intervened in Vietnam in 1955 to prevent a communist takeover of the country. Despite having superior conventional weapons, the US army failed to defeat a country that was not even industrialized. This was due to the unique guerrilla tactics employed by the Vietnamese army, which utilized the dense jungle as cover. The Americans found it impossible to counter these tactics and lost after 20 years.

Vietnam has continuously absorbed various influences from Asian, European, and American cultures. The part of the East Asian culture that the Vietnamese have imbibed includes ancestor veneration and worship, respect for community and family values, and manual labor religious belief. Their important cultural symbols include 4 holy animals: Dragons, Turtles, Phoenix, and Unicorn. The national flower is the lotus and the most popular plant in Vietnam is bamboo.

Ancestor worship pays tribute to deceased family members and helps people remember their roots. Children must respect their parents in life and remember them after they pass away. Ancestor worship reflects the influence of patriarchy and Confucianism on Vietnamese culture. Confucianism is a philosophy based on mutual respect and kindness toward others. It was developed to bring peace and stability to society. This was introduced during the Chinese domination.

Nowadays, most Vietnamese families have an ancestral altar in their homes, placed in a prominent location. Adorned with ancestral tablets and pictures, an incense burner bowl is placed at the center of the altar as a symbol of the stars. Inside the bowl stands a circular incense stick that represents the universe. Two candles are placed on the sides of the altar to embody the sun (left) and the moon (right). On special occasions like ancestors' death anniversaries or the Lunar New Year, special rites are performed to communicate with the dead. The rites consist of making offerings of fruits, foods, and wine; lighting candles; and burning incense sticks.

Most Vietnamese people practice Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, with a small number following Catholicism and Hinduism. Buddhist Pagodas, Confucianist temples, Christian prayer halls, and Hindu temples are a testimony to this.

The traditional clothing style of Vietnam has undergone various changes throughout its history. However, the Ao Dai has stood the test of time. Once worn by both men and women, the Ao Dai now remains mostly a woman's apparel. It is a long silk tunic with a conventional snug collar and is buttoned down on the left side. The male tunic falls to the knees while the female tunic falls to the ankles and is worn with loose pants by both genders. These days, Western outfits have taken over the clothing style of Vietnam. The Ao Dai is either worn on special occasions or as a uniform in schools and workplaces. Another traditional Vietnamese apparel is the non-la, which is a conical hat, a hallmark of Vietnam's culture. Both these have a Chinese influence.

Vietnamese cuisine has been influenced by Chinese cooking techniques and ingredients, such as noodles, stir-fries, and dumplings. The use of soy sauce, ginger, and garlic in Vietnamese cuisine is also a testament to the Chinese influence. However, Vietnamese food has its unique flavors and regional variations.

About 70% of Vietnamese words are borrowed from various Chinese languages, some of which are so old and established that even natives are unaware of their foreign origin. While Vietnamese architecture has developed its distinct identity over time, its major influence can still be traced back to China.

Latin characters became the standard for written Vietnamese due to French influence. French is mostly spoken by the older generation, and examples of the French language exist in some vocabulary, such as "ga" for the train station, derived from the French word "gare," and "madam" for Mrs. Additionally, vegetables such as potatoes, carrots, artichokes, onions, and asparagus were brought to Vietnam by the French. The use of butter and wine in meal preparation is also due to French influence. Vietnam is the second-largest coffee producer in the world, and coffee was brought to the country by the French in the 19th century. The Robusta coffee, far stronger than the internationally popular Arabica, hails from here. Coffee is made in a variety of ways, but the most popular is with sweetened condensed milk. "Café da," which is coffee served cold and over ice.

During their occupation of Vietnam in the 19th century, the French destroyed many indigenous constructions to replace them with French-styled buildings. The French Quarter in Hanoi is a living example as the French intended to make Hanoi their capital. Modern Vietnamese fashion incorporates many French fashion trends such as suits, Jupe, and berets. Middle- and upper-class Vietnamese people often wore French-styled attire to display their modernity and class.

The Vietnamese arts are spread across:

### **Lacquerware and Lacquer Paintings**

Vietnamese lacquerware is a unique and intricate art form involving a meticulous layering process. The base article is made of wood and coated with several layers of lacquer (sap of a tree used as varnish). It can take up to 3 and a half months and involves 20 stages to complete. Interestingly, many people who were disabled in the US-Vietnam war depend on this art form for their livelihood. While lacquerware originated in China, Lacquer Paintings are an original art form of Vietnam, which was appreciated and encouraged by the French rulers in Vietnam.

## **Silk Paintings**

Vietnamese silk paintings are known for their softness, elegance, transparency of colors, and fluidity. Different from the silk paintings of China and Japan, these paintings depict a wide range of themes, including landscapes, Pagodas, rustic countryside, rural life, and historical events.

## **Lanterns in Hoi An**

A UNESCO World Heritage city, Hoi An is a quaint picturesque town in central Vietnam, where one sees colorful lanterns of numerous shapes and sizes everywhere! Nights are magical with thousands of lanterns reflecting their light on the nearby river.



**Image: Lanterns in Hoi An**

## **Hand Embroidery**

The art of hand embroidery is embedded in Vietnamese culture and dates to 700 years. It is kept alive in modern times by local artisans, ethnic minorities, and artists, and the technique is often learned by high school girls as an extra-curricular activity.

## **Ceramics and Pottery**

Ceramic making in Vietnam has a long history, dating back thousands of years. The Ly Dynasty (1010-1225) was a particularly prosperous period for this art form. Following the Chinese invasion, Vietnamese ceramists were heavily influenced by Chinese ceramics and were also inspired by other cultures such as Cambodia and India.

## **Contemporary Art**

The Vietnamese contemporary art scene is hard to miss. The paintings capture a wide range of styles, from dramatic landscapes and exquisite figurative to edgy contemporary creations. Vietnamese artists' paintings undoubtedly capture the interest of art lovers. Increased international interest in the country's art scene, with works of Vietnamese artists being exhibited in Hong Kong, Singapore, Australia etc.

## **Thang Long Water Puppet Theatre**

A popular Vietnamese puppet show with rice farming as its theme uses water to showcase the reality of Vietnamese agriculture. It is an ancient art form that attracts a large number of foreign audiences.

Exotic yet affordable Vietnam, a rich experience of an alive world with a magnus past.

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## About the Author

An MBA from Mumbai University, with corporate experience in marketing in MNC's like Ogilvy and Mather, Colgate-Palmolive India ltd, Parle Agro pvt ltd.

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- On the Appreciation list for the Asian Literary Society's "Indian Women's Achiever 2020", for literature.
- Recognized as the "Writer of the Week" by ALS in June 2019.
- Received the First prize for Stand-up poetry recitation at Impish Lass Publishing House 2019.
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