

Other Attractions in Vietnam

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This paper analyses the place of highland ethnic minorities in Vietnamese visual culture. For decades, artists have appropriated markers of ethnic difference in propaganda posters about national unity and progress. Vietnamese notions of ethnic groups draw on a historical trajectory that involves colonial racial classifications as well as the anti-colonial notion of 'the people'. The inclusion of ethnic minorities in official portrayals of the people draws on the historical conditions of nation building and an armed struggle for independence. Equally important, the visual appropriation of the markers of ethnic and national difference projects national progress through the mapping of backwardness on highland ethnic groups. The recent emergence of the same ethnic markers as an international tourist attraction draws on similar progressivist narratives, and the growing market in souvenirs recycles visual exercises in national unity as a just-discovered Other Vietnam.

The year 2000 marked a number of Vietnamese national celebrations.¹ On 3 February, the Communist Party commemorated its seventieth year; 30 April was the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Hanoi victory over the Saigon government, and on 19 May Ho Chi Minh would have turned 110 years old. As is custom throughout the country, the government draws attention to these national milestones by commissioning artists to make posters, billboards, stamps, statues and paintings and placing them in public view. These art works are intended not only to commemorate a historical event but even more importantly are meant to unite the Vietnamese population through common national images. They are designed to present the Vietnamese people as a unified group, joined under a single flag, cause or identity. The content of these representations of the nation, most of which contain images of women and ethnic minorities, thus points to ways in which Vietnamese national identity is constituted.

On visits to the countryside in northern Vietnam during summer of 2000, we noticed several posters that portrayed the nation of Vietnam to itself. In one of them, placed on the outside wall of an ethnographic museum in the administrative centre of Bac Thai Province, four women are shown standing in a semicircle, facing the other way (Figure 1). Each is dressed differently from the others. Three of the women carry flowers and the fourth a coloured ribbon. The path they are on is depicted as a bright yellow line, and they are heading toward factories and construction materials that lie at the horizon. The four women are on the path toward industrialisation and progress. As they head in that direction, they

1 Our research in and on Vietnam and its art and ethnic minorities draws on several stays and shorter visits since 1992 (Taylor in 1992–4, 1995–6, 1998, and 2000, Jonsson in 1996, 1998 and 2000). We are each indebted to the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Arizona State University, for separate Faculty-Grant-in-Aid fellowships, and to the Center for Asian Studies, also at ASU, for separate A.T. Steele Travel Grants, that made possible our most recent research trips.



Figure 1. Uncle Ho, ethnics and the road to progress. *Note:* Poster outside an ethnology museum in Bac Thai (photo: Hjorleifur Jonsson).

seem to be offering the flowers and banner to Ho Chi Minh whose face, surrounded by four doves, appears in the sky above them. To the right of Uncle Ho is the image of the Vietnamese flag, a gold star on a red background. Also in the sky are dates, two that mark the birth and the 110th anniversary of Ho Chi Minh and one marking the successful take-over of Saigon in 1975, which ended the American War (as it is locally known) and brought the country under a single government.

This official poster conflates the biographies of Ho Chi Minh and modern Vietnam in a specifically national manner. The date of his birth and his 110th anniversary several decades after his death come together with an image of the national flag and the visual markers of industrialisation and peace, along with the date of the military take-over of Saigon. The poster's assembly of images implies the destiny of the nation as tied to the life of Ho Chi Minh. But if the image is intended as a statement about modern Vietnam as a unified country, the dresses of the four women seem to speak to another reality. The women's dresses are neither modern nor national. Rather, they index 'traditional' and ethnic or regional realities that seem at first glance to contradict the modern, modernist, and nationalist message of the poster. In this article, we want to explore what makes traditional, ethnic and/or regional women's dresses suitable for the official portrayal of a national

destiny that includes military victory, an industrialised future and the national emblems of the flag and the founder's life.²

The representation of 'traditional' Vietnamese (*Kinh*) and highland ethnic minorities through images of people in 'ethnic' clothing is a fundamentally modern phenomenon. It draws on a nationalist gaze within which a select few ethnic markers stand as references to the multiethnic composition of the Vietnamese nation. Images of women in minority ethnic dress are posted as celebratory. The intent of the images is not a move back to imagined or historical roots of ethnic diversity or a multiculturalist celebration of difference for the sake of difference but, and without exception, an appropriation of the markers of difference for the project of national unity and progress. Traditional Vietnamese and ethnic minority women are depicted, through the visuals of their dress, as analogous indexes of national unity. In their portrayals in the public sphere of postage stamps, billboards, etc., visibly non-modern women perform an iconic service to the nationalist cause, through both their dress and their femininity. The picture that is presented in this poster is one of harmony between different types of Vietnamese women who have been chosen to stand for the nation. But what is this picture about? Why does its subject matter make sense to an audience which is commemorating both the birthday of the founder of the nation and national reunification? In other words, why do women wearing traditional dress stand as national emblems?

The women in the poster are adornments in an artistic rendering of the nation, and therefore we must consider their semiotic position and question whether ethnic minority women in Vietnam are being represented or transformed as they become pictorial and national subjects. Also, how does art become a terrain where issues of ethnicity, gender and nationalism get played out? In this particular poster, the four women are identified by their dress or costume. Their non-individual identities are equally manifest in the dresses that stand for particular ethnic or regional collectivities and in the fact that their faces are not shown. The women's outfits tell the viewer who they are, where they come from, and which segment of the population they stand for. The woman on the far left is wearing a precolonial outfit called *ao tu tham*. Currently, this outfit is most familiar from performances of *cheo*, a folk opera associated with the Red River delta in Vietnam's north, where Hanoi is located. At her right is a woman in an outfit that identifies her as one of the indigenous minorities of the Central Highlands region. The dress could be from Ede, Jarai, Bahnar or another of the many ethnic groups in the region, but the reference of the dress is regional. The woman 'stands for' the Central Highlands (Tay Nguyen) that lie in the hinterlands that are adjacent to the border with Cambodia and Laos. Next to her is a woman in a shirt worn over black trousers, an outfit that associates her with the rice farmers of the Mekong Delta region that includes the city of Saigon. To the 'southern' woman's right is the last of the four, wearing the colourfully dyed and embroidered skirt, blouse and scarf that define her as belonging to one of the Tai ethnic groups in the northern part of Vietnam bordering China and Laos.

Through their non-modern dresses, the four women stand for the four traditional components that have come together through Ho Chi Minh's contribution to the nation. As representations of traditional collectivities, the four women erase as much as they reveal about the constitution of modern Vietnam. What they reveal through their dress is a reference to 'the people' as fundamental to the modern nation. It is made obvious in this and other propaganda posters that Vietnam is made up of several kinds of people. At the

2 We focus on this one poster for the sake of economy. For a sense of the wide range of posters and billboards within the same discursive parameters, see Viviane Lowe, 'Women in Arms: Gender and Nation in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, 1965–1975' (MA Thesis, Australian National University, 1996), and Thaveporn Vasavakul, 'Art and Politics: Nationalism in Vietnamese Poster Art'. *Asia Pacific Magazine*, no. 8.

same time, the conceptual workings of defining ‘the people’, through regional and ethnic identities, are erased. What is in view and actively promoted in official imagery is the nation as various kinds of people who are all united in their gratitude to their leader, in their fight against foreign aggression, and/or on the way to progress.

Unlike art for art’s sake or art for decorative purposes, propaganda art is meant to contain messages, to speak to an audience that is receptive to the ideas that are contained in the artwork. The intended audience of public art is always to some extent abstract or imaginary, but it is still assumed to apprehend the encoded messages in a very specific way. Interpretations differ depending on the context of the artwork, but when placed in a public space in a designated area at a chosen time, one can expect that the billboard or poster in question is understood by its audience in a particular way owing to shared sets of cultural values, what Baxendall³ refers to as a shared visual culture. Vietnamese audiences perceive such signs as doves, ribbons, flags, flowers, dress, hand gestures, women and ethnic minorities in terms of a shared visual framework. Propaganda art takes full advantage of this, and purposefully includes images that have little or no ambiguous meaning in order to deter multiple interpretations and for the message to be immediate and clear. As a Vietnamese poster artist recently reported to a *New York Times* journalist, ‘you have to paint so that people don’t have to look twice’.⁴ According to one art historian, propaganda art involves for many a contradictory terrain: ‘The word “propaganda” has a sinister ring, suggesting strategies of manipulative persuasion, intimidation and deception. In contrast, the idea of art implies to many people a special sphere of activity devoted to the pursuit of truth, beauty and freedom. For some, propaganda art is a contradiction in terms’.⁵ But in Vietnam, art has been constructed as a means of expressing national sentiment for a considerable time. In twentieth-century Vietnam, art had multiple entanglements with nationalism and propaganda.⁶

In the following section, we address the colonial-era construction of ‘the people’ as central to the modern nation, and provide some historical background concerning ethnic and regional differences. A part of our aim in this section is to suggest how the emphasis on traditional, regional or ethnic dress is a specifically modern and national project. Then we discuss the imagery of Vietnamese propaganda posters and the interest that Vietnamese painters have shown in ethnic minorities. Having addressed dimensions of the national focus on ethnic and regional difference, we then move on to discuss the traffic in these markers of alterity, ethnic minority clothing and its representations, that has an increasingly global dimension. The global traffic in ethnic art, somewhat like Vietnamese propaganda art about national unity and progress, thrives on iconic reminders of the unmodern. Along with various differences, they have in common attempts to appropriate glimpses, fragments or whole pieces of the dresses of Vietnam’s minority peoples for their projects of identity and difference in the modern world.

The State, Ethnic Difference and the People

A historical examination that attempts to chart majority–minority relations in Vietnam toward the present may implicitly project the territorial and ethnic dimensions of the contemporary postcolonial state onto a historical terrain where the bounded nation state does not belong and where a majority–minority discourse may be fundamentally alien. Our

3 Michael Baxendall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1972).

4 ‘Vietnam Hangs onto a Relic: The Propaganda Poster’, *New York Times*, 14 Nov. 2000, p. B2.

5 Toby Clark, *Art and Propaganda in the Twentieth Century* (Calmann and King, London, 1997), p. 7.

6 See Nora Taylor, ‘The Artist and the State: The Politics of Painting and National Identity in Hanoi, Vietnam, 1927–1995’ (PhD Dissertation, Cornell University, 1997).

intent here is not to map a Vietnamese space on the landscape of the past, but to highlight the historical specificity of twentieth-century ethnic relations and the period's imagery of ethnic and national identity. Precolonial Vietnamese courts tended to be indifferent to the internal affairs of hinterland villages while upland–lowland relations for trade and tribute were common. Ethnic identity was a feature in these dynamics, in that hinterland populations reproduced cultural schemes that were largely independent of state-society.⁷ Dry-rice farming (swiddening, slash-and-burn) was beyond the reach of the state's taxation schemes and, from the state's perspective, these hinterland populations were uncivilised. Vietnamese courts, and society more generally, used terms such as *Man* (a Chinese borrowing into Vietnamese, 'Barbarian') and *Moi* (Vietnamese, 'Savage') for upland peoples. While the courts might strike deals with their leaders for warfare, tribute and allegiance against a rival court, there is no indication of an attempt to integrate highland peoples into Vietnamese society. In this, upland–lowland relations in Vietnam are analogous to other parts of Southeast Asia. 'Society' assumed a state with a court that integrated settlements and people through its control over trade and tribute and assigned identities in a hierarchic fashion. Lowland wet-rice farmers were as central to the economy of this state-centred society as they were low in its hierarchy.⁸ In theory, upland dry-rice farmers stood outside this court-centred vision of society. The status of settlements *vis-à-vis* the state was not determined in ethnic terms, but through relations and positionings that were as likely to divide as to coalesce people who shared an ethnic reference.

Among populations that subsequently came to be defined as minorities in the northern region of Vietnam, there was commonly a local elite whose status depended on their relations with Vietnam's courts (and sometimes those of northern Laos⁹). Many of these settlements engaged in wet-rice cultivation and were thus within, while often marginal to, the civilised realm of the state. Within the state's framework of society, there was nothing questionable about these settlements, while their distance from the court may have contributed to cultural autonomy and the perpetuation of linguistic and ritual differences from Vietnamese society.¹⁰ One of the few statements concerning the significance of dress within this bifurcated social environment is in a decree from a Nguyen king, Minh Mang (r. 1820–41). He attempted to 'civilise' the leaders of highland peoples, who occasionally presented tribute to the court, by presenting them with tunics appropriate for the occasion rather than them appearing for the court in what to him was 'bare skin'. The outfit that the highland leaders were given for the occasion was that specified for 'mandarins of the

7 We use various terms such as hinterland peoples, uplanders and highland ethnic minorities as synonymous references to peoples who currently are ethnic minorities. Our discussion of history is intended to show that terms such as ethnic minorities are not applicable to the pre-colonial period, but there is no single adequate gloss for these populations prior to the colonial and national eras. Some authors use 'Montagnard' for all the highland peoples. Like the British colonial-era term 'hill tribes' that was applied from India to Fiji, Montagnard naturalises historically specific relations between identity and space. For a discussion of the term Montagnard, see Hjørleifur Jonsson, 'French Natural in the Vietnamese Highlands: Nostalgia and Erasure in Montagnard Identity', in Jane Winston and Leakthina Ollier (eds), *Of Vietnam: Identities in Dialogue* (St Martin's Press, New York, 2001). On highlander identities more generally, see Hjørleifur Jonsson, 'Cultural Priorities and Projects: Health and Social Dynamics in Northeast Cambodia', in Don McCaskill and Ken Kampe (eds), *Development or Domestication: Indigenous Peoples of Southeast Asia* (Silkworm, Chiangmai, 1997), and Jonsson, 'Yao Minority Identity and the Location of Difference in the South China Borderlands', *Ethnos*, vol. 65, no. 1 (2000).

8 See Hjørleifur Jonsson, 'Forest Products and Peoples', *Sojourn*, vol. 13, no. 1 (1998).

9 Alexander Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1971), p. 244. For a study of Phuan, whose nineteenth-century leaders' allegiance was variously with Lao and Vietnamese courts, see Snit Smuckarn and Kennon Breazeale, *A Culture in Search of Survival: The Phuan of Thailand and Laos* (Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, New Haven, 1988).

10 Georges Condominas, *L'espace social à propos de l'Asie de sud-est* (Flammarion, Paris, 1980), and John T. MacAlister, 'Mountain Minorities and the Viet Minh', in Peter Kunstadter (ed.), *Southeast Asian Tribes, Minorities, and Nations* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1967).

second class of the seventh degree in the civil service'.¹¹ The emphasis on dress-change as a marker of presentability in Vietnamese society was not limited to highland peoples; King Minh Mang twice issued 'long edicts commanding [lowland] northern women to change from skirts to trousers'.¹²

The French colonial take-over of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia as Indochina brought a new model of state and society, one that took ethnic-cum-racial identities as axiomatic, and ethnographic classification became an important aspect of the colonial strategy. Henri Roux's ethnographic account of northern Laos, for instance, insists on the correctness of a racial classification of ethnic categories in terms of language families. Roux complains about the laxness of local categorisations, where people's identity could change along with changes in livelihood and social relations.¹³

The French colonial effort to identify peoples as 'races' was in terms of the evolutionary theories of the time, and assumed that people could be ranked on a scale of progress. There was no inherent agreement on the policy implications of such classifications. Saleminck has discussed debates among French administrators regarding the indigenous peoples of the Central Highlands, whether they were better off 'protected' by the French from Vietnamese lowland populations, or it was better that they 'vanished' as a 'race' because they were too primitive.¹⁴ In the Central Highlands, French administrators established themselves as the legitimate rulers through ceremonies where leaders of highland populations paid allegiance to them in a 'traditional' way and wearing their traditional garb.¹⁵ This manipulation of tradition, including the explicit use of traditional dress, for the purposes of rule and expropriation draws on the colonial-era (and proto-nationalist) notion of 'the people' as the basis for rule. Herein lies the source of the French colonial zeal to identify and classify all the 'races' in Indochina and their ethnic components.¹⁶

As was the case with other colonial regimes in Southeast Asia, the French rulers of Indochina became the collectors and defenders of traditional cultures and ways of life once they had quelled various forms of local resistance to their rule. This is one aspect of the colonial-era shift away from rulers and their courts and toward 'the people' as the defining feature of 'society'. In Vietnam, other aspects of this shift drew on nationalist and anti-colonial ferment in the early twentieth century that was decidedly anti-royal and anti-traditional. Markers of a Chinese-influenced hierarchy in dress and hairstyle, as well as the Chinese-derived Nom script that was unique to Vietnam, became the targets of nationalist movements.¹⁷ The state was identified with feudal and colonial oppression, and the nationalist making of Vietnam was expressly in the name of 'the people' whose historical destiny was shaped by the struggle against foreign aggression. The Vietnamese term *dan toc*, analogous to the Malay *bangsa* and the Thai *chonchat* (all mean 'people')

11 Gerald Hickey, *Sons of the Mountains: Ethnohistory of the Vietnamese Central Highlands to 1954* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1982), pp. 172–3.

12 Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model*, p. 134.

13 Henri Roux, 'Deux Tribus de la Région de Phongsaly,' *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême Orient*, vol. 24 (1924), p. 373. The situational aspect of ethnic identity in the region, that Roux complained about as somehow incorrect, is best described for Burma, see Edmund Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma* (Beacon Press, Boston, 1954).

14 Oscar Saleminck, 'Mois and Maquis: The Invention and Appropriation of Vietnam's Montagnards from Sabatier to the CIA', in George Stocking (ed.), *Colonial Situations* (University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1991), pp. 254–6.

15 Hickey, *Sons of the Mountains*, pp. 306–7, Saleminck, 'Mois and Maquis', p. 252.

16 For examples of such classifications, see G. Aymé, *Monographie du V^e Territoire Militaire, Indochine Française* (Imprimerie d'Extrême-Orient, Hanoi, 1930) and Auguste Bonifacy, *Cours d'ethnographie indochinoise* (Imprimerie d'Extrême Orient, Hanoi–Haiphong, 1919). For analyses, see K.W. Taylor, 'On Being Muonged,' *Asian Ethnicity*, vol. 2, no. 1 (March 2001), and Susan Bayly, 'French Anthropology and the Durkheimians in Colonial Indochina', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 34, no. 3 (2000).

17 David Marr, *Vietnamese Anti-Colonialism* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1971).

'nationality'),¹⁸ indexes a historically specific formulation of the nation that assumes an ethnic essence as the defining feature of community and identity.

It is a truism in modern Vietnam that the nation consists of 54 ethnic groups.¹⁹ But apart from the publications of the government's ethnologists, a very recent Vietnam Museum of Ethnology, and a set of one-inch tall porcelain figures of women in ethnic dress (Figure 2), the depiction of Vietnam's ethnic diversity tends to assume a more manageable number of peoples. The four women in the poster in Bac Thai are one example, and among others are figures standing for the three (lowland) geographical regions of north, centre and south, and the division of the population into members of five language families that is common in museum displays. In Vietnamese public art, depictions of 'kinds of people' are not fundamentally ethnic in character. Rather, ethnicity is one of the features that constitute kinds of Vietnamese.²⁰ Examples of this include billboards that portray a doctor, a factory worker, a soldier, a peasant woman and an ethnic minority woman as together making up the peoples of Vietnam. In these depictions, ethnicity and occupation stand as analogous markers of identity, and the most commonly implied reference of these pictorial assemblies is how all the kinds of people contribute, in their different ways, to the nation. Identity, whether ethnic, occupational or otherwise, has been nationalised. Our understanding of the position of ethnic minorities in these depictions is that they stand as a measure of the progress of the Vietnamese nation. In their traditional, non-modern ethnic dress, they are an indication of the inclusiveness of the national community at the same time as they serve as a measure of how far all other segments of Vietnamese society have moved from this condition of non-modern-ness.

The Vietnamese Propaganda Poster

The art of the Vietnamese propaganda poster draws equally on colonial encounters, nationalist politics and the experiences of war for independence. Artists who had studied painting and drawing under the French colonial regime from 1925 to 1945 at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts d'Indochine, joined anti-colonial forces and began to create art that served the

18 For Malaysia, see Anthony Milner, *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995), and for Thailand, Walter F. Vella, *Chaiyo! King Vajiravudh and the Development of Thai Nationalism* (University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1978).

19 'The List of Ethnic Groups made known by the General Department of Statistics on March 2, 1979, recognises that the Vietnamese nation *officially* comprises 54 ethnic groups'. Dang Nghiem Van, Chu Thai Son, and Luu Hung, *Ethnic Minorities in Vietnam* (The Gioi Publishers, Hanoi, 2000), p. 1, our emphasis.

20 There is not a single predominant definition of the components of the national population in Vietnam as there is in Laos. In the Lao case, the notion of High, Mid and Low Lao (*Lao Sung*, *Lao Thoeng* and *Lao Lum*), which is depicted for instance on currency bills through a representation of women in ethnic dress, has since the early 1950s become a very resonant model of the national population. Trankell suggests that the three women are Hmong (as High Lao), Khmu (as Mid-slope Lao) and Lao (as Lowland Lao). See Ing-Britt Trankell, 'A Minor Part of the Nation: Politics of Ethnicity in Laos', in Ing-Britt Trankell and Laura Summers (eds), *Facets of Power and Its Limitations: Political Culture in Southeast Asia* (University of Uppsala, Uppsala, 1998). Proschan (personal communication, 2001), who has done considerable research among Khmu (Khmhu, Kammu) states that the dress of the Mid-slope Lao is not that of Khmu, who live in the north of the country, but that of one of the Mon-Khmer speaking groups in the south. What the imagery conveys and postulates is not simply ethnic categorisations by altitude, but equally by region, the division of Laos into north, centre and south. This is analogous to some of the public depictions of Vietnam through kinds of people. For an account of the history of the tripartite division of Laos, see Frank Proschan, 'Who are the Khmu?', in *Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference of Thai Studies, Theme 4: Traditions and Changes at the Local Level* (Chiangmai University, Chiangmai, Thailand). One example from an out-of-the-way place indicates the pervasiveness of this national image of Laos. During the fall of 2000, lowland ethnic Lao exiles in suburban Phoenix, Arizona, staged a dress-and-dance representation of the three kinds of Lao for themselves and interested outsiders for a 'culture night'. Even if they are all ethnically Lao and living in America, they take on the three kinds of Lao for a representation of who they are as nationals.

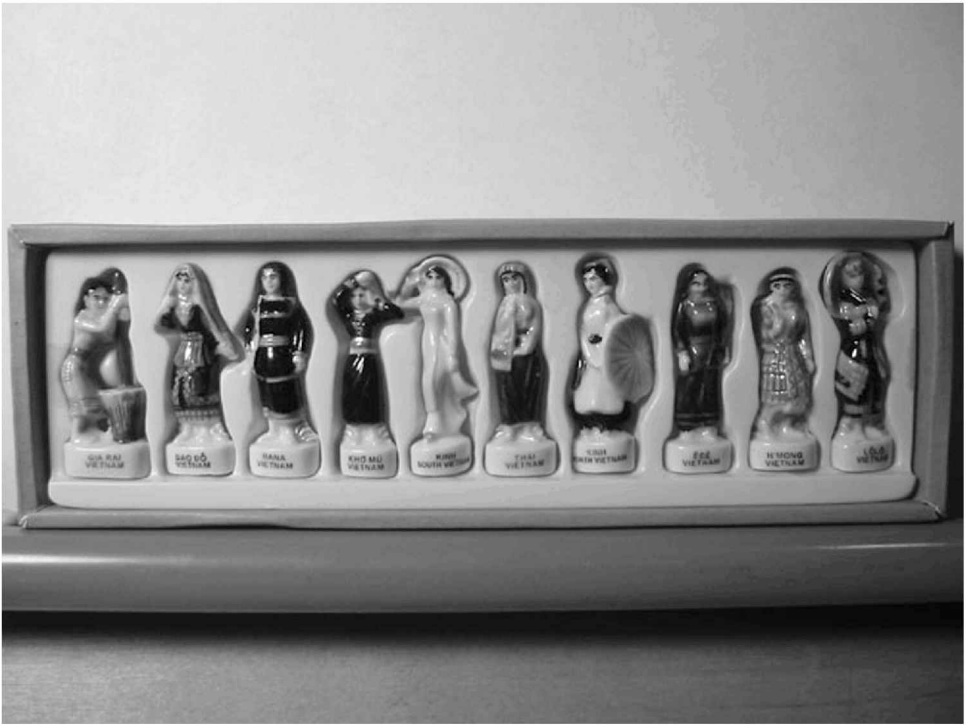


Figure 2. Ethnics in miniature, one of six sets of dolls. *Note:* The figurines are of generalised national space (e.g. ‘Bana, Vietnam’) with the exception of ethnic majority Kinh, for whom there are separate dolls for ‘North Vietnam’ and ‘South Vietnam’ (photo: Hjørleifur Jonsson).

rising nationalist movement.²¹ This included paintings of landscapes, Vietnamese villages, farmers and ethnic minorities. Artists used their drafting skills to fashion images of the Vietnamese in their native environment drawing attention to the characteristics of the Vietnamese nation. Depictions of people served to encourage Vietnamese citizens to consider themselves national subjects. Landscapes were the most common genre that served to incite pride in the Vietnamese land and reinforce viewers to imagine the nation as a geographic entity, where ‘land’ and ‘people’ were aspects of the same essence.²² Posters utilised these ideas and simplified them for the average viewer.

As national art that contributed to a national understanding and sentiment, this art was ‘popular’ in the sense of being non-elite and being aimed at non-elite public spaces. The posters also addressed an international audience in order to project images of an independent Vietnam in the face of colonial pressures. The first poster created for the independence movement read in English ‘Vietnam for Vietnamese’ and consisted of a line-up of historical figures meant to evoke past struggles against foreign aggression. This first graphic, nationalist depiction of Vietnam and its people was created by Tran Van Can in 1941, and

21 See Nora Taylor, ‘Orientalism/Occidentalism: The Founding of the *Ecole des Beaux-Arts d’Indochine* and the Politics of Painting in Colonial Vietnam, 1925–1945’, *Crossroads*, no. 11 (1998).

22 See Taylor, ‘The Artist and the State’.

it served as a model for many subsequent posters. The image of a heroic Vietnamese standing at the helm of an abstracted outline of the Vietnamese map was utilised throughout the independence period, the revolution and the war against the United States. Posters often show Vietnamese nationals standing on maps of Vietnam as a way to legitimate Vietnamese rule over the entire territory of Vietnam, north and south.

The nationalist depictions of Vietnam had a political project. Annamese and Indochinese nationalisms already had considerable currency, and a Vietnam-focused nationalist sentiment was neither widespread nor 'obvious' prior to 1945. Christopher Goscha has shown how the eventual move away from Annamese and Indochinese identities in the anti-colonial struggle concerned a dissociation from foreign rule (the Chinese control over An-Nam ['the pacified south'] and the French control over Vietnamese (as Annamese), Lao and Cambodian domains as Indochine). This shift, as well as the focus on 'the people', contributed to a conceptual reworking of space and identity in terms of a shared struggle against foreign aggression, and posters then broadcast this vision with their combinations of 'Vietnamese subjects' and the outlines of the national space.²³

While paintings were used to imagine the essential traits of the Vietnamese nation in an ideal or romantic form, posters spoke more directly of the Vietnamese fight for nationhood. In the early 1940s, most of the population of Indochina was illiterate and posters served to draw attention to the anti-colonial struggle and help combat illiteracy. Using the ancient art of woodblock printing, artists drew images of women learning to read and peasants wielding pens instead of swords, thus simultaneously encouraging the population to learn to read and join the revolutionary forces. Furthermore, while painting materials were expensive and scarce, paper was easily made and images easily reproduced through basic printing processes. Graphic arts did not just serve poster making but also helped to create stamps, currency and political logos. Artists participated in the making of medals, stationery, banners and pamphlets. Portraits of the revolutionary leader Ho Chi Minh were also created during this time, and his image figured more prominently in posters than it did in paintings from this period.

Posters reduced complicated political ideas to simple messages that the average Vietnamese subject could understand. A mother and child, a rice farmer or a soldier standing beside a flag, a historical relic or brandishing a weapon projected the concept of fighting for Vietnamese autonomy. References to history were combined with present concerns such as poverty and illiteracy to illustrate the need to modernise for the sake of national pride and well-being. Thaveeporn Vasavakul suggests that the Vietnamese war posters' combination of traditional and modern imagery, including pre-historic Dong Son designs, the outlines of the national territory and armed ethnic minorities, portrayed 'self-contained narratives ... of [national] unity and inseparableness'.²⁴

In poster art, ethnic minorities are visual signifiers of national unity. Historically, these populations are non-Vietnamese, and they live in areas removed from modern development and political authority, in the mountainous regions bordering China, Laos and Cambodia. But there are historical reasons for the inclusion of ethnic minorities in nationalist art, apart from the wishful thinking of national inclusiveness. The nationalist movement had its base in a minority area in the highlands north of Hanoi, and the art school was relocated there as a part of the nationalist effort. To Ngoc Van, a graduate of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts d'Indochine, was put in charge, and there he conducted classes in art and politics.

23 Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam or Indochina? Contesting Concepts of Space in Vietnamese Nationalism, 1887–1954* (Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, Copenhagen, 1995), pp. 90–102.

24 Vasavakul, 'Art and Politics', p. 4.

Influenced by movements in the Soviet Union and China, artists in the Viet Bac region were encouraged to think about ways in which art could serve the state and the process of nation building. Posters became the natural vehicle for expressing national identity and encouraging the population to join the national struggle. The art school remained in the region of Viet Bac until the Independence League's (Viet Minh) victory against the French at the valley of Dien Bien Phu, north west of Viet Bac, in 1954. During the nine years that the revolutionary movement was stationed in the hills, artists were greatly intrigued by the upland peoples residing in the northern regions of the Red River Delta and were inspired to sketch them and include them in their posters depicting the nation of Vietnam.

Besides the interest that artists had in the highlanders for artistic reasons, there was also a political motive for including them in the art of the period. The Viet Minh relied on the support of the highland peoples in the battles against the French. In the preparations for the battle of Dien Bien Phu, ammunition, food, water and other supplies had to be carried through areas inhabited by highland minorities. Highlanders had not only to help the Viet Minh physically in offering food and water, but the Viet Minh had also to secure their friendship and alliance.²⁵ The French had traditionally viewed the hill peoples as 'primitives' who could be manipulated to benefit the colonial economy more easily than could the more sophisticated Annamese urbanites. During the interim period between 1945 and 1954, the French may have also hoped to promote a 'divide and conquer' policy and set the highlanders against the Vietnamese in order to weaken Viet Minh forces.²⁶ It was in the interest of the Viet Minh to uphold a unified front and join forces with the peoples living in the ethnically and geographically marginal areas of Vietnam. And after the victory at Dien Bien Phu, Vietnamese scholars maintained the idea of a Vietnam with a harmonious population and dissolved any notion of ethnic tension, and they strove 'to write national history from an inclusive, multi-ethnic perspective'.²⁷

Sketches made of ethnic minorities during the 1940s and 1950s served as models not only for future billboards and posters but also for paintings and drawings made by artists and graduates of the various national schools and colleges of fine arts after independence. It has become standard practice even today for art students to travel to the mountainous regions of Vietnam and sketch portraits of the different ethnic groups. During the 1960s and through the 1980s, artists often painted themes revolving around the education of minorities by Vietnamese soldiers or government workers, the development of the highlands and other assistance projects provided by the state to less modernised regions of Vietnam. In these paintings, the Vietnamese are shown in their worker or soldier uniforms helping their ethnic minority fellow-nationals. These images use the language of ethnic dress to delineate the differences between majority Vietnamese and minority others and at the same time emphasise their common efforts at nation building.

