

# 'Search for Cultural Ambassadors'

organised by

Asia Foundation and Vietnam National Library Hanoi



## Good morning, my Vietnam

Take a look at this picture.

It is all about a young schoolgirl trying with all her might to pedal to school on her rusty bicycle on a bumpy road in the early morning. Her small hands squeeze the handlebar and her right thumb always gets ready to tinkle the bicycle bell. With a black old schoolbag, carrying a fountain pen and some Vietnamese books in the bicycle basket, she seems to be ready for class.

A few years later, people can see the change of the picture. The young schoolgirl has grown up. Still with a determined face and smile, she rides her Honda motorbike to attend her English class as an 'extra course'. Her hands, being protected from sunshine by gloves, now squeeze the motorbike handlebar. The single tinkle from her bicycle is now replