



From Sinicization to Modernization: The Evolution of Vietnamese Culture in the Shadow of China

Gregory Henry Erari¹, Made Panji Teguh Santoso²

^{1,2}Universitas Singaperbangsa Karawang

Abstract

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This research aims to analyze the evolution of Vietnamese culture from the era of Sinicization to modernization, focusing on how Vietnam has maintained its cultural identity amid strong Chinese influence. The background of this study is Vietnam's long history under Chinese domination for over a thousand years (111 BCE–939 CE), which brought significant changes to the Vietnamese language, governance, religion, and social structure. However, the process of Sinicization did not erase local identity; instead, Vietnam demonstrated strong adaptive and resistant cultural capabilities, which were further tested during French colonialism and the rise of modern globalization. The research employs an interdisciplinary approach, combining historical analysis, cultural studies, and cross-cultural comparison. Data were collected from primary sources such as Vietnamese historical manuscripts, Chinese dynastic records, French colonial documents, and secondary sources including international scholarly works. The analysis was conducted chronologically and thematically to identify patterns of cultural adaptation and resistance. Results show that while Vietnamese culture adopted many Chinese elements such as Han script, Confucianism, and architecture Vietnam succeeded in developing its own writing system (Chữ Nôm), syncretic religious forms, and a strong national identity. In the modern era, Vietnam continues to transform while retaining local cultural characteristics amid global influences. This study affirms that the strength of Vietnamese culture lies in its ability to selectively adapt without losing its core identity.

Keywords: *Sinicization, Chinese influence, National Identity, Vietnamese Cultural*

(*) Corresponding Author: 2110631260024@student.unsika.ac.id

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INTRODUCTION

Vietnamese culture represents one of the most intricate and enduring examples of cultural evolution in Southeast Asia, shaped by more than two thousand years of interaction with external civilizations most notably China while preserving a distinct cultural identity (Britannica, 2025). The process of Sinicization, characterized by the infusion or imposition of Chinese cultural elements such as language, governance, Confucian values, and philosophical systems, deeply influenced Vietnamese society during the nearly millennium-long Chinese domination from 111 BCE to 939 CE (Britannica, 2025). However, the Vietnamese response to Sinicization was not one of passive assimilation. Instead, the society demonstrated cultural resilience and strategic selectivity, adopting beneficial aspects of Chinese civilization while retaining indigenous elements rooted in the Dong Son culture and Southeast Asian traditions. The historical relationship

between Vietnam and China was not limited to cultural borrowing or hegemonic control, but rather unfolded through a dynamic interplay of imposition and resistance (Study.com, 2025). Under successive Chinese dynasties such as the Han, Tang, and later the Ming, Vietnamese territories were governed as Chinese provinces, during which Sinicization was actively pursued through administrative integration, Confucian education, and religious assimilation. This period, referred to in Vietnamese historiography as *Bắc thuộc* (meaning "belonging to the north"), left a lasting imprint on Vietnamese institutions and cultural practices. Yet, it also fostered a deep undercurrent of resistance and an enduring consciousness of separateness, which would become central to later assertions of independence and identity (Study.com, 2025).

Paradoxically, it was this extended period of cultural imposition that catalyzed the formation of a distinct Vietnamese national identity. The Vietnamese did not merely reject Chinese influence but recontextualized it in ways that aligned with local needs and values (Asian Survey, 1998). For instance, the development of the *Chữ Nôm* script using Chinese characters to represent the Vietnamese spoken language was a deliberate assertion of linguistic and cultural autonomy. As scholar Le Van Anh notes, the process of Sinicization ironically served to galvanize Vietnamese cultural consciousness, fostering a capacity for resistance that would later be mobilized against Chinese political domination and later colonial encroachments (Asian Survey, 1998). Vietnamese Buddhism, Confucianism, and even architectural forms, while initially inspired by Chinese models, evolved into uniquely localized expressions that diverged from their Chinese counterparts (Britannica, 2025). The trajectory of Vietnamese cultural evolution did not cease with the end of Chinese rule. Instead, it transitioned into a new phase of foreign interaction with the onset of French colonialism in the late 19th century, which brought with it Western political ideals, Christianity, modern education, and the Latin-based Vietnamese alphabet (*quốc ngữ*) (Giang, 2023). Vietnamese society responded with selective adaptation, absorbing modern technologies and ideas while maintaining a sense of cultural continuity. Following independence, the ideological and political struggles of the 20th century further shaped Vietnamese identity, culminating in the *Đổi Mới* reforms of 1986, which opened the country to global markets and new cultural influences (Lozano, 2021).

This period marked a significant modernization shift, accelerating Vietnam's engagement with global digital culture, international media, and cosmopolitan lifestyles, while simultaneously raising new questions about the preservation of traditional values. From the Sinicization era to the colonial and postcolonial periods, Vietnamese cultural identity has consistently been forged through an active process of negotiation between external pressures and internal priorities (Lozano, 2021). The capacity of Vietnamese society to synthesize diverse cultural elements Chinese, French, and global while preserving core traditions, illustrates a form of cultural dynamism that is both resilient and innovative. Rather than being defined by subjugation or mimicry, Vietnamese cultural development is best understood as a continuous process of resistance-infused adaptation that reflects both agency and creativity (Giang, 2023).

METHODS

This research adopts a comprehensive interdisciplinary approach to explore the evolution of Vietnamese culture, particularly tracing its transformation from the era of Sinicization to the modern period. By employing historical analysis, the study delves into the complex and often contested narratives that have shaped Vietnam's cultural identity over centuries. This includes a critical examination of key historical moments, such as the millennium of Chinese rule, French colonialism, and the post-colonial nation-building process, which collectively contribute to understanding the layered and dynamic nature of Vietnamese culture. Cultural studies methodologies further enrich the analysis by offering tools to interpret cultural texts, symbols, and practices that reflect the lived experiences and ideologies of different historical periods. These methodologies allow the research to go beyond formal historical records and explore literature, art, folklore, and everyday cultural expressions as crucial sites of cultural negotiation and transformation. In particular, the study pays attention to how Vietnamese cultural identity has been both shaped by and resisted dominant influences, especially those stemming from Confucian orthodoxy, colonial modernity, and contemporary globalization (Vietnam Travel, 204).

The methodological framework also incorporates a comparative cultural examination, enabling the research to situate Vietnam within a broader regional and global context. This comparative dimension helps highlight the uniqueness of Vietnam's cultural evolution while also identifying parallels with other societies that have undergone similar processes of external influence and internal adaptation. For instance, comparisons with other East and Southeast Asian cultures, particularly those that also experienced Sinicization or colonial encounters, provide valuable insights into how Vietnam's cultural trajectory aligns with or diverges from broader regional patterns. The research draws upon both Western theoretical perspectives and indigenous Vietnamese analytical traditions to create a balanced and contextually grounded framework. Western theories ranging from postcolonialism to cultural hybridity offer critical lenses for interpreting power relations and cultural transformations, while Vietnamese intellectual traditions contribute localized understandings rooted in the nation's own historical and philosophical heritage. This dual perspective ensures that the study remains sensitive to the cultural specificity of Vietnam while engaging with global academic discourses, ultimately enriching the scholarly conversation on cultural change and identity formation.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Result

The Sinicization Period (111 BCE – 939 CE)

The Sinicization period, spanning from 111 BCE to 939 CE, marks a foundational era in the shaping of Vietnamese civilization. Under successive Chinese dynasties, Vietnam then referred to as various commanderies such as Giao Chi was incorporated into the broader imperial system of governance (Britannica, 2025). The Chinese administration systematically introduced Confucian ideology, bureaucratic structures, Han script, and classical Chinese education with the intent of assimilating the local population (Huang Shenglin, 2025). This period saw the

construction of roads, the establishment of administrative units modeled after Chinese provinces, and the spread of Chinese cultural norms, particularly among the elite. These policies were designed not only to facilitate control but also to integrate Vietnam more deeply into the Sinosphere (Ngo, 2018).

However, Sinicization was not an unchallenged or uniform process; rather, it was met with both passive resistance and active rebellion from the local population. The most emblematic example is the uprising led by the Trưng Sisters in 40 CE, which, although ultimately suppressed, became a symbol of enduring Vietnamese resistance to foreign domination (Ngo, 2018). Despite the imposition of Chinese institutions and customs, indigenous practices and beliefs persisted, particularly among the rural majority who maintained their local languages, matrilineal traditions, and animistic spiritual systems. This complex interplay between adaptation and resistance led to the emergence of a uniquely Vietnamese cultural identity one that selectively incorporated external influences while preserving core indigenous elements.

Ironically, the long period of Chinese rule played a paradoxical role in strengthening Vietnamese national consciousness. The sustained contact with Chinese civilization provided the tools and institutional knowledge necessary for state-building, which later dynasties such as the Lý and Trần would adopt and indigenize after independence was achieved in 939 CE. More importantly, the collective memory of foreign domination and the cultural resilience displayed during this period became central to Vietnam's national mythology and historical consciousness. Thus, while Sinicization introduced foundational changes to Vietnamese society, it simultaneously fostered a distinctive identity rooted in the tension between cultural absorption and enduring autonomy (Thompson, 2000).

One of the most enduring and transformative legacies of the Sinicization period in Vietnam was the introduction and institutionalization of Chinese writing systems. Chinese characters, known in Vietnam as *Chữ Hán*, became the dominant script for official, religious, and literary use. These characters were not only used by Chinese administrators but were also adopted by the emerging Vietnamese elite as tools of governance, diplomacy, and intellectual expression. The mastery of *Chữ Hán* became a marker of social status and education, effectively integrating Vietnam into the broader sphere of Confucian literary culture that connected East Asia through a shared script and classical canon (Thompson, 2000).

Classical Chinese, or *Văn ngôn*, served as the primary language of administration, scholarship, and moral instruction. Vietnamese students who aspired to governmental positions were required to study Confucian texts in their original Chinese form, and civil service examinations modeled after those of the Chinese imperial court became the standard route to bureaucratic advancement (Thompson, 2000). This linguistic system reinforced hierarchical structures and Confucian values, aligning Vietnam's intellectual and moral worldview with that of China. Over time, this created a learned class the *sĩ phu* whose cultural identity was deeply rooted in Chinese literary traditions, even as their political loyalty remained increasingly Vietnamese.

Despite the dominance of Chinese script and classical language, the Vietnamese people did not passively absorb these systems without adaptation (Thompson, 2000). By the 13th century, Vietnamese scholars developed *Chữ Nôm*,

an indigenous writing system that combined Chinese characters with newly invented characters to represent native Vietnamese sounds and words. This innovation signaled both a practical response to the limitations of Chữ Hán and a cultural assertion of linguistic independence (Thompson, 2000). Chữ Nôm allowed Vietnamese literature, such as the celebrated epic poem *Truyện Kiều*, to flourish in the vernacular while still using a script rooted in Chinese calligraphic forms. This dual system of writing illustrates Vietnam's ability to both adopt and transform foreign influences into uniquely local expressions (Thompson, 2000).

The linguistic legacy of Sinicization also endures in the structure of the Vietnamese language itself. It is estimated that around 60–70% of the modern Vietnamese lexicon consists of Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary terms derived from Chinese, often through centuries of bureaucratic and scholarly use. These borrowed terms are most prevalent in domains such as politics, philosophy, medicine, and religion, where Classical Chinese once dominated discourse (Thompson, 2000). However, Vietnamese also retained its Austroasiatic grammatical structure and tonal system, which were never fully supplanted by Chinese influence (Ngo, 2023). This resulted in a hybrid linguistic identity: one that reflects deep historical interaction with China but remains unmistakably Vietnamese in its phonology, syntax, and everyday use.

The Sinicization of Vietnam's language and writing systems exemplifies both the profound depth of Chinese influence and the enduring agency of Vietnamese culture. Rather than erasing local identity, the introduction of Chinese scripts and vocabulary provided new tools for Vietnamese expression, which were selectively adapted and localized. The coexistence of Chữ Hán, Chữ Nôm, and the eventual development of the Latin-based Quốc Ngữ script in the colonial period represents a long continuum of linguistic negotiation, one that reflects the broader dynamics of cultural resilience and hybridization throughout Vietnamese history (Ngo, 2023).