Some artists who trained during the resistance period in the hills of Viet Bac have continued to paint minorities almost as a reminder of that period. Artists such as Mai Long and Linh Chi have made paintings of highland ethnic minorities their trademark (Figure 3). Furthermore, part of their success as painters is due to their ability to portray minorities in a realistic and yet idealised fashion with an emphasis on minority dress and textile patterns. Minority clothes provide artists with artistic and aesthetic material enhancing a portrait with colour and texture. Paintings of farmers and soldiers in their simple uniforms appear bland and drab compared with the brightly embroidered leggings, skirts, jackets and headdresses

25 MacAlister, 'Mountain Minorities', pp. 791–6.

26 Saleminck, 'Mois and Maquis', pp. 260–4.

27 Patricia Pelley, '“Barbarians” and “Younger Brothers”: The Remaking of Race in Postcolonial Vietnam,' *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 29 (1998), p. 377.



Figure 3. Mai Long's painting of a Black Thai woman. *Source:* photo by Hjorleifur Jonsson.

of the Yao, Hmong and Tai.²⁸ The painter Mai Long lived in Son La province, northwest of Hanoi and near the border with Laos, for eight years after the Viet Minh victory at Dien Bien Phu. He grew very familiar with the Tai groups living there, eating their food, living in their houses and raising his children with theirs. His presence there was part of a programme of educating minorities in the Vietnamese language and Marxism–Leninism to incorporate them into the nation. He was not sent as an educator but rather as an observer and a body, and as such an intended influence on the local population. Somewhat like an American Peace Corps volunteer, he was there to help spread the goodwill of the government's literacy campaigns to the mountainous regions. The influence that he and others would exert on the uplanders was meant to help the process of socialisation reach the border areas. He and his family grew fond of Tai customs and habits and, in conversations with us, they suggest that the stay there had a greater impact on them than on the highland Tai. Mai Long's paintings of minorities show signs of his affection for the Tai, but they are also emblematic of the Vietnamese intervention in the highlands.

²⁸ This emphasis on upbeat, cheerful representations of people in Vietnamese art coincides with official policies toward painting. From the 1950s through the 80s, sad, melancholy and generally cynical views of Vietnamese life were considered counter-revolutionary and thus unacceptable in national exhibitions organised by the art associations affiliated with the Communist Party and the Fatherland Front. See Nora Taylor, 'Framing the National Spirit: Viewing and Reviewing Painting Under the Revolution', in Hue-Tam Ho Tai (ed.), *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 2001).

Posters made after 1954 consistently included one or more minority ethnic representatives when portraying the Vietnamese 'people'. But in poster and billboard art, ethnic minorities are essentially an Other within the Vietnamese population, they never stand for the average Vietnamese. While they are *dan toc*, they are not *dan toc Viet Nam* but rather *dan toc thieu so* or *dan toc it nguoi*, 'small-group people' or minorities. While poster-depictions from the American War show ethnic minorities as participants in the armed struggle, they are consistently depicted as wearing traditional, ethnic clothing, and thus semiotically in and of the past. There is no 'modern' version of the dressed-identity of ethnic minorities as there is for other Vietnamese through an *ao dai*,²⁹ a soldier's uniform, a doctor's coat or a factory worker's outfit. Minorities' participation in the national struggle and in the process of nation building is recorded through their dress. Presenting the ethnic minorities in art through items of ethnic clothing is more than an identification symbol, it is a projection of an image of backwardness. The ethnic minority dress is the symbol that legitimates Vietnamese authority over the ethnic minorities within the national borders.

Our visits to the ethnic minority areas in the north and the south of the country indicate that ethnic minority dress is not commonly worn. Conversations with minority people suggest widespread Vietnamese prejudices regarding ethnic minority cultures as backwards, and partly for this reason ethnic minority peoples wear market clothes in an attempt to avoid these prejudiced connotations. Official policies have aimed at eradicating supposedly backward practices and have emphasised progressive changes in livelihood, culture and rituals.³⁰ Recent efforts at the 'selective preservation' of minority cultures³¹ therefore seem more aimed at sustaining enough markers of difference to maintain the notion that Vietnam consists of 54 ethnic groups than in any interest in these minority cultures or identities as such. What the posters declare, in their propagandist fashion, is not far from the reality of ethnic difference in contemporary Vietnam; difference is officially sanctioned only insofar as it contributes to the nation.³² Within this framework of national policy, as in the posters, the more locally oriented practices of ethnic minority livelihood, culture and rituals simply have no place.³³

29 The *ao dai*, a tunic worn over trousers, has been adopted as the national dress of Vietnam and the 'traditional' dress of the Kinh as an ethnic group. It was devised by the Hanoi painter Cat Truong in 1925 to meet the need for a national dress, and may be seen as complementary to the twentieth-century fashioning of 'the people', in that its reference was the generalised national society. As a marker of identity, the *ao dai* needs to be seen in relation to its alternatives, the 'Western' clothes of the colonials and the hierarchically graded dress code of the precolonial state. In recent years, the *ao dai* has been adapted to new fashion trends, and it is worn by the urban elite, young school girls and government workers, and displayed at fashion shows. In her work on textile traders in Ho Chi Minh City, Leshkovich writes: 'As a national symbol touted in cultural rhetoric, the *ao dai* provides a metaphor for debating the pros and cons of combining the local with the global and the traditional with the modern.' Ann Marie Leshkovich, 'Big Families in a Small World: How Female Entrepreneurs Use International Kin Networks to Shape Vietnam's National Costume', presented to the Association for Asian Studies Meetings (Boston, MA, 14 March 1999), p. 23.

30 See Grant Evans, 'Internal Colonialism in the Central Highlands of Vietnam', *Sojourn*, vol. 7, no. 2 (1992). Evans discusses Vietnamese ethnologists' two-part scheme of 'traditional man' and 'socialist man'.

31 Oscar Salemink, 'Sedentarization and Selective Preservation among the Montagnards in the Vietnamese Central Highlands,' in Jean Michaud (ed.), *Turbulent Times and Enduring Peoples: Mountain Minorities in the South-East Asian Massif* (Curzon, London, 2000).

