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The Vietnamese Public in Transition: The 2001 World Values Survey

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Publication Date

2001-11-01

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Executive Summary

This report describes the preliminary findings from the World Values Survey conducted in Vietnam in 2001 within a comparative perspective of the 2000-01 World Values Survey (WVS). For the first time, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam joined the World Values Survey network. The Institute for Human Studies in Hanoi conducted the Vietnamese survey, under the direction of Prof. Pham Minh Hac. The Center for the Study of Democracy at the University of California in Irvine provided support for this study.

On subjective well-being...

- ❖ Nearly all the Vietnamese (91%) say they are very or quite happy with their situation; about two-thirds rate themselves as satisfied with life overall.
- ❖ These statistics place the Vietnamese above most of the developing world and on par with nations such as China, Mexico, Chile and Spain.
- ❖ Most people also score themselves as satisfied with their financial status.

On social relationships...

- ❖ The family is the most important social structure in Vietnamese society. The family also is the center of social life: most report weekly contact with parents or relatives.
- ❖ Work is also an important focus for social life. A third say they have weekly contact with work colleagues and more than half say work is important in their lives.
- ❖ Many belong to various groups and associations, but actual involvement in social groups, clubs, religious groups, and other associations is limited.
- ❖ Most Vietnamese are skeptical of their fellow man; 59% say that one needs to be careful in dealing with other people. Still, this level of social trust is higher than most other nations at Vietnam's level of economic development.

On family values...

- ❖ Most Vietnamese (99%) think that parents are to be respected regardless of their qualities and faults. A full 97% also state that "one of my main goals in life has been to make my parents proud."
- ❖ Most people believe that family life deserves more emphasis (88%).
- ❖ Nearly everyone (91%) rejects the view that marriage is an outdated institution. Most respondents (97%) agree that both husband and wife should contribute to household income.

- ❖ Belief in a traditional role for women remains strong, however. A large majority say that a woman needs to have children (86%), and that housework is as fulfilling as working for pay (86%). A majority (56%) also thinks that men are better suited for politics.

On ethics and religion...

- ❖ Adherence to the law is strong among the public: only few individuals could justify actions such as falsely claiming social benefits, avoiding transportation fares, cheating on taxes, or accepting bribes
- ❖ The public also holds conservative values on homosexuality and prostitution
- ❖ Vietnam is a quite secular society. The overwhelming majority of Vietnamese (90%) say they do not belong to any religion nor do they view religion as important (55%).
- ❖ Most Vietnamese do not think that religious authorities can provide adequate moral support to societal needs. Nor do they believe in heaven, hell, God, life after death, the soul, or other Western religious concepts.

On economics...

- ❖ Reflecting the economic reforms of the last decade, the broad majority favors privately-owned businesses (81%) over government ownership (19%).
- ❖ Even if the market economy is not fully functional, a variety of questions indicate that the values of market competition are broadly endorsed.
- ❖ The work ethic is very strong in Vietnam. Many people say that work is an important part of their lives, and less attention is paid to leisure as a pursuit.

On politics...

- ❖ Many citizens are interested in politics, view politics as important in their life, and discuss politics. Few have participated in political protests, however, though many would probably sign a petition, attend a demonstration, join a strike or a boycott. Many respondents belong to the Communist party or a political group (29%).
- ❖ The public displays a strong nationalistic spirit. Nearly everyone is proud to be Vietnamese (98%), and a similar number express their willingness to fight for their country should there be a war.
- ❖ Expressed confidence in political and social institutions is extremely widespread; more than 90% are confident in the government, parliament and the army.
- ❖ Images of government are improving. People rate the government ten years ago very positively, and the current government receives even better ratings.
- ❖ Still, there is evidence in support for social change: 54% want stronger measures toward societal reform, 30% would like a more gradual approach, and only 16% think society should be defended against social change.
- ❖ Nearly all Vietnamese (97%) are satisfied with the government's decision to add the concept of democracy into the national development slogan: "Prosperous people; strong nation; just, *democratic*, and civilized society."
- ❖ Democracy itself is seen in positive terms. A majority of Vietnamese (72%) thinks that democracy may have problems but it is better than any other form of government. Large majorities also reject statements that the economic system runs badly in a democracy, democracies are indecisive and have too much quibbling, and democracies are not good at maintaining order.

The Vietnamese Public in Transition The World Values Survey: Vietnam 2001

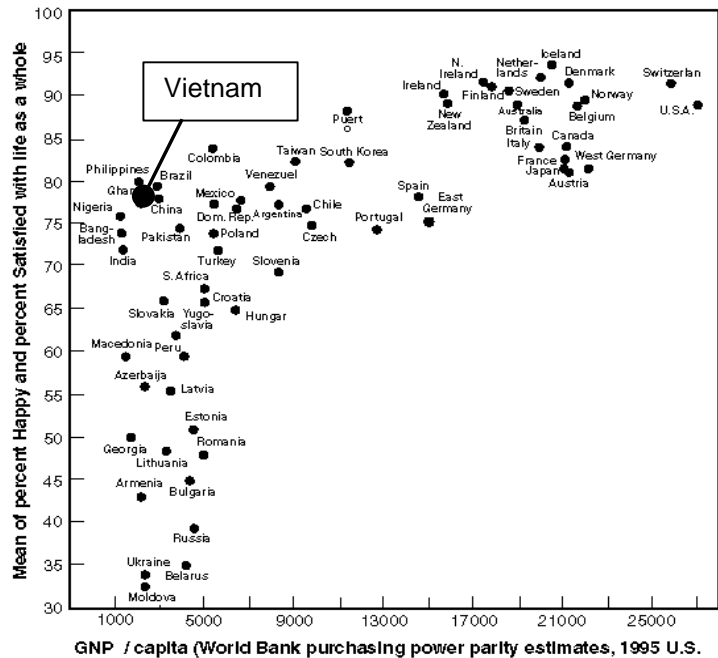
In the past generation Vietnam has experienced dramatic social, economic, and political changes. North and South Vietnam became the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in 1975, and the Vietnamese Communist Party ruled under its continuous, monopolized leadership. The economy was restructured and centrally planned. The Sixth National Party Congress, however, introduced several economic reform measures (*doi moi*) in 1986. The reforms allowed price floats, engaged private sectors into business, decollectivized farmlands, and liberalized foreign trade and investment. Socially, the Vietnamese people are experiencing better living standards, although equivalent political reforms have not developed.

As part of an international study of human social and political values, the Center for the Study of Democracy at the University of California, Irvine, supported the initiation of one of the first scientifically-sampled surveys of public opinion in Vietnam. This is an especially important research study because so little is scientifically known about Vietnamese attitudes on social and political issues. The 2001 World Values Survey inquired about satisfaction with the quality of life, social and family relations, political interest and engagement, economic values, and trust in the political system. The results from this survey provide an initial view into how contemporary Vietnamese citizens think about their society, their economic system, and their nation.

Feelings of Life Satisfaction

The World Values Survey asked respondents about their feelings of satisfaction with their lives. Most Vietnamese (63 percent) say they are satisfied with their lives--and 92 percent say they feel quite or very happy. Such general sentiments reflect a mix of factors in one's life: family, work, social relations, and other factors. And often such life satisfaction is tied to the economic development of a nation, as seen in Figure 1 to the right. If we compare Vietnam to other nations at roughly the same level of economic development from the 1995-98 WVS, the Vietnamese are relatively satisfied for their economic condition, with much higher levels of satisfaction than most of Eastern Europe and on par with nations such as China, Mexico, Chile and Spain.

Figure 1: Happiness & Satisfaction vs. GNP



Social Relations

The survey asked a variety of questions to explore interpersonal relations. Who do people interact with, how much trust do they have for their fellow neighbor? Social interactions are heavily focused around the family, as we might expect (Figure 2). A full 59% said they spend time with their parents or relatives on a weekly basis, compared to only 32% who spend time with work colleagues, or 17% with social friends. Institutional social connections, such as through clubs, associations or religious groups are much less frequent.

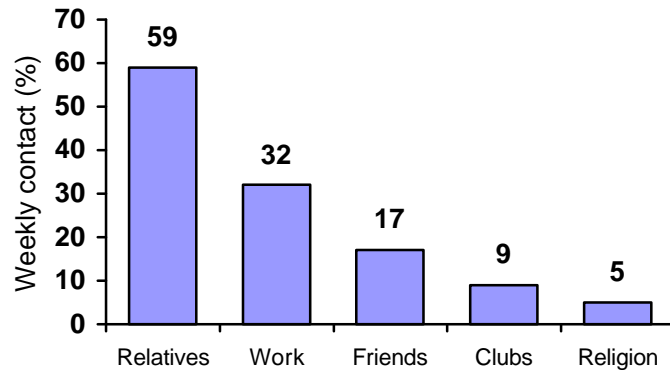
Because Vietnam tries to encourage formal social involvement, many of our respondents reported membership in a variety of social groups--ranging from welfare groups, to community associations, to sports clubs. But actual activity in such groups is quite limited, averaging about 10% among group members.

Perhaps due to this social disconnectedness, our Vietnamese respondents are somewhat skeptical about their fellow man. Only 41% think that most people can be trusted, while 59% say that one needs to be careful in dealing with other people. Social trust tends to be higher among the better educated, the working class, and residents of the North. Still, the Vietnamese national level of social trust appears higher than other nations at Vietnam's stage of economic development.

Family Values

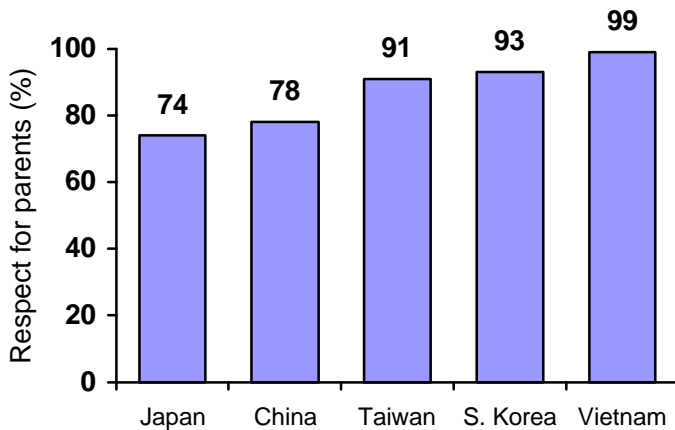
In the Vietnamese society, as with many Confucian societies, the family is a central element of social life. The vast majority of Vietnamese say the family is a very important part of life.¹ Another survey question shows that most respondents (88%) think a greater emphasis on family life would be a good thing. Moreover, almost all Vietnamese (99%) feel that parents are to be respected regardless of their qualities and faults. In another question, 97% state that "one of my main goals in life has been to make my parents proud." These strong family values are expected, as they have also been reflected through Vietnamese folk poetry such as, "The father's laborious effort piles up as high as Mount T'ai / The mother's unconditional love flows without cease like a water spring / One ought to respect one's parents / For that is one's fulfillment of filial piety" (*Cong cha nhu nui Thai Son / Nghia me nhu nuoc trong nguon chay ra / Mot long tho me kinh cha / Cho tron chu hieu moi la dao con*).

Figure 2: Whom do you spend time with?



¹ The dominance of family appears in another question that asked about the importance of various parts of life: family is ranked as very important by 82%. The comparable statistics in other nations are China (77%), Taiwan (77%), South Korea (90%), Japan (91%), U.S. (95%).

Figure 3: Respect for parents in Asian countries

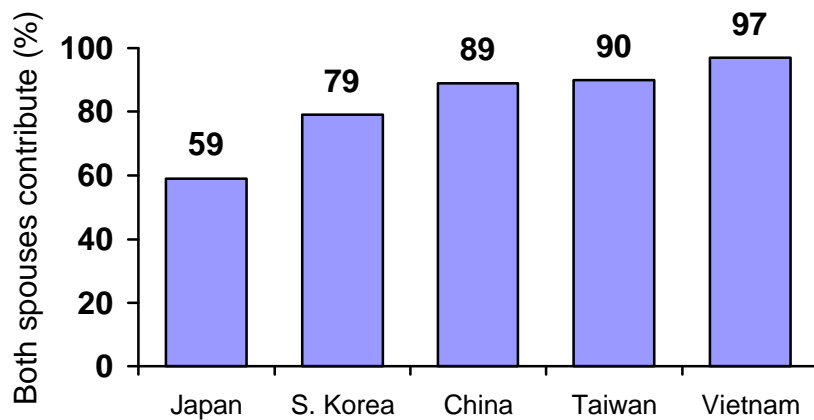


Indeed, even in comparison to other East Asian nations in the 1995-98 WVS, Vietnam ranks the highest on respect for parents (see Figure 3).

Our survey provides other signs of the strength of family within Vietnam. For instance, nearly everyone (91%) rejects the view that marriage is an outdated institution. Moreover, there is near unanimity that both husband and wife need to contribute to household income (97%), an even higher level than in other Asian countries (see Figure 4). These sentiments may partially represent economic needs that push both spouses into the work force.

Another element of family life concerns the role of women in Vietnamese society. Several questions indicate a continuing belief that women should follow a traditional role. A large majority claim that a woman needs to have children in order to fulfill her role (86%), and that being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay (86%). Most respondents also say that men are better politicians (56%), and a plurality (48%) believe that a man has more right to a job when employment is scarce. One bit of counter evidence is the strong rejection of the statement that education is more important for boys than for girls.

Figure 4: Spousal contribution in Asian countries



Adherence to a traditional role for women is common among East Asian nations. For example, belief that a housewife is a fulfilling role is common in China (69%), South Korea (89%), Taiwan (86%), and Japan (90%). At the same time, these sentiments are less common among affluent Western democracies. And within Vietnam, social modernization tends to attenuate support for a traditional role for women; these feelings are lower among the better-educated, the more affluent, and younger Vietnamese.

Ethical Issues and Religion

One of the concerns of the World Values Survey was to assess the breadth of various moral and ethical principles across the globe. Moral education (*dao duc*) permeates Vietnamese literature, folk culture, and philosophy--and Confucian traditions reinforce a commitment to social responsibility and traditional lifestyles.

The strength of moral convictions is apparent on a question that asked whether "There are absolutely clear guidelines about what is good and evil. These always apply to everyone, whatever the circumstances." The belief in moral absolutes is especially strong among the Vietnamese (58%), stronger than in China (41%), Taiwan (28%), Japan (17%), or the United States (49%). These sentiments are more common among older individuals, those living in rural areas, and the lesser educated.

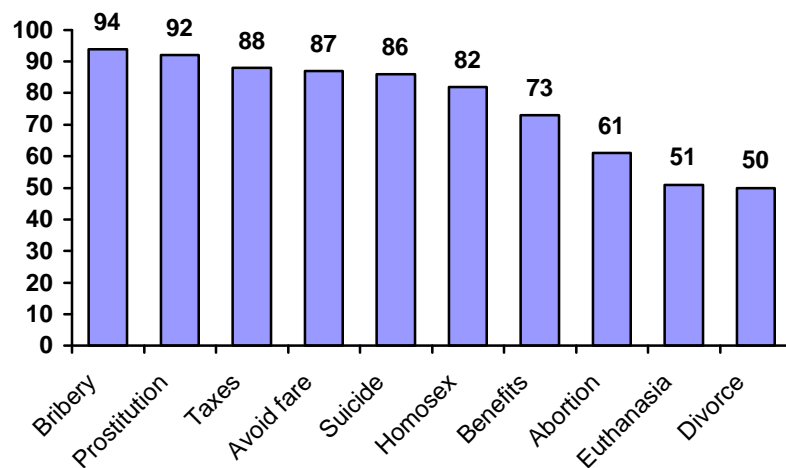
Given these orientations, it is not surprising to find that most Vietnamese do not believe that various illegal activities are ever justified: bribery, falsifying taxes, avoiding fares on public transportation, or illegally claiming government benefits (Figure 5). These ethical beliefs are more frequent in Vietnam than in the other East Asian nations in the 1995-98 WVS by a modest margin of 10-15%.

At the same time, the public is not tolerant on sexual matters. Nearly all of our respondents say that prostitution is never justified (92%) and a large majority says homosexuality is never justified (82%). Vietnamese opinions on these issues are relatively close to those expressed by the Chinese in the WVS, while opinions in Japan, South Korea and Taiwan are significantly more tolerant on these matters.

In most Western democracies, such ethical and moral beliefs are regularly linked to religious values. Vietnam, however, is a quite secular society. The overwhelming majority of Vietnamese (90%) say they do not belong to any religion nor do they participate in religious services. Only a small share of the public view religion as very important (10%) in their life. Few believe in heaven, hell, God, life after death, the soul, or other Western religious concepts.

Not only are most Vietnamese not religious, they are also skeptical about the role that religion may play in Vietnamese society. A large majority (82%) does not feel that religious leaders can provide adequate answers to the social problems facing Vietnam today. Similarly, two-thirds state that religious leaders should not influence government decisions, and public confidence in religious organizations is limited.

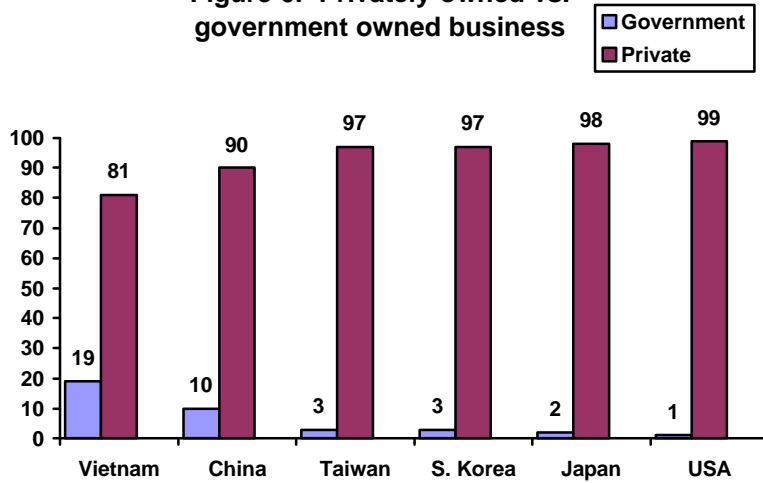
Figure 5: These acts are never justified



Economic Values

Since the late 1980s Vietnam has begun to shed the planned economy of the past in favor of privatized production and elements of a market economy. In addition, Vietnam has steadily expanded its involvement in international trade.