While the Sinicization of Vietnam laid the foundation for deep structural changes in governance, language, and intellectual life, it was in the spiritual and philosophical domains that Chinese influence left an equally profound mark. The transmission of religious and ideological systems from China particularly Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism did not simply overwrite indigenous beliefs but interacted with them in complex and enduring ways. Just as the Vietnamese adapted Chinese writing and political institutions to serve local needs, so too did they absorb and reinterpret these imported worldviews, producing a dynamic spiritual landscape that blended foreign doctrines with native traditions. This religious and philosophical negotiation illustrates another layer of Vietnam's cultural evolution: one rooted not only in resistance and adaptation but also in creative synthesis that gave rise to a uniquely Vietnamese worldview.

Chinese religious and philosophical systems left a deep and lasting imprint on Vietnamese spiritual and intellectual life during and after the period of Sinicization. Among these, Confucianism exerted the most profound structural influence, particularly on political institutions, social norms, and ethical worldviews (Lozano, 2021). The Confucian ideal of a hierarchical, orderly society governed by morally upright scholar-officials resonated with emerging Vietnamese statecraft, especially following independence. Confucian principles became central to

Vietnamese governance, emphasizing loyalty to the monarch, filial piety, and clearly defined social roles. This ideological framework shaped family structures, legal systems, and educational priorities, embedding Chinese philosophical norms deeply into Vietnamese elite culture (Lozano, 2021).

One of the key instruments through which Confucianism gained prominence in Vietnam was the civil service examination system, modeled closely after China's imperial exams (Britannica, 2025). This system tested candidates' knowledge of Confucian classics and moral philosophy, producing a literati class (*sĩ phu*) that served as bureaucrats, educators, and cultural leaders (Lozano, 2021). Over the centuries, these scholars became not only administrators but also guardians of Vietnamese cultural values, often promoting Confucian ideals as a means to preserve order and stability. While the exams reinforced Chinese ideological influence, they also became a uniquely Vietnamese institution, producing generations of intellectuals who contributed to local literature, historiography, and state-building (Thompson, 2000).

Confucianism was not the sole Chinese tradition to take root in Vietnam. Taoism and Buddhism also became major components of the spiritual landscape, although each underwent a process of significant transformation. Taoist cosmology, rituals, and concepts such as balance and harmony were integrated into Vietnamese spiritual practices, often blending with animist and indigenous beliefs. Temples dedicated to Taoist deities became common, and many aspects of traditional Vietnamese medicine, divination, and geomancy drew heavily from Taoist principles (Lozano, 2021). Yet this influence was far from uniform or rigid; Taoism in Vietnam was reshaped by local traditions and served more as a spiritual resource than a dominant ideology.

Buddhism, introduced via China but also through other regional interactions, experienced an even more vibrant indigenization. While Mahayana Buddhism especially in its Chinese forms initially guided Vietnamese practice, it gradually merged with native spiritual customs, resulting in highly syncretic expressions. Local deities were incorporated into the Buddhist pantheon, and rituals often combined Buddhist liturgy with folk practices such as ancestor worship and spirit veneration. This hybrid form of Vietnamese Buddhism was not confined to the elite but spread widely among common people, becoming a cornerstone of Vietnamese religious life and identity (Lozano, 2021).

This process of religious and philosophical syncretism reveals the distinctive Vietnamese approach to cultural absorption: selective appropriation rather than wholesale adoption (Britannica, 2025). Rather than merely imitating Chinese religious structures, the Vietnamese engaged in a creative negotiation of foreign influences, adapting them to local contexts and needs. This allowed foreign ideologies to coexist with, and even reinforce, indigenous beliefs rather than displace them. The result was a dynamic religious culture characterized by fluid boundaries between traditions, accommodating Confucian social ethics, Taoist cosmology, Buddhist metaphysics, and animist practices within a unified yet diverse spiritual framework (Lozano, 2021).

The religious and philosophical transformation of Vietnam during and after Chinese rule illustrates both the depth of Sinic influence and the resilience of Vietnamese cultural identity. While Confucianism provided institutional and

ideological models for governance and society, Taoism and Buddhism were embraced and reinterpreted through a uniquely Vietnamese lens. The fusion of these traditions with local beliefs not only enriched Vietnamese spiritual life but also demonstrated the capacity of Vietnamese culture to integrate and localize foreign elements while preserving its own distinctiveness (Britannica, 2025).

Beyond philosophy and religion, Chinese cultural influence also manifested in the visual and material dimensions of Vietnamese life. Architecture and the decorative arts became additional arenas where foreign forms were not merely adopted but reimagined to suit local conditions and aesthetic sensibilities. As with language and spirituality, Vietnamese engagement with Chinese architectural principles and artistic techniques reflected a broader pattern of selective appropriation absorbing external models while preserving indigenous identity. This ongoing process of negotiation and adaptation is particularly evident in the built environment and artistic production that emerged during and after the period of Sinicization.

Chinese architectural influence played a foundational role in shaping Vietnamese building styles, particularly in religious, administrative, and ceremonial structures (Sanmuang et al, 2023). During the period of Chinese rule and the centuries that followed, Vietnamese builders adopted numerous Chinese architectural elements, including upturned roof corners, enclosed courtyards, symmetrical layouts, and axial planning especially evident in temple and palace designs. These features were visible in the construction of imperial citadels, Confucian academies, and Buddhist pagodas across Vietnam. The introduction of wooden post-and-beam frameworks and sophisticated roof-bracketing systems allowed for the construction of more durable and monumental structures than those previously common in indigenous building traditions (Sanmuang et al, 2023).

Despite these clear influences, Vietnamese architecture did not simply replicate Chinese models; instead, it underwent a process of localization and adaptation. Vietnamese builders modified imported forms to suit the tropical climate, using local materials such as bamboo, laterite, and tropical hardwoods more appropriate for the region's heat and humidity. Roofs were often made steeper and wider to handle heavy rainfall, and buildings were elevated on stilts or stone foundations to mitigate flooding. Moreover, spatial arrangements often emphasized harmony with the surrounding natural environment, reflecting indigenous preferences for integration with landscape features such as hills, rivers, and trees. This adaptation process contributed to the emergence of a hybrid architectural aesthetic that remained uniquely Vietnamese, even as it bore the visible legacy of Chinese models (Sanmuang et al, 2023).