32 It is worth noting that the emphasis on ethnic complexity that the posters declare, in terms of 'modern' nationals and 'traditional' ethnic minorities serves to project a homogeneity on lowland populations. Sizeable populations of ethnic Chinese, Cham and Khmer peoples are glossed over, as is diversity among Kinh populations, in this focus of difference as a property of highland populations.

33 One example comes from a recent book on traditional textiles in the northern region: The Northeast has been cultivated for a long time. Government programmes encouraging permanent settlement and sedentary agriculture of formerly nomadic Dao and the Mong people [that is, in our words, the suppression of highland people's autonomy regarding their livelihood] have already produced results ... Along with potential economic development, the ethnic minorities are also known for their traditional handicrafts ... The Northeast area and the

The Bac Thai poster, of Vietnam's population through four kinds of women in traditional dress and on their way toward progress, can be viewed as portraying some of the regional and ethnic divisions that challenged the nation-building process. The representation of lowland ethnic Vietnamese as 'north' and 'south' speaks to a particularly twentieth-century predicament, not only in the dismissal of the previously predominant central region of the Nguyen courts in Hue but also, and more importantly, concerning the 1954 division of the country into North and South Vietnam and the subsequent American War. Both the nationalist victory in the north and the struggle over the south involved appeals to the loyalties of highland ethnic minorities. Poster-depictions of people in ethnic minority dress variously encourage or commemorate such loyalty. The importance of women in these posters appears to be informed by many of the same concerns that scholars have noted about the visual portrayals of ethnic minorities in southern China: 'While state images such as billboards, posters, opening ceremonies, and currency were geared more toward iconography supporting the authority of party patriarchs, these images also reproduced the ubiquitous trope of polychrome, feminised, primitivised minorities as national ornaments.'³⁴

The nationalisation of women's identity and work is evident, for instance, in the Women's Museum in Hanoi, which commemorates the contribution of women to Vietnamese history. On the top floor of the museum, the crafts and dresses of women from various of the 54 ethnic groups are placed in the manner of an ethnographic display. An explanatory panel at the entry to this exhibit spells out very clearly how ethnic difference, through women's making and decoration of dress, has been nationalised:

Efforts of women are expressed through the different kind of cloth they have woven, the forms of dress they have designed, the colours they have chosen, the decorations they have made, and through each of their stitches. In fact, those women[']s] clothes have contributed importantly to creating the cultural characteristic[s] of each ethnic group and the whole Vietnamese nation.

According to a recent Vietnamese book on ethnic minority textiles, 'textile patterns are truly the most vivid expressions of Vietnamese traditional culture'.³⁵

These statements are non-trivial semiotic appropriations of women's work, in that whatever significance their weaving and embroidery has had in the (re-) production of identity and difference at the level of individual, household, region and/or ethnicity, the meanings of this work as a whole have been nationalised. At the same time, and equally important, through this appropriation of the values of their work, women have been defined as the makers of tradition. Given the overarching modernist project of the Vietnamese government, this symbolic classification of women as the source of tradition has to be viewed in part as a patriarchal disenfranchisement of women within the nation.³⁶ If tradition

Footnote continued

regions contiguous to the Red River, play an important role in exchanges between people living in the highlands and the people of the delta. Such interactions and exchanges have been occurring for many generations between ethnic minorities and the Viet majority group, called Kinh. The continuity of this two-way process could play an important role in Vietnam's industrialisation and modernisation process.

Diep Trung Binh, *Patterns on Textiles of the Ethnic Groups in Northeast of Vietnam* (Cultures of Nationalities Publishing House, Hanoi, 1997), pp. 5–6. While the author writes of inter-ethnic relations as a two-way process, the larger goal of national progress negates the assumed balance of minority relations to the national majority and to the nation more generally.

34 Louisa Schein, *Minority Rules: The Miao and the Feminine in China's Cultural Politics* (Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2000), p. 165. See also Dru Gladney, 'Representing Nationality in China: Refiguring Majority/Minority Identities,' *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 53 (1994).

35 Diep, *Patterns on Textiles*, p. 2

36 Women have long remained in the shadows of their fathers, brothers and husbands professionally and have been subjected to Confucian moral codes of behaviour. In art, women have been the subject of paintings since the colonial period and most often appear as dutiful and elegant wives and mothers. In painting, women are expected to look beautiful and represent the cultural ideal that is repeatedly propagated in magazines and newspapers as the proper Vietnamese woman. See Nora Taylor, 'Invisible Painters: North Vietnamese Women Artists from the

resides so unequivocally with women and their work, then progress, national and otherwise, is the realm of men. Women, like ethnic minorities, can only be led to progress, as their essence resides squarely within the domain of the traditional. Lowe's analysis of the imagery of gender and nation in North Vietnam during the 1960s and 1970s brings out the same themes:

In the iconography of the revolutionary nation-state, the peasant woman plants the roots of Vietnamese identity deep in the national soil, and tends their growth, displaying the signs that establish difference: her dress and her class. This division of labor frees the male worker and soldier to devote themselves to the forward-looking tasks of nation building, modernisation, and integration into the communist brotherhood.³⁷

The Traffic in Ethnic Minority Essences

While minorities have figured in art for more than a half a century, it is only recently that minority clothing has appeared in shops and become available for sale as a fashion item. The influx of tourism to Vietnam since the United States lifted its trade embargo against Vietnam in 1994 is partly responsible for the commodification of ethnic clothing. After 1975, tourism was restricted to overseas Vietnamese nationals visiting family, official government delegations and organised tours by American Veterans' associations. Until the late 1980s, less than 100,000 tourists per year visited Vietnam. Since 1994, the figure has been over a million per year. Until March 1993, individual tourists had to obtain permission to travel to areas outside major Vietnamese cities. The mountainous areas such as the Central Highlands, the region surrounding Dien Bien Phu, and the borders with Laos and China were all off limits. In early 1994, the former colonial hill station of Sapa in Lao Cai Province opened for tourism. It fast became a must-see destination on the backpacking trail through Vietnam, as the home of the colourful Hmong and Dao people. Hmong, Yao (Dao) and Giay women began to peddle clothing and textiles to foreign visitors in this market town, and during 1994 and 1995, backpackers could be seen parading through Hanoi wearing jackets made of a patchwork of Dao embroidery and Hmong batik. By the fall of 1995 souvenir shops in Hanoi started selling clothing from various ethnic groups along with handicrafts and textiles. By 1999, the number of these shops had greatly increased, and they are now located throughout Hanoi along main shopping streets and near hotels in the capital's commercial centres.

Ethnic minority clothing is the antithesis of high Vietnamese fashion and modern 'Western' wear, and that is its attraction to a growing global audience. Backpacking Westerners see in it something authentic that is uncontaminated by modernity. A considerable segment of recent tourists to Southeast Asia are seeking the 'primitive and remote' in increasingly far-off places.³⁸ Buying goods from lesser-developed villages and in areas off the busy tourist routes gives the traveller a sense of purchasing 'authentic primitive' artefacts, items of increasingly rare value.³⁹ The global market for ethnic minority items from the hinterlands of Vietnam is bifurcated into trekkers who seek anti-fashion 'grunge' mementos of their sojourns into the remoter regions, and connoisseurs who acquire collection-quality objects in the boutiques that deal in antiques and fine 'tribal art'. The

Footnote continued

Revolution to Doi Moi', in Dinah Dysart and Hannah Fink (eds), *Asian Women Artists* (ArtAsia Pacific, Sydney 1996).

37 Lowe, 'Women in Arms', p. 45.

38 On trekker imagery of highland peoples, see for instance Erik Cohen, 'Primitive and Remote: Hill Tribe Trekking in Northern Thailand', *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol. 16 (1989).

39 Shelley Errington, *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art and Other Tales of Progress* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1998), pp. 118–36.

attraction of these objects to a global clientele is based in part on the pre-existing trade in 'tribal' and 'primitive' art and objects elsewhere, in neighbouring Thailand as much as in America and other places. To some extent, the appeal and value of these objects in or from Vietnam is primarily that the country's isolation kept the objects out of circulation on the global market until the 1990s. That is, Vietnam's non-participation in a global capitalist economy and in the global traffic in markers of alterity has provided the country with a 'vintage' quality that is appropriated by cultural tourists eager for a relief from more saturated markets.

Paintings of minorities now stand beside ethnic clothing and ethnic artefacts in shops around Hanoi. Tourists are the main consumers of such paintings today. In search for colourful souvenirs of their travels abroad, tourists have steadily purchased art from Vietnam because of its comparatively low price and also because many Vietnamese paintings capture what they perceive as an otherwise bygone era. The 'outsider' status of minorities in government view is perpetuated within the cultural travel of the tourist industry. The art market equally participates in the differentiation between majority Vietnamese and minorities through its sales of paintings depicting hill peoples. Through portraits made by Vietnamese Kinh artists, minorities become commodities, signifiers for sale that add another layer to how minorities are appropriated for Vietnamese agendas. By emphasising ethnic clothing and using clothing as a marker of ethnic, class and socio-cultural difference, national Vietnamese art has classified minorities as 'others' in much the same way as tourist shops and galleries selling paintings of minorities transform them into exotic artefacts.

Ethnic minority clothing from Vietnam can thus be seen as authentic primitive artefacts from peoples on their way toward extinction, and this is an important criterion for their entry into a global traffic in ethnic markers. The commodification of minorities through artistic portraits draws on the non-capitalist heritage of the nationalist struggle and its historically specific visual culture. The original works were not meant as commodities but as propaganda and a celebration of national unity. In some ways, the art market's appropriation of these paintings as art and as souvenirs of Vietnam for foreigners involves a change in the objects' meaning that is analogous to the process of having ethnic minority dress index national unity. Neither semiotic shift is conditioned by the earlier significance of nationalist painting or ethnic clothing, but the current trade in ethnic dress to an international audience is facilitated by the previous appropriation of the images of minority ethnic dress as fundamentally Vietnamese.

Foreign tourists and the authorities in Vietnam thus sustain traffic in the markers of alterity for their separate projects of identity and difference. Both call up signifiers of ethnic difference and the traditional in terms of their notions of modernity. For the jungle-trekkers as well as the connoisseurs, their efforts are rewarded by the sights and mementos of people untouched by Westernisation. To the Vietnamese government, the unmodern serves as a measure of how far the nation has in fact progressed, and also as a motivation to bring the 'backwards' populations out of the confines of traditional culture and on to the road toward progress. The poster's depiction of the yellow road that leads to the factories and construction materials of a rewarding national future is not a cynical manipulation of imagery, but rather an indication of a shared visual culture that in this context is made to serve particular nationalist aims.

The global audience for ethnic minority objects and images shares some of the visual references with the Vietnamese authorities. But in contrast to the government's eagerness to get 'backward' people onto the presumed road to progress, travellers from outside the country want to catch markers of the unmodern ethnic before 'change' happens. For a fee, and with some advance planning, travellers may catch some of this multi-ethnic essence. It

appears that the ethnic minorities have taken to embodying their public image, and sharing an aspect of it with its paying audience:

Run by the local police force, [the Hoa Binh Ethnic Minority Culture Troupe] performs a one-hour show featuring the music and dance of the Muong, Thai, H'mong and Dao ethnic minorities and giving members of the audience a chance to chew areca nut and betel leaf and drink sweet sticky rice wine (*ruoc can*) through straws from a communal pot. Pre-booking essential.⁴⁰

In bringing up this example, our aim is not to contrast 'real' and 'invented' traditions, but to suggest that in this case, the activation of ethnic minority identity involves the engagement of minority peoples with local authorities and international tourists. In the context of the previous suppression of 'backward' practices, it is worth pointing out how the state has inserted itself into the enactment of traditional minority identity (dress, dance and drink)—the ethnic troupe is run by the local, Vietnamese police unit. The event can be construed as a consensual fiction among the three parties involved. The expectations of international tourists are as important to the performance as is the policemen's control, while the event supposes that ethnic minority people simply share their culture with the visitors. Somewhat like the art market, the global traffic in culture that lies behind this performance contributes to a separation of highland ethnic minorities from mainstream and contemporary Vietnamese society. In the process, Vietnamese authorities' national control of cultural practices and their official monitoring of the practices of identity appear, on this transnational stage, as the facilitation of cultural exchange.

40 Tim Doling, *Mountains and Ethnic Minorities: North West Vietnam* (The Gioi Publishers, Hanoi, 1999), p. 74. In his book *Tourism and Modernity in China* (Routledge, London, 1998) Tim Oakes provides an instructive analysis of the reworkings of local (ethnic and place) identities that have resulted from ethnic minority peoples' engagements with international tourism and national modernity in China. See also Schein, *Minority Rules*, pp. 193–202.

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