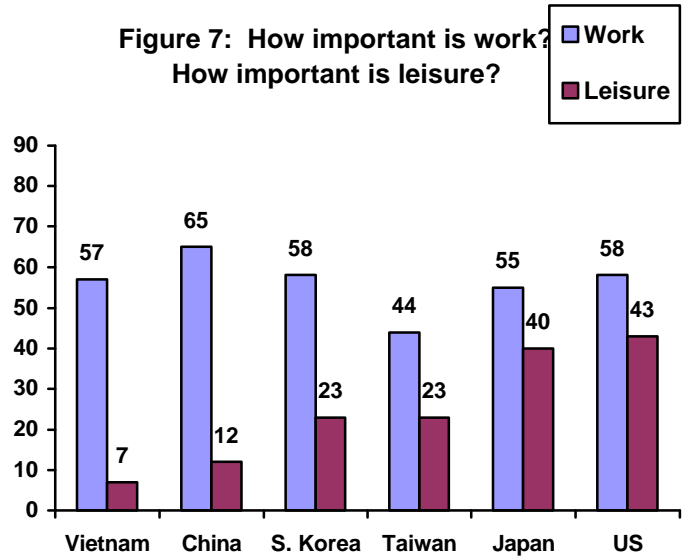
Figure 6: Privately-owned vs. government owned business



The World Values Survey provides a unique opportunity to examine Vietnamese attitudes toward the structure of the economic system and other economic attitudes. One of the core questions in the survey tapped support for government versus private ownership of business. Although a fifth of the Vietnamese public still endorse government ownership, the broad majority now favors privately owned businesses (Figure 6)--a figure only slightly lower than in Taiwan, South Korea and Japan.

A variety of other questions from the survey suggest that the Vietnamese are developing values that are broadly consistent with a market-oriented economy. For example, instead of stressing equal incomes as might be expected in a communist system, more people (60%) lean toward large income differences as an incentive for individual effort. Rather than agreeing that the government should provide for individuals, most respondents (67%) say that people should take more responsibility to provide for themselves. And three-quarters of the public believe "competition is good. It stimulates people to work hard and develop new ideas." Support for the market is stronger among the young, the better-educated and urban residents. Even if the market economy is not fully functional, the values of market competition are broadly endorsed.²

Figure 7: How important is work? How important is leisure?



Finally, the work ethic is very strong in Vietnam. Many people say that work is an important part of their lives, which is common in many other societies around the world (Figure 7). What is noteworthy, however, is the rising importance of leisure with national affluence. Few Vietnamese (7%) say leisure is an important part of their lives, but these sentiments are much more common among the Japanese (40%) and Americans (43%).

² For example, acceptance of income inequality is also common in South Korea (69%), Japan (53%) and Taiwan (69%), but is less common in China (44%).

Political Affairs

Most citizens are interested in the political process. Three-quarters say they discuss politics at least occasionally, and slightly more express an interest in politics. This level of engagement matches or exceeds most other East Asian nations (Figure 8).³ A relatively high percentage also says that politics is an important part of their lives (39%). More than a quarter also are members of a political organization, and a high percentage of these members are actively involved.

Political engagement does not, however, extend to the types of unconventional political activities that have become common in Western democracies. Only 4% have signed a petition, 2% have attended a demonstration, and even fewer had joined in a boycott, a strike or occupation of a building. However, 52% say they would be willing to sign a petition, and 40% say they would be willing to participate in a demonstration.

Figure 8: Political Engagement

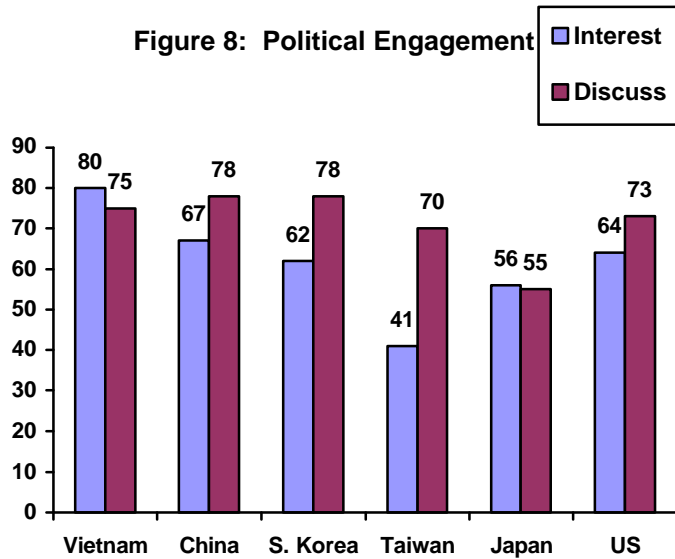
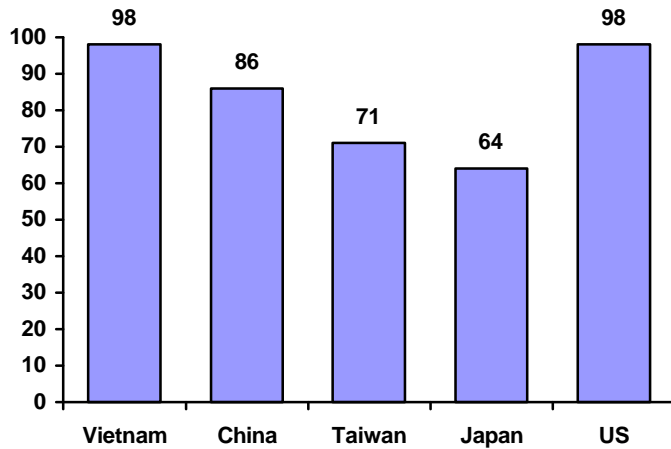


Figure 9: Feelings of National Pride



A distinct element of the Vietnamese political culture is a strong sense of national identity. For instance, the public is virtually unanimous in expressing pride in their nation (Figure 9). And despite the ravages caused by past wars in Vietnam, the citizenry is virtually united in their willingness to fight for the nation should there be another war. These levels of identification and support of the nation are higher levels than most other East Asian nations, and among the highest in among all the nations in the World Values Survey. Americans are one of the few nationalities that come close to the Vietnamese in their expressions of national allegiance.

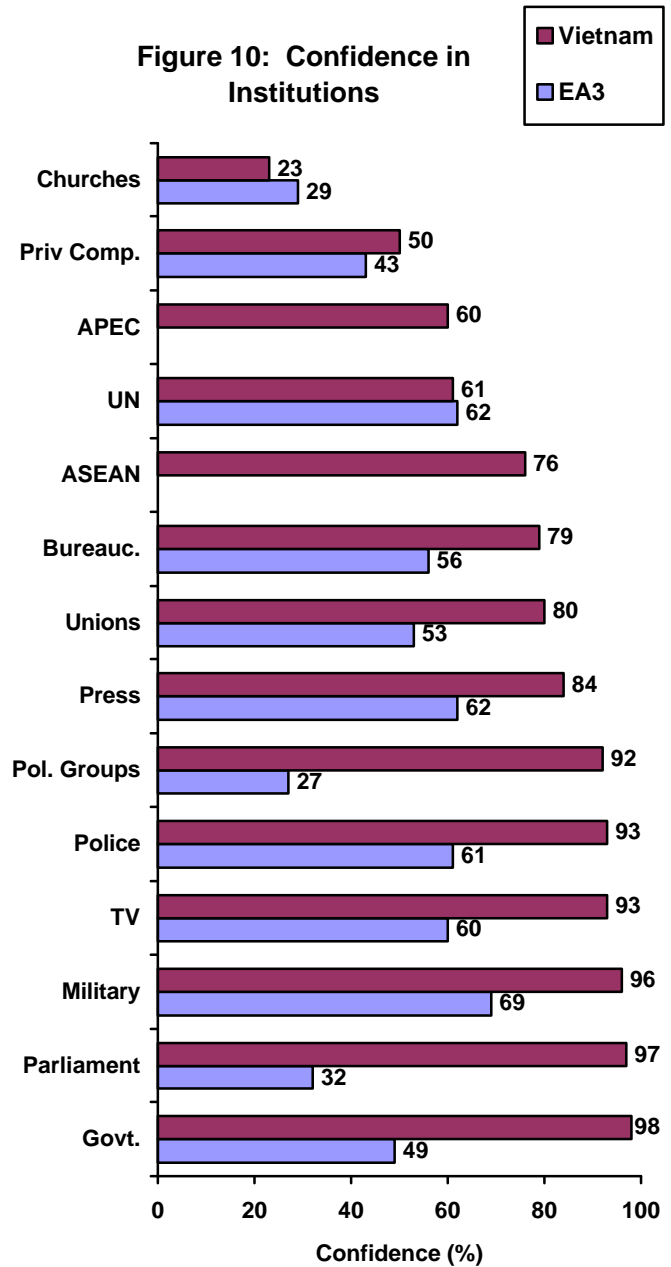
³ The survey was conducted during the month of September, and it is possible that the results are affected by increased attention to politics in the wake of the September 11th terrorist attacks on the United States.