The influence of Chinese visual culture extended beyond architecture into the decorative and fine arts, including traditional lacquerwork, which became one of Vietnam's

most renowned artistic expressions. Vietnamese lacquer art, known as *son mài*, dates back over two millennia and was significantly shaped by both Chinese techniques and indigenous creativity. From China, Vietnamese artisans learned methods such as layering, polishing, and gilding, as well as the symbolic use of certain motifs like dragons, lotuses, and clouds. However, they infused these techniques with distinctly Vietnamese themes, colors, and stylistic choices often

depicting local myths, historical scenes, and natural landscapes with a uniquely soft, layered texture and depth.

The development of Vietnamese lacquer art also illustrates a broader pattern of selective cultural integration (Minh, 2023). While Chinese methods introduced a technical sophistication that elevated the medium's artistic potential, Vietnamese artists utilized locally sourced resins, pigments, and materials, which altered both the aesthetic qualities and the thematic resonance of their work. The red, black, and gold palettes, along with engraved shell inlays and mother-of-pearl highlights, became hallmark features of Vietnamese lacquerware, distinguishing it from its Chinese counterparts. In doing so, Vietnamese artists not only preserved their cultural identity but also contributed to the evolution of a visual tradition that could stand on its own within the East Asian artistic canon. Rather than submitting to a passive cultural transmission, Vietnamese artisans and builders engaged actively with foreign forms, transforming them through local sensibilities and environmental needs. This creative adaptation process ensured that even as Vietnam drew from Chinese civilization, it continued to produce distinct cultural expressions that reflected its own historical experiences and aesthetic values. The resulting hybridity, visible in everything from pagoda rooftops to lacquer paintings, exemplifies the resilience and ingenuity of Vietnamese cultural identity throughout its complex history of foreign interaction (Minh, 2023).

Just as Chinese influence reshaped Vietnam's aesthetic and spiritual landscapes, it also deeply penetrated the structures of governance and social organization. Beyond art and architecture, the legacy of Sinicization extended into the administrative and ideological foundations of the Vietnamese state, leaving a lasting imprint on its institutions, hierarchies, and political thought.

The Chinese administrative legacy had a profound and lasting influence on Vietnamese political organization, especially during and after the period of Sinicization. Under Chinese rule, Vietnam was integrated into the imperial governance system through the implementation of a centralized bureaucracy, complete with prefectural divisions, civil service structures, and standardized legal codes. These administrative innovations replaced earlier, more localized forms of rule with a highly stratified and hierarchical model that emphasized order, rational governance, and the supremacy of the state. Chinese bureaucratic models became the blueprint for Vietnamese governance for centuries, especially under dynasties such as the Lý, Trần, and Lê, which maintained complex state structures modeled after the Tang and Song dynasties (Britannica, 2025).

One of the most significant ideological imports was the Confucian concept of the Mandate of Heaven (Thiên mệnh), which provided a new philosophical basis for political legitimacy. This concept held that a ruler's authority derived from divine sanction, contingent on moral virtue and competent governance (Minh, 2023). Vietnamese rulers adopted this framework to justify their sovereignty, especially after independence from Chinese rule in 939 CE. However, they modified the idea to align with local beliefs and political traditions, often intertwining it with indigenous cosmologies and ancestor veneration. In this way, while Confucian ideology shaped the structure and logic of Vietnamese statecraft, it was localized to suit the Vietnamese worldview and experiences of kingship (Britannica, 2025).

The adoption of Chinese administrative and political models also led to significant changes in Vietnam's social hierarchy and kinship structures. The Confucian ideal of the

patriarchal, patrilineal family became increasingly institutionalized, particularly among the elite. These ideals promoted male dominance in familial decision-making, inheritance, and ancestral rites, thereby reinforcing a gendered social order aligned with Confucian orthodoxy. Over time, these values became enshrined in Vietnamese legal codes and customs, influencing marriage practices, inheritance laws, and social expectations across classes. However, this transformation was neither total nor uncontested, and indigenous customs continued to exert strong influence, especially in rural areas (Britannica, 2025).

Notably, traditional Vietnamese society had long recognized significant roles for women in both family and public life, a practice that clashed with imported Confucian gender norms. Women in pre-Sinic Vietnam often held property, participated in agriculture and local governance, and maintained autonomy in household affairs. These traditions persisted even after Chinese models were introduced, creating a layered and sometimes contradictory social fabric (Britannica, 2025). This tension is most vividly illustrated by national figures such as the Trung Sisters, who led a major rebellion against Han Chinese rule in the first century CE and became enduring symbols of female leadership and resistance. Their legacy continues to challenge and complicate the Confucian narrative of male-dominated authority in Vietnamese historical consciousness.

Chinese administrative and social systems deeply influenced the formation of the Vietnamese state and society, embedding structural models that endured well beyond the period of direct Chinese rule. Yet the Vietnamese response was far from passive; foreign institutions and ideologies were consistently adapted to local needs, environmental conditions, and cultural values. This dynamic process produced a unique political culture that merged hierarchical governance with local traditions of autonomy, including those related to gender and kinship. The resulting synthesis allowed Vietnam to modernize and centralize its state institutions while preserving key elements of its indigenous identity, setting the stage for a resilient and distinctively Vietnamese sociopolitical order.

Transition Period (939 CE – 1986): Independence and Colonial Encounters

The transition period from 939 CE to 1986 marked a pivotal chapter in the evolution of Vietnamese culture a time of asserting independence, negotiating foreign influences, and nurturing a distinct national identity (Study.com, 2025). The declaration of independence from Chinese rule in 939 CE did not mark a complete cultural rupture but rather the beginning of a nuanced process of cultural synthesis. Vietnamese dynasties such as the Lý, Trần, and Lê asserted political sovereignty while continuing to engage with Chinese-derived philosophical, political, and institutional models. This complex balancing act between autonomy and continuity became a defining feature of Vietnamese cultural development throughout the post-independence era (Study.com, 2025).

