

Book Review

Review by Nilar Chit Tun

Vietnam Today

By Mark Ashwill with Thai Ngoc Diep
Intercultural Press, 2004. 188 pages.

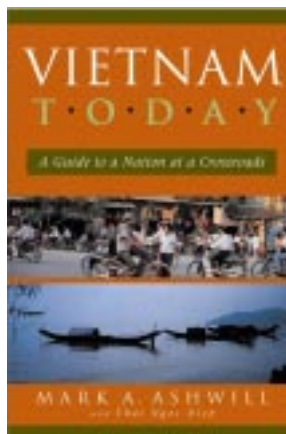
Written from a historical and cultural perspective, *Vietnam Today* is a valuable resource for travelers, students studying abroad, and those thinking about conducting business in the country. While ordinary guide books structure lists of do's and don'ts, this book is for the insightful and intellectual. The book can be read by referencing particular chapters depending on the audience and situation or in a few hours straight through- ideal reading during a plane ride to Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City.

Mark Ashwill's main objective throughout the book is to provide information to break down the misunderstandings between the United States and other Western countries and Vietnam, and to see how and where the different cultures can find a substantial meeting point. Also contributing to the book is Thai Ngoc Diep, a Vietnamese citizen educated in both the US and Vietnam who has a first hand perspective on how the Vietnamese see foreigners. This is seen especially in the chapter discussing the conduct of business in Vietnam.

Core cultural dimensions are discussed in a clear manner by "taking a closer look at Vietnam as a collectivist society in which the group takes precedence over the individual." Notable themes include basic descriptions of individualism and collectivism, indirect communication, and non-verbal communication. Examples of indirect communication given from both perspectives are particularly helpful to understanding the intricacies that are often puzzling to foreigners. For example, while a Vietnamese may say, "That is a very interesting view point," the correct interpretation of the statement may be, "I don't agree," "We need to talk more about this," "You are wrong," or "We don't like it." While most reading the book only have the vantage point of a Westerner, this part of the book attempts to deter potential arguments and misunderstandings between Westerners and Vietnamese. While it is a laudable

effort, many times during travel such interpretations can only be learned through the actual experience of being in the situation.

The author points out several Western stereotypes that arise on arrival to the country, such as, "some men having abnormally long fingernails by Western standards. No, they are not being effeminate; they are making it clear that they are not manual laborers." The descriptions are clear and vivid throughout the book, allowing for those that are familiar with Vietnamese culture to identify with the descrip-



tion, but still allowing for new readers to enjoyably gain insight beyond rote encyclopedic facts. In each chapter anecdotes, surveys, and quotes are interspersed between informative essays, preventing the reader from being bogged down by any monotonous lectures about cultural standards, something many travel books are guilty of.

History plays an important, yet not an overbearing role in this book. A synopsis of Vietnamese history is presented with an emphasis on the different countries that invaded it: China, France and the US. The US is treated fairly, and the author uses statistics in lieu of subjective opinions to clarify this difficult point in history. Ashwill makes good use of this opportunity to clarify facts about the war that have often been misconstrued in history books and

in the media.

The chapter on "Working with the Vietnamese" is an essential set of rules for anyone conducting business in the region. All of the typical issues a visitor to Vietnam might encounter from introductions, the proper exchange of business cards, issues of punctuality, and the use of interpreters are all cleverly discussed. Negotiating is also emphasized, as the "Vietnamese are skilled negotiators and are fully cognizant of the fact that time is on their side...having a long history of negotiation in times of war and peace." Ashwill makes a point for visitors to, "try not to be too 'Vietnamese' in your behavior. This will only arouse suspicion and distrust...as with all international negotiations...maintain a spirit of respect, trust, and cooperation."

Historical and cultural allusions peppered with added examples create a colorful picture of what to expect in the Vietnamese business environment. A useful compendium of ten principals for working in Vietnam is presented at the end of the chapter, which is an excellent reference for future Western investors or entrepreneurs. I found the chapter on "How Vietnamese See Westerners" as a very effective and at times comical way to explain cultural stereotypes. This chapter presents the good and bad impressions that foreigners have held about the Vietnamese who have worked with them. The author makes good use of quoting local nationals and the criticism is directed at all foreigners, not just Americans. Other topics of discussion in the chapter include Vietnamese likes ("open minded and accepting of criticism"), dislikes ("rude, arrogant and they can't curb their temper"), and other common problems that occur with foreigners.

I felt that after having read this book, I could visit Vietnam and extensively enjoy the cultural and historical surroundings and not offend the locals in the process. The comparisons and quotations are insightful and the appendices in the back

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are a more vibrant version of an encyclopedia. However, if you are looking for a book with maps, restaurant recommendations, and hotel information, this is not the book for you. The focus throughout the book is the Vietnamese people, their culture, and their reaction to Western ideals. The book does an excellent job of maintaining a critical yet constructive view of both Western and Vietnamese cultures as they meet and interact. *Vietnam Today* is a good example of how a travel guide should be written for the educated consumer, study abroad students, and business travelers.

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