

History Education and the Politics of Identity in a Globalizing Vietnam

Conservatives fear that a recent decision to make history a high school elective will erode the “national consciousness” of the young.

By To Minh Son

The announcement by Vietnam’s Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) in late April that it would make history an elective in the national high school curriculum was met with a flurry of anxious opinions in the Vietnamese press and social media. Beginning with the 2022 cohort, Vietnamese high school students can choose to study, at minimum, one of three social science subjects: geography, history, and economy and law education. The public concerns about this move – that the marginalizing of history will erode the national awareness of the young generation – reflect the growing anxiety surrounding national identity in a globalizing Vietnam.

According to the MOET, the change resulted from wide consultations and conforms to international standards on education and preceding guidelines. The move is part of the ministry’s New General Education Plan, enacted in 2018, which seeks to implement the Central Executive Committee’s 2013 Resolution 29-NQ/TW on the comprehensive renovation of education. The plan intends the last three grades in high school to be the “career-oriented education phase” after a nine-year “basic education phase.” These policies aim to modernize Vietnam’s dated educational regime that indiscriminately trains students in all subjects without career specialization. Their criterion of “global reintegration” underlines the need to bring Vietnam’s education system in line with international standards, in response to the growing demands for professional labor since Vietnam’s embrace of the global economy with the 1986 *doi moi*, or “renovation,” reforms.

Public opinions over the change vary from begrudging support to vocal dissatisfaction. Supporters argue that the change allows students much-needed academic flexibility. The current history education – replete with repetition, rote memorization, and the rigid presentation of dry, factual information – has put off students from embracing the subject. Detractors, however, worry that the move could lead future students to neglect historical learning and undermine their national consciousness. The move has even prompted the mass-based, state organ, the Vietnamese Fatherland Front, to petition for the reinstatement of history as a mandatory subject, citing other East Asian countries’ history education.

These worries stem from the special status that history education occupies in Vietnam’s political imagination. Standardized history, in Vietnam as in many Asian countries, is the most direct and effective means of inculcating national identity and official ideology through sanctioned narratives such as China’s “national humiliation” or Singapore’s meritocratic notion of “Asian values.” For the most part, Vietnam’s *doi moi* has not translated to substantive changes in history education. Textbook socialist narratives still present a teleological view of revolutionary Vietnam from past to present, struggling against capitalist and imperialist forces under the rightful leadership of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP). The *doi moi* reforms

and the creation of a “socialist-oriented market economy” are represented as a step toward the realization of socialism, in contrast to its collapse in East Europe.

With Vietnam opening up to the world, however, its history education is found to be rigid and dated. Vietnam’s youth have been steadily adopting materialist and consumerist values and a more “cultured” lifestyle. Recent British Council research on Vietnamese youth found that they are more individualistic than their preceding generations, with the internet “completely integrated into their lives.” Students have little interest or use for purely descriptive historical knowledge within an increasingly stressful educational environment. With market competition and job searches in mind, the rising Vietnamese middle class is depoliticized and politically apathetic, to the dismay of the VCP’s elderly secretary general, Nguyen Phu Trong. Vietnamese students and their parents instead turn toward more practical undertakings, chasing after natural sciences or IELTS scores.

These effects of globalization on the Vietnamese youth have given rise to anxieties about national identity, typically among establishment scholars and elites. Complaints about students’ lack of historical knowledge have become a social trope in contemporary Vietnam. From 2005 to 2021, history was consistently one of the subjects in which students performed the worst in Vietnam’s highly competitive national high school exam. The youth’s lack of historical knowledge and basic historical facts have been widely and repeatedly reported in Vietnamese media since at least 2005. These once prompted the revered, late General Vo Nguyen Giap to write a letter in 2008 warning about its grave consequences for Vietnam’s “revolutionary traditions” and patriotism. The late historian and ex-president of the Vietnam Association of Historian Science, Phan Huy Le, remarked in 2012 that “history is the most dismissed subject in high schools.” Today’s opinions echo the concerns made in 2015 when the MOET initially discussed making history an elective.

With these anxieties unsated by history education, nationalistic voices in Vietnam are gradually rising in public discourse. Here, the Sino-Vietnamese conflicts are one major point of contention. Official discourse downplays them in line with Vietnam’s rapprochement to China after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Their euphemistic portrayals in a mere few paragraphs in history textbooks have been criticized amid the rising tensions in the South China Sea. Anti-China nationalism has even challenged the VCP’s legitimacy at times, spilling into protests and riots whenever China encroaches on regions of the waterway claimed by Vietnam. To this, officials have responded with an ambivalent mix of repression and tacit acknowledgement, placating its nationalistic populace while keeping them in line.

Nationalistic sentiments remain too reactive and contested to pose a significant threat to the regime. A diverse array of voices speaks in the name of the nation, from the natives to the diaspora, from retired party cadres and pro-democracy progressives to pro-regime supporters and conservatives. Yet it is issues to do with China – the 1979 border war and the 1988 Johnson Reef standoff – that animate people more than rigid textbook narratives. Substantively reforming history education, however, remains unlikely. Genuine historical thinking could lead to questions from the youth about Vietnam’s complicated history, while putting Sino-Vietnamese conflicts into textbooks could have consequences for bilateral relations, as once happened in the past.

With a conservative history education and penchant for censorship over creation, the VCP may “lose the narrative” in the future as this politics of identity intensifies. For glimpses of such a scenario, Vietnam can look to its northern neighbor, where populist nationalism has grown

feverish enough to influence China's domestic and foreign policy. The deteriorating discourse of relations between China and the U.S. should serve as a reminder on how virulent identity politics can become. Vietnam has always walked a tightrope on both globalization and its relations with China, but the rope is getting ever shakier as nationalism becomes a more prominent domestic force.

The Author

- **To Minh Son** is a research assistant at S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. His research interests include Vietnamese political discourse, Chinese politics, and ASEAN regionalism