In the centuries following independence, Vietnamese rulers and scholars embraced Confucianism not as a symbol of foreign domination but as a flexible framework that could be adapted to indigenous realities. The Confucian bureaucracy remained central to governance, with court rituals, civil service

examinations, and legal codes drawing heavily from Chinese precedents. However, the Vietnamese applied Confucian principles in ways that underscored their distinct worldview emphasizing local interpretations of filial piety, meritocracy, and moral rulership. Through this appropriation, Confucianism was recontextualized as a Vietnamese ideology of governance, legitimizing native dynasties while preserving cultural continuity (Study.com, 2025).

This post-independence cultural consolidation also gave rise to a vibrant literary tradition that became a key medium for articulating Vietnamese identity. The creation and widespread use of *Chữ Nôm*, a demotic script based on modified Chinese characters, enabled scholars and poets to express complex ideas in the Vietnamese language. One of the most emblematic works of this tradition, Nguyễn Du's *Truyện Kiều* (The Tale of Kiều), masterfully fused Vietnamese moral themes with classical literary forms, becoming a cultural touchstone (Study.com, 2025). The flourishing of *Chữ Nôm* literature marked the maturation of Vietnamese high culture, asserting both intellectual independence and cultural sophistication in relation to the broader East Asian world.

The advent of French colonial rule in the late 19th century brought a profound cultural disruption. The French administration sought to remake Vietnamese society in the image of Western modernity, often dismissing both indigenous and Chinese-derived traditions as obstacles to progress. French schools prioritized instruction in the French language and culture, relegating Confucian education and classical literature to the margins. At the same time, the colonial government introduced *Quốc Ngữ*, a Latin-based writing system developed by European missionaries, as the new standard for Vietnamese literacy. This shift, while initially imposed, ultimately became one of the most transformative developments in Vietnamese cultural history, democratizing education and enabling new forms of mass communication (Hung, 2022).

French influence extended beyond language and education into the physical and sensory fabric of Vietnamese life. In cities like Hanoi, Huế, and Saigon, colonial authorities introduced European-style architecture, wide boulevards, and modern infrastructure, which contrasted sharply with traditional urban forms. Yet, over time, Vietnamese architects and builders blended French and Vietnamese styles, producing a unique hybrid aesthetic visible in homes, government buildings, and cathedrals (Hung, 2022). Culinary exchanges also occurred: French staples such as bread, coffee, and *pâté* were incorporated into Vietnamese cuisine, culminating in iconic dishes like *bánh mì* and *cà phê sữa đá*. These examples reflect the persistent Vietnamese pattern of cultural adaptation absorbing foreign elements while reconfiguring them to align with local tastes and identities.

Despite the colonial regime's efforts to impose cultural assimilation, French rule inadvertently stimulated Vietnamese resistance and the emergence of a new cultural nationalism. The early 20th century witnessed the rise of a Western-educated intelligentsia who grappled with reconciling traditional Confucian ideals, colonial modernity, and aspirations for national independence (Hung, 2022). Thinkers such as Phan Bội Châu and Phan Châu Trinh invoked both East Asian philosophies and Western political theories to critique colonial oppression and envision a modern Vietnamese society. Their writings and activism planted the

seeds of a new cultural consciousness that was both rooted in Vietnamese heritage and open to global influences (Nhien, 2024).

The cultural ferment of the colonial era also facilitated a reevaluation of gender roles, education, and identity. As Western ideas about individual rights, gender equality, and secular governance circulated through Vietnamese society, they intersected with indigenous and Confucian values in complex ways. Women increasingly entered public life as writers, teachers, and activists, challenging Confucian patriarchal norms. Meanwhile, literary and artistic production expanded through new media, including newspapers, novels, and plays written in Quốc Ngữ, which allowed for broader public engagement with national and cultural issues (Voortman, 2018).

World War II, the First Indochina War, and the subsequent division of Vietnam in 1954 further deepened cultural transformations. In the North, a socialist cultural policy emerged that emphasized proletarian ideals, anti-colonial narratives, and revolutionary aesthetics, often rejecting both traditional Confucian and colonial legacies. In contrast, the South experienced a flourishing of modern arts, cinema, and literature influenced by both French and American models (Voortman, 2018). This divergence created a cultural dichotomy within Vietnam, reflecting broader political divisions but also fueling debates over the meaning of Vietnamese identity in a rapidly changing world. The transition period

from 1954 to 1986 was not a linear journey away from Chinese influence or toward Western modernity, but rather a dynamic continuum of cultural negotiation (Nhien, 2024). Vietnamese society continuously reinterpreted external influences whether Chinese, French, or socialist within the framework of its own historical experience and values. From Confucian temples to colonial boulevards, from Chữ Nôm poetry to Quốc Ngữ journalism, each phase of this period added new layers to the complex tapestry of Vietnamese culture. This era of consolidation, colonization, and cultural renaissance laid the intellectual and institutional foundations for the post-Đổi Mới era, in which Vietnam would reengage the world on its own terms (Voortman, 2018).

The struggle for independence from French colonial rule was not only a political revolution but also a profound cultural awakening that laid the foundation for modern Vietnamese nationalism. As anti-colonial sentiments intensified in the early 20th century, Vietnamese intellectuals began to explore and redefine what it meant to be Vietnamese in the context of both a colonial past and a modernizing world. This period saw a concerted effort to reclaim national identity by engaging with cultural traditions that had long been overshadowed or suppressed under French domination (Linh, 2023). Intellectuals and political leaders looked to Vietnam's rich historical legacy including its resistance to Chinese domination, its literary achievements, and its folk traditions as sources of pride and inspiration. These cultural elements were reframed as symbols of resilience and uniqueness, essential to the formation of a modern national consciousness (Linh, 2023).

