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Vietnam: Culture and History

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The History of Ho Chi Minh City

Ho Chi Minh City lies along the banks of the aptly named Saigon River and is contemporary Vietnam’s largest city, port, and commercial center (Ho Chi Minh City). It’s easy to see the location’s value in its proximity to both the Mekong Delta in the North and the South China Sea within a 50-mile radius (Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica). However, previously ruled by Chinese and Khmer settlers and then colonized by French, Annamese, and Spanish, Ho Chi Minh City has only been able to thrive recently without external interference (Ho Chi Minh City). Under the Khmer empire, the city was also the Chochin China capital and the capital of the Union of Indochina from 1887 to 1902. Understanding the narrative of this unique combination of ruling groups is pivotal to capturing the essence of Vietnamese culture today and projecting its future.

Indigenous ethnic groups that occupied what is now Ho Chi Minh City (once named Saigon) included the Ma and the Stieng, likely having navigated up the Saigon River to settle into the area because of its high elevation and freshwater access (Ho Chi Minh City's 300-Year History). However, the majority of Ho Chi Minh’s original residents were migrants from nearby feudal clans, particularly those from China. They were mostly poor peasants seeking a better way of life away from the war-torn Ming Dynasty. Continuing these trends of migration, it’s estimated that around 10,000 people were living in Saigon by the mid-17th Century. The original formal government of Saigon was instituted by famous army commander, Nguyen Huu Canh, in the late 1600s. Garnering respect for his virtue and his ancestry to the acclaimed politician Nguyen Trai, Canh expanded the territory of the province and restored a social order that allowed the area to prosper under his guidance.

The capture of Vietnam by the French in 1859 is apparent in the remaining layout of the city, characterized by “rectilinear fashion with wide, tree-lined avenues” (Ho Chi Minh City). French design has since been declining due to the flux in high-rise construction since the 1990s, however. Regarded historically as “the Pearl of the Orient” because of its beautiful colonial landscape along Rue Catinat, or Dong Khoi Street, these changes are making quite an impression on local culture (Ives). “At least 207 colonial-era villas in two of the city’s 24 districts were demolished or significantly altered from 1994 to 2014,” and it is believed that the once-beloved atmosphere of Ho Chi Minh City might transform within the decade. Additionally, it’s anticipated that such changes will have economic repercussions for the city as it consequently reduces its urban heritage and tourist appeal.

Although the city was occupied by the Japanese as well in 1940, Ho Chi Minh City was largely unscathed by WWII (Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica). Internal resistance to French colonization formally initiated with the French attack on the Viet Minh in Haiphong in November 1946 (Wintle, 460). The colonial power had claimed that it was serving its “mission civilisatrice” to aid the under-developed nation, but instead its government was harsh and unrepresentative of Vietnamese interests (Grey, 14). Some practices of antiquity have held positive weight today, such as the construction of “drainage canals to increase rice production in the Mekong Delta and boost trade with France” (Folkmanis). Nevertheless, while in power the French were only appointing French officials and embodied white supremacy in overt exploitation of the local people, their culture, and their land (Grey, 15). These resentments eventually culminated in the Geneva Conference in 1954, which divided the state centrally and finally relinquished French control to the Vietnamese (Wintle, 460).

Following the end of French Colonial rule, Vietnam was divided into two regions: the North and the South, with the Southern capital being instated in Ho Chi Minh City, formerly known as Saigon, in 1954 (The History of Ho Chi Minh City). Under ardent Catholic rule in 1963, monk Thich Quang Duc would light himself on fire in protest of the South’s persecutions of Buddhists. The incident would draw international attention to the regime’s practices and eventually contribute to the removal of President Diem, facilitated by the US.

Ho Chi Minh City experienced a surge of at least a million rural residents during the 1960s and 70s, creating significant, unanticipated overcrowding issues (Ho Chi Minh City). Following 1968’s Tet Offensive, an invasion of Saigon by Northern Communists during the celebration of the lunar year, the morale of domestic residents dropped and offered a wakeup call to US officials that the war was not advancing in their favor.

In mid-April 1975, Southern President at Saigon Nguyen Thiem resigned and openly accused the US of betrayal (BBC On This Day: April 21, 1975- Vietnam's President Thieu Resigns). According to Thiem, the Viet Cong (Northern forces) had made substantial advances because the South had not been granted funds supposedly promised by the US. Specifically, Thiem cast blame on US Secretary of State Dr. Henry Kissinger from the origins of the Paris Peace Treaty two years earlier. The document proposed a ceasefire and had contributed to Kissinger winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 1973. Regardless, when the North breached the treaty and invaded the South, the US under President Ford did not intervene militarily. The pressure for Thiem to resign had escalated domestically and internationally as he had been stripping Saigon of many of its democratic institutions.

Saigon officially fell on April 30, 1975, and earlier that month, the transition seemed inevitable (Truman). In April, US Ambassador Graham Martin declared on Saigon television the following statement: “I, the American Ambassador, am not going to run away in the middle of the night. Any of you can come to my house and see for yourselves that I have not packed my bags. I give you my word.” This seemed reasonable considering that the dense trees and swimming pool at the embassy were not copacetic to the landing of planes or helicopters necessary for evacuation. However, the presence of Northern forces three miles from Saigon encouraged the US to cut down the trees, load Americans on ‘Chinooks’ and ‘Jolly Green Giants’ helicopters, and abandon the city in desperation. Though it had been a safe haven during the Vietnam War, Saigon’s dramatic fall would leave residents attempting to jump on US helicopters as Americans fled and the Presidential Palace’s gates were overrun by tanks (The History of Ho Chi Minh City). Although some Southern Vietnamese were successful in their evacuation with assistance by the US, most were not (Truman). The abandoned embassy left nearly $5 billion in weaponry on-site that would be confiscated by the Communist regime in its new rule (Walsh). Within a year of its capture by the North, the city would be renamed after Northern leader Ho Chi Minh and the modern capital would shift to Hanoi (The History of Ho Chi Minh City).

Foreign Direct Investment and local businesses have boomed in Ho Chi Minh City since the implementation of 1986’s doi moi economic renovations, advancing Saigon’s status as an Asian metropolis with loosened policies (The History of Ho Chi Minh City). Today, Ho Chi Minh City is a powerhouse and offers a stark contrast to its former self. In 2014, it was approximated that the city “contribute[d] almost a quarter of the country’s gross domestic product and the market capitalization of its stock index [was] seven times Hanoi’s” (Folkmanis). Due to its complex and tenuous history, Ho Chi Minh City stands as an evolving and optimistic symbol of overcoming adversity, a chief player in the Asian economy and an iconic cultural center.

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