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Chinese (Hoa)

Profile

There is some controversy as to the size of the Chinese minority in Vietnam: official figures tend to float around the 1 million figure, but estimates from outside sources tend to be much higher, even exceeding 2 million in some cases. In any event, it would seem that in all likelihood the Chinese are probably the largest minority in the country. Not all Chinese (known as Hoa) are officially recognized by the government of Vietnam: the Hoa category excludes the San Diu (mountain Chinese) and the Ngai.

Most Hoa are descended from Chinese settlers who came from the Guangdong province from about the eighteenth century, and it is for this reason that most of them today speak Cantonese, though there is also a large group who speak Teochew.

The majority of ethnic Chinese today live in the south, with perhaps 600,000 living in Ho Chi Minh City.

Historical context

Prior to 1975, Chinese in South Vietnam were concentrated in urban areas and largely engaged in commercial activities. In the late 1950s the government imposed a series of decrees that sought to weaken their economic predominance. These laws forced Chinese to take Vietnamese citizenship and prevented non-citizens from engaging in certain occupations. The Vietnamese language became required in Chinese high schools. In effect, however, the citizenship regulations actually provided the Chinese with greater access to the Vietnamese economy.

Bolstered by US foreign aid during the war, the economic activities of the Chinese community thrived and expanded until the North's victory in 1975. Chinese in the North played a very different societal role to those in the South. Most lived in Quang Ninh province, bordering on China, and were mainly engaged in fishing, forestry and crafts. Those in the urban areas were primarily workers and technicians.

In the late 1970s the Socialist Republic of Vietnam took increasingly drastic action to transform the capitalist economy of the south into a socialist one, and Chinese were disproportionately affected, leading to protests by Chinese in Ho Chi Minh City in 1978 against discrimination in relation to property loss. The creation of, and threatened transfer of people to, New Economic Zones led to the first wave of 'boat people', primarily from the South, beginning in April 1978.

The short but bloody border war with China a year later resulted in a deliberate policy to encourage the departure of ethnic Chinese from Vietnam. In 1978-9, some 450,000 ethnic Chinese left Vietnam or were expelled across the land border with China. The decline of the Chinese population in Vietnam continued throughout the 1980s. The recent liberalization of the economy and renewed efforts to integrate Chinese into society has added new vitality to the small Chinese community. The number of ethnic Chinese leaving Vietnam by the mid-1990s has been negligible, due to a strict policy of not resettling Vietnamese refugees by Western governments, who regarded them as economic refugees.

Current issues

The overall situation for Hoa has improved dramatically, especially when compared to the repression, discrimination and loss of property that they experienced before the 1990s. Overall, Hoa Chinese appear to be benefiting from Vietnam's liberalization of the economy more than other minorities. Indeed, poverty among the Hoa since 1993 has not only decreased more than for any other ethnic minority, it is even lower than the poverty level for majority Kinh.

Vietnamese authorities still do not allow private schools teaching in Chinese (Mandarin or Cantonese) to go beyond teaching the actual language. This results in some Hoa parents sending their children to these schools in order to preserve their language and culture rather than to Vietnamese-medium state schools.

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