A key aspect of this cultural resurgence was the synthesis between tradition and modernity. Rather than reject the cultural changes brought by colonialism, many Vietnamese reformers sought to integrate selected aspects of Western thought, political theory, and artistic expression into a revitalized national culture (Nhien, 2024). Thinkers like Phan Bội Châu and Phan Châu Trinh, though differing

in their strategies, both emphasized the need to modernize while remaining anchored in Vietnamese heritage. This dual orientation allowed for the emergence of a dynamic form of cultural nationalism that was both forward-looking and deeply rooted in the Vietnamese past. It also laid the intellectual groundwork for later revolutionary movements that would use culture not just as a means of expression but as a weapon of resistance and nation-building (Linh, 2023).

In the realm of literature, the early 20th century witnessed an explosion of creativity and innovation. Vietnamese writers began to experiment with prose fiction, journalism, and poetry written in Quốc Ngữ, the Latin-based script that had become more widespread under French colonial rule. This allowed for greater accessibility and mass readership, democratizing literature and expanding its role in shaping public opinion. While adopting new narrative techniques and addressing contemporary social issues such as colonialism, inequality, and gender, many authors remained deeply connected to traditional Vietnamese literary forms and moral themes. Works like Tữ Lực Văn Đoàn's novels exemplified this blend of modern literary form with traditional Confucian concerns about ethics, family, and social responsibility (Son & Le, 2022).

Art and visual culture also underwent significant transformation during this era. Traditional Vietnamese art forms such as lacquer painting and calligraphy were reimagined with modern sensibilities, often influenced by European artistic movements but grounded in local techniques and materials (Son & Le, 2022). Artists trained in colonial art schools began to explore national themes through new mediums and visual vocabularies, leading to the emergence of a uniquely modern Vietnamese aesthetic. This period also saw the birth of modern Vietnamese cinema and theater, which became important platforms for expressing national identity and addressing contemporary social realities. These developments illustrate the capacity of Vietnamese culture to evolve and respond creatively to foreign influences without losing its core identity (Son & Le, 2022).

The cultural movements that emerged during the struggle for independence reflected the resilience and adaptability of the Vietnamese people. By consciously reengaging with their past while embracing aspects of modernity, Vietnamese intellectuals and artists forged a path toward a renewed and self-defined national culture. This process of synthesis melding indigenous traditions with foreign elements was not merely a reaction to colonialism but a proactive strategy for asserting cultural sovereignty (Son & Le, 2022). It affirmed that Vietnamese identity was neither static nor derivative, but rather dynamic, multifaceted, and deeply connected to the nation's ongoing quest for freedom and dignity.

Moderinization Phase (1986 – Present): Doi Moi and Cultural Transformation

The introduction of Đổi Mới (Renovation) economic reforms in 1986 marked a watershed moment in Vietnam's modern history, ushering in an era of economic liberalization, global integration, and significant cultural transformation. Initiated in response to a crisis in the centrally planned economy, Đổi Mới aimed to shift Vietnam toward a socialist-oriented market economy (Le, 2025). While the reforms were primarily economic in intent, their ramifications have deeply affected Vietnamese society and culture. The period since 1986 has witnessed unprecedented changes in how Vietnamese people live, think, consume, and relate to their national identity, raising profound questions about cultural continuity in the

face of globalization and modernization.

Economically, *Đổi Mới* transformed Vietnam from an isolated, agrarian economy into one of the most dynamic markets in Southeast Asia. State-owned enterprises were restructured, private entrepreneurship was encouraged, and foreign direct investment began to flow in. As a result, poverty levels dramatically declined, and a new middle class emerged. These socioeconomic shifts led to changes in traditional structures extended family households gave way to nuclear families, rural-urban migration increased, and new occupational roles emerged. These developments had deep cultural implications, affecting everything from daily routines and gender roles to generational relationships and collective values (Le, 2025).

Urbanization accelerated during this period, especially in major cities like Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi, which became epicenters of cultural change. The rise of malls, cafes, fashion industries, and entertainment venues gave rise to a new consumer culture (Trang, 2014). While this urban modernity brought new opportunities for individual expression and social mobility, it also challenged long-standing Vietnamese values centered around frugality, community, and respect for tradition. The lifestyle changes associated with this new economic order required individuals and communities to renegotiate the meaning of cultural authenticity and the boundaries of acceptable modern behavior (Trang, 2014).

Vietnam's increasing integration into global markets and international institutions further intensified these cultural dynamics. Trade agreements, diplomatic partnerships, and participation in global forums opened Vietnam to an influx of foreign ideas, products, and cultural norms. From South Korean pop culture and American films to Japanese fashion and Chinese mobile applications, Vietnamese youth in particular became immersed in a global cultural environment (Trang, 2014). While some viewed this cultural openness as a threat to national identity, others saw it as an opportunity to redefine and enrich Vietnamese culture in the global context (Le, 2025).

Vietnam's historical relationship with China continued to shape cultural discourse in this era. Despite robust economic ties, Vietnamese society remained cautious about Chinese influence, both culturally and politically (Le, 2025). Territorial disputes in the South China Sea and economic competition intensified public wariness, leading to occasional outbreaks of anti-Chinese sentiment. These tensions reflected a long-standing desire among many Vietnamese to assert cultural autonomy and resist perceived cultural subjugation. This ambivalence toward Chinese influence underscores the complexity of Vietnam's post-*Đổi Mới* cultural positioning open to exchange, but vigilant in guarding its distinctiveness.

Digital technology became a powerful force of cultural change in contemporary Vietnam. The proliferation of smartphones, widespread internet access, and the rise of social media platforms radically altered how Vietnamese people communicate, express themselves, and interact with their heritage. Young people increasingly turn to digital platforms for information, entertainment, and identity formation. While this shift has democratized cultural production and facilitated global connections, it also poses challenges for preserving traditional practices and transmitting cultural knowledge across generations (Viet Nam News,

2024).

Despite these challenges, Vietnam's digital transformation has also revealed its capacity for cultural innovation. From YouTube channels that teach traditional cuisine to TikTok trends that remix folk songs with modern beats, Vietnamese netizens have shown remarkable creativity in blending the old with the new (Viet Nam News, 2024). The popularity of digital storytelling and online communities devoted to Vietnamese history, language, and folk art demonstrates how technology can also serve as a tool for cultural preservation and revival. In this way, digital culture becomes a new frontier where Vietnam negotiates the relationship between tradition and modernity.

Today's Vietnamese culture is the result of a layered synthesis, shaped by thousands of years of indigenous development, centuries of Chinese rule, nearly a century of French colonialism, Cold War divisions, and now, globalization (Viet Nam News, 2024). This synthesis is not uniform; cultural expressions vary widely across regions, ethnic groups, and social classes. In the highlands, minority groups maintain distinct languages and rituals, while urban youth in Hanoi or Saigon may embrace global fashion and digital subcultures. This diversity reflects both the richness and complexity of Vietnamese cultural identity in the post-Đổi Mới era.

To address the tensions between cultural preservation and modernization, the Vietnamese government and civil society have implemented various policies and initiatives. Educational reforms now include greater emphasis on Vietnamese literature, history, and moral education. Cultural preservation efforts aim to document and protect intangible heritage such as folk songs, traditional crafts, and local dialects. Contemporary Vietnamese artists, musicians, and writers are also reimagining traditional forms for modern audiences, ensuring that culture remains both rooted and relevant. These efforts demonstrate a conscious strategy to maintain cultural coherence amid rapid change.

The post-Đổi Mới era represents a transformative phase in Vietnamese cultural evolution. Economic reforms and globalization have brought both opportunities and tensions, challenging Vietnam to redefine its cultural identity in a rapidly changing world. Yet throughout these shifts, Vietnamese culture has shown resilience, adaptability, and creativity. The Vietnamese people continue to draw upon their deep cultural reserves while embracing the possibilities of the future. As Vietnam navigates the complexities of the 21st century, its culture remains a living, evolving testament to a long history of negotiation between the local and the global, the traditional and the modern (Le, 2025).

Discussion

The evolution of Vietnamese culture from the era of Sinicization to the present-day era of globalization reflects a deeply ingrained pattern of selective adaptation and resilient resistance. Rather than passively absorbing external influences, Vietnamese society has historically exercised agency in determining what aspects of foreign cultures to incorporate and what to reject (Lozano, 2021). This process underscores a cultural dynamism rooted in both pragmatism and a strong sense of identity. The Vietnamese have consistently taken what was useful whether administrative systems, philosophical ideas, or technological innovations while modifying or resisting elements perceived as threatening to their cultural autonomy. This

dynamic is clearly seen during the millennium of Chinese rule, when Vietnamese elites adopted Confucian education and political structures but simultaneously developed unique linguistic and artistic traditions (Britannica, 2025). The invention of Chữ Nôm, a writing system that used modified Chinese characters to represent the Vietnamese language, exemplifies this creative form of resistance. Instead of rejecting Chinese influence entirely, the Vietnamese reconfigured it to express their own voice. Similarly, Chinese architectural templates were integrated into religious and governmental buildings but adapted to suit the local environment and aesthetic sensibilities, resulting in a hybrid yet distinctly Vietnamese architectural identity.

The French colonial period introduced new challenges that echoed earlier patterns. French institutions, language, and urban planning were imposed, but again, the Vietnamese responded with a mix of resistance and adaptation. French educational models were adopted, but often used by Vietnamese intellectuals to craft anti-colonial ideologies and a renewed sense of cultural identity (Lozano, 2021). The adoption of Quốc Ngữ the Latin-based Vietnamese alphabet initially promoted by colonial authorities, eventually became a powerful tool for national literacy and cultural expression, enabling the growth of modern Vietnamese literature and press. In the contemporary era, globalization has presented Vietnam with a new wave of foreign cultural influences, from Western consumer goods and entertainment to digital platforms and international educational systems. Yet, Vietnamese responses to globalization continue to reflect historical patterns. Foreign media content is popular, but local adaptations such as Vietnamese versions of reality shows or fashion trends inspired by K-pop but rooted in Vietnamese aesthetics demonstrate ongoing cultural filtering. While Vietnam engages enthusiastically with the global economy and cultural flows, it does so with a firm grounding in its own traditions and historical consciousness (Le, 2025).

Geography and historical experience play a central role in explaining this enduring cultural pattern. Located at the crossroads of East Asia and Southeast Asia, Vietnam has long been exposed to both Chinese and regional cultural influences. Its proximity to China made some level of cultural interaction unavoidable, but its position within the broader Southeast Asian cultural sphere provided counterweights to Chinese hegemony. Over centuries, Vietnam synthesized elements from both spheres, forging a cultural identity that is at once responsive to its environment and uniquely its own. This spatial and civilizational positioning enabled Vietnam to be a cultural mediator rather than a passive recipient (Le, 2025). Vietnam's long history of resisting foreign domination whether Chinese, French, Japanese, or through ideological Cold War divisions has also cultivated a resilient cultural psyche. This experience has fostered a national ethos centered on self-preservation, strategic adaptation, and cultural pride. Instead of cultural isolationism, Vietnam has opted for engagement with foreign ideas on its own terms. From Confucian scholars of the Lý and Trần dynasties to modern digital creators, Vietnamese agents of culture have continuously exercised discernment, blending foreign elements with indigenous values. This ongoing negotiation between outside influence and internal coherence is the hallmark of Vietnamese cultural history an enduring testimony to both resistance and innovation.

The dynamic interplay between cultural preservation and modernization in post-Đổi Mới Vietnam is not only visible in societal norms and lifestyle shifts but

also deeply embedded in linguistic evolution (Kim, 2024). Just as Vietnam has skillfully negotiated foreign cultural influences in broader socio-cultural arenas, it has demonstrated equal dexterity in the realm of language. The story of Vietnamese linguistic development marked by periods of assimilation, resistance, and innovation provides another lens through which the nation's cultural resilience and adaptability can be understood. From the classical imposition of Chinese characters to the pragmatic adoption of the Latin-based Quốc Ngữ and the growing prominence of English, the evolution of Vietnam's writing systems and linguistic priorities underscores the same cultural logic: selective integration, localized transformation, and the assertion of national identity through expression (Kim, 2024).

The evolution of the Vietnamese language and writing systems reflects a broader narrative of cultural development and identity formation that spans centuries of foreign influence and domestic adaptation. During the period of Chinese rule, the adoption of Chinese characters (Chữ Hán) enabled Vietnam to participate in the broader East Asian cultural and intellectual sphere. Classical Chinese became the medium for administration, literature, and scholarly discourse, embedding Vietnam within the Sinic cultural world. However, even within this framework of linguistic dependence, Vietnamese intellectuals began to explore ways of expressing uniquely Vietnamese experiences and perspectives. A significant milestone in the assertion of linguistic autonomy came with the development of Chữ Nôm, a demotic script that used modified Chinese characters to represent native Vietnamese words and grammatical structures. This innovation emerged as a powerful act of cultural resistance, allowing Vietnamese authors and poets to compose in their own language while still operating within the structural logic of Chinese script. Through Chữ Nôm, Vietnamese literature flourished with a distinct voice, culminating in masterpieces like Nguyễn Du's *The Tale of Kiều*, which blended Vietnamese themes with classical literary forms (Kim, 2024).

The French colonial period introduced a radical transformation in Vietnam's linguistic landscape with the imposition of the Latin-based alphabet (Quốc Ngữ). Initially promoted by French colonial authorities to replace traditional scripts and facilitate administration, Quốc Ngữ was later embraced by Vietnamese intellectuals and nationalists as a tool for modern communication and cultural revival. Its phonetic simplicity and adaptability contributed to increased literacy and a broader dissemination of ideas, playing a key role in the formation of modern Vietnamese identity and resistance against colonial domination. This linguistic transition also marked a shift in cultural orientation. While Chữ Hán and Chữ Nôm tied Vietnam to East Asian traditions, Quốc Ngữ opened pathways toward Western intellectual currents and modern political thought. Vietnamese writers, journalists, and scholars began to engage with Enlightenment ideals, nationalism, and modernity, crafting a cultural discourse that was both rooted in indigenous traditions and open to global influences. The new script became a vehicle not only for anti-colonial activism but also for literary experimentation and educational reform.

In contemporary Vietnam, the continued dominance of Quốc Ngữ illustrates the long-term success of this linguistic modernization. However, it also poses challenges for cultural heritage preservation, particularly concerning older texts written in Chữ Hán and Chữ Nôm. Efforts to revive interest in these classical scripts

reflect a broader desire to reconnect with Vietnam's precolonial intellectual heritage and affirm cultural continuity in an age of rapid change. Simultaneously, educational initiatives aim to balance global engagement with national cultural literacy. The engagement with global languages, especially English, in recent decades represents a new phase in Vietnam's linguistic and cultural evolution. English proficiency is increasingly seen as essential for access to global knowledge, economic opportunity, and international diplomacy. Yet, despite the growing role of English in education, business, and digital spaces, Vietnamese remains central to national identity and everyday communication. The dual emphasis on global competence and linguistic rootedness reflects Vietnam's broader cultural strategy of selective integration and preservation (Du & Nhien, 2024).

This pattern of linguistic adaptation mirrors Vietnam's historical responses to foreign cultural pressures. Just as earlier generations adapted Chinese and French scripts to

serve Vietnamese purposes, the current generation is shaping multilingualism as a tool for cultural expansion rather than dilution. Language in Vietnam has never been a passive reflection of external forces; it has always been a dynamic site of negotiation, adaptation, and innovation. This linguistic creativity continues to reinforce a resilient and evolving cultural identity. Religious and philosophical developments in Vietnam further underscore this capacity for synthesis. Confucian ethics shaped governance and family structures, Buddhism offered spiritual and communal frameworks, and indigenous animist beliefs persisted alongside formal religions. These diverse influences were not merely juxtaposed but actively woven into a coherent spiritual worldview that supported both individual piety and collective identity. This same pattern of cultural integration and reinvention is mirrored in Vietnam's linguistic journey (Du & Nhien, 2024). Ultimately, the history of Vietnamese language is not simply a record of changing scripts or borrowed lexicons; it is a testament to the nation's enduring agency in shaping its cultural destiny. Whether through the invention of Chữ Nôm, the adoption and transformation of Quốc Ngữ, or the embrace of multilingualism in the global era, Vietnam's linguistic history exemplifies its broader cultural ethos: openness to the world, confidence in its identity, and creativity in forging new paths forward.

CONCLUSION

The cultural evolution of Vietnam from the period of Sinicization through modernization illustrates a long-standing pattern of selective adaptation, creative resistance, and synthesis. Rather than being passive recipients of external influence, the Vietnamese have actively shaped their cultural identity through strategic engagement with dominant powers such as China and France. The development of Chữ Nôm to assert linguistic independence during Chinese rule, the adaptation of foreign architectural, religious, and philosophical elements, and the later repurposing of the Latin-based script introduced by the French all reflect Vietnam's ability to creatively transform foreign inputs while safeguarding core cultural values. These patterns continued well beyond political independence, as Vietnamese society navigated colonization, revolution, and the postcolonial era with cultural confidence and flexibility. Since the Doi Moi economic reforms of 1986, Vietnam has entered a new phase of accelerated modernization and

globalization, marked by market liberalization, digital transformation, and deeper integration into global systems. These changes have brought about significant cultural shifts urbanization, increased exposure to international media, and new forms of expression but also posed challenges to cultural continuity, especially regarding intergenerational knowledge transmission and traditional values.

Nonetheless, Vietnam continues to draw on its historical strength of cultural synthesis, managing to preserve its linguistic identity while embracing multilingualism, and maintaining traditional religious practices even as it adapts to global digital culture. The resilience of this approach highlights how cultural identity in Vietnam is not a static inheritance but an evolving construct actively shaped in response to new realities. Vietnam's experience offers critical insights into the dynamics of global cultural interaction. Its trajectory challenges reductionist models of cultural diffusion that predict the erosion of local identities in the face of dominant global cultures. Instead, Vietnam shows that cultural vitality stems from confident engagement with external influences, grounded in historical memory and a strong sense of identity. As the country faces future challenges climate change, shifting geopolitical alignments, and the continued expansion of digital life it is likely to continue its tradition of adapting without assimilating. The

Vietnamese case provides not only a compelling example of cultural resilience and innovation, but also a valuable framework for understanding how other societies might navigate the balance between globalization and cultural preservation.

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