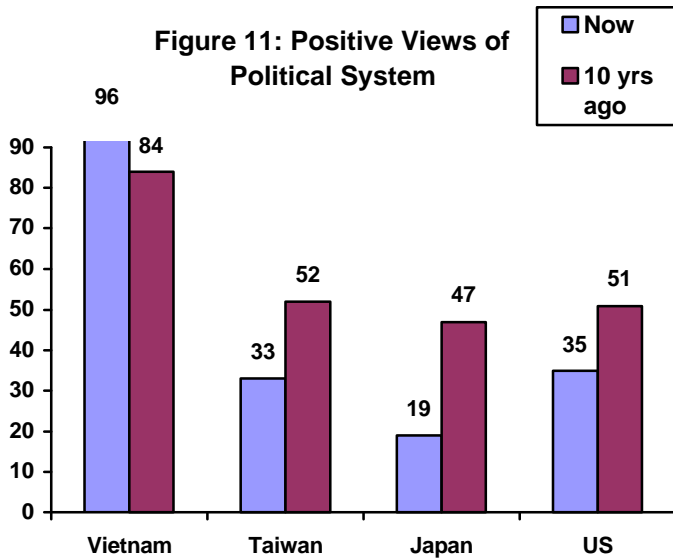
A standard battery in the World Values Survey assesses public confidence in a wide array of political and social institutions. The Vietnamese express exceptionally confidence in virtually all of these institutions (Figure 10). For example, more than 90% declare confidence in the national government, parliament, and political groups (which largely refers to VCP organizations). In addition, the public displays similar levels of confidence in the agents of state authority--the police and the military.

Vietnamese levels of institutional confidence are extremely high when compared to most nations in the WVS. Figure 10 presents the confidence levels averaged across Japan, Korea and Taiwan. Vietnamese respondents consistently express greater confidence in political institutions than do citizens of the three other nations.

We suspect that the expressed level of confidence among the Vietnamese is affected by several factors. First, respondents may not feel that stating a lack of confidence is a socially allowable answer--for any institution. For instance, there is also greater confidence in large private companies among the Vietnamese (50%) than in the three capitalist nations (43%). In addition, the WVS has displayed a tendency for citizens in more developed and open societies to be more willing to question institutions and sources of authority.

Vietnamese orientations toward international organizations are also noteworthy. Opinions of APEC, ASEAN, and the United Nations are significantly lower than the confidence rating of domestic political institutions. Given the tendency to express confidence in other institutions, these low evaluations of international bodies suggests a broader skepticism of international action among the Vietnamese public. Similarly, another battery of questions showed the few Vietnamese endorse independent action by the UN on issues such as refugees, environmental protection, international peacekeeping, guaranteeing human rights, or economic development assistance.





Reflecting this confidence in political institutions, most Vietnamese are broadly supportive of the current political system. On a ten-point scale rating views about the current system for governing the country, 96% are positive about the system (Figure 11). These views are more positive than images of the government a decade ago--implying that political support is increasing, perhaps as a consequence of the reforms that have been introduced as well as the apparent allegiant aspects of the Vietnamese political culture.

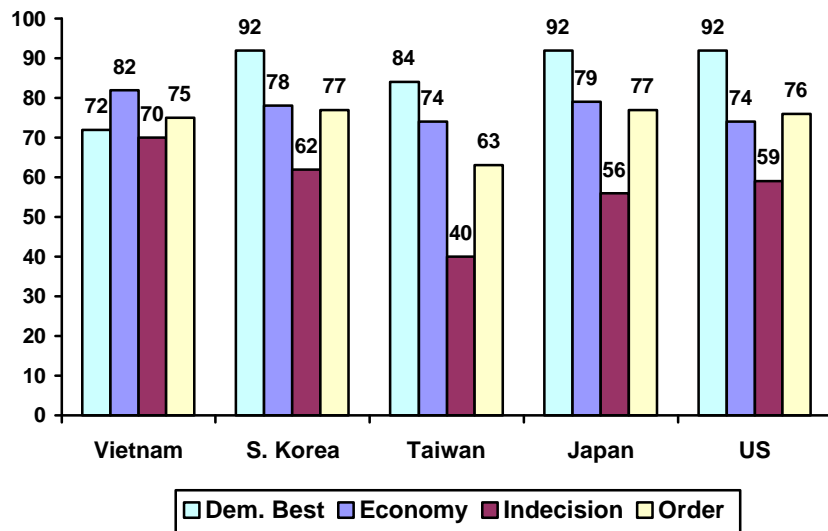
Vietnamese approval of government is also much higher than in other East

Asian nations surveyed in the 1995-98 World Values Survey. And it is often the case that citizens are more positive about past governments than the current incumbents--a reversal of the pattern found in Vietnam. This is another indicator that opinions are in transition.

When asked about further reforms, however, the survey yields mixed evidence. One question asked respondents to place themselves on a scale running from "continuing the reform" to "no reform." An overwhelming majority of Vietnamese place themselves toward the "no reform" end of the continuum. In contrast, another question suggested substantial support for social reform: A majority (54%) believe that "that stronger measures should be applied toward societal reform," another 30% say "society must be gradually improved through reforms," and only 16% think that "our present society must be valiantly defended against all subversive forces."

One of the obvious issues of political reform concerns the democratization of Vietnamese politics. The Vietnamese government has recently decided to add the concept "democracy" into the national development slogan: *Prosperous people; strong nation; just, democratic, and civilized society (Dan giao; nuoc manh; xa hoi cong bang, dan chu, van minh)*. Almost two-thirds feel "very satisfied" with this

Figure 12: Support for Democracy (pro democracy responses)



decision, and less than 5% are openly dissatisfied. Indeed, the theme of democracy seems to resonate among the Vietnamese public. For example, 72% agree with the Churchillian statement that "democracy may have problems but it's better than any other form of government." Support for democracy on these items tends to be higher among those under age 50, residents in the South, and the politically attentive. While Vietnamese support for the democratic ideal is lower than in other East Asian nations--the gap is narrower than one might expect.

Another sign of the positive imagery of democracy comes from a series of questions that asked about the some of the possible negative consequences of democracy. Even phrased in these terms, large majorities in Vietnam endorse the pro-democratic alternative and reject statements that the economic system runs badly in a democracy, democracies are indecisive and have too much quibbling, and democracies are not good at maintaining order (see Figure 12). Pro-democratic sentiments on some of these items in Vietnam are actually above the levels of democratic values expressed by South Korean, Taiwanese and Japanese publics.

Based on earlier analyses of other WVS nations, one must be cautious about interpreting the espoused support for democracy in Vietnam because "democracy" often has different meanings to different people. On the one hand, it might mean adherence to the government's new democratic slogan and would not imply support for full democratic reforms; on the other hand, it might imply support for broader reforms of the political system. But these sentiments probably demonstrate the exceptional appeal of the democratic ideal even in a nation that is just beginning to introduce democratic reforms into the political system.

* * *

Vietnam is a society and political system that is in the midst of change. This report of the social and political values illustrates how the public contributes to these changes in economic and political systems, and how the public has been affected by past trends. Indeed, the participation of Vietnam in the World Values Survey is a sign of these changes. Through further analyses of these data, we hope to better understand the factors that shape these opinions, and the implications of public preferences for Vietnam's future.

The analyses and opinions in this report represent those of the authors, and not the other investigators and institutions that participated in this survey. **Russell Dalton** is Director of the Center for the Study of Democracy at the University of California, Irvine and Professor of Political Science. **Nhu-Ngoc Ong** is a graduate research fellow in the Center and a Ph.D. student in the Department of Political Science.

Methodology

The survey was conducted in September-October 2001 using a multi-stage area probability sample with a random walk household selection at the last stage. The project and fieldwork was administered by the Institute for Human Studies in Hanoi under the direction of Dr. Pham Minh Hac.

The sample consists of 1,000 respondents distributed proportionately throughout the eight census regions of Vietnam. The survey respondents were selected to be representative of the adult population in Vietnam. In comparison to census statistics, the survey closely represents the population on several standard demographic measures:

| | <u>Survey</u> | <u>Census</u> |
|--------------------|---------------|---------------|
| Red River Delta | 19.9% | 19.4% |
| Northeast | 14.4 | 14.2 |
| Northwest | 2.9 | 2.9 |
| North Central | 8.1 | 13.1 |
| Central Coast | 13.2 | 8.6 |
| Central Highland | 6.5 | 4.0 |
| Southeast | 12.8 | 16.6 |
| Mekong River Delta | 22.2 | 21.2 |
| Male | 49.1% | 48.4 |
| Female | 50.9 | 51.6 |
| 18-19 years | 5.2% | 6.5% |
| 20-29 | 17.5 | 29.1 |
| 30-39 | 23.2 | 25.4 |
| 40-49 | 23.9 | 16.7 |
| 50+ years | 30.2 | 22.3 |
| No education | 4.2% | 9.8 |
| Primary | 32.0 | 50.3 |
| Lower secondary | 33.7 | 26.7 |
| Upper secondary | 23.2 | 10.4 |
| College | 6.9 | 2.7 |

The statistical sampling error of this study is approximately 4 percent. This means that national percentages in this report are likely (95 percent of the time) to be within +/- 4 percent of the actual population percentages. In addition, one should also consider that this was the first application of a national probability sampling on a political attitudes survey in Vietnam. The Vietnamese population also is unfamiliar with the survey methodology, and some respondents may feel hesitant to express their opinions fully. So it is possible that non-sampling errors are also present in these data even though the Institute for Human Studies expressed their willingness to take extraordinary care to follow scientific procedures.

Additional information on the Vietnamese survey, the English and Vietnamese language questionnaires, sampling design, and information on the World Values Survey project is available on our project website: www.democ.uci.edu/democ/archive/vietnam.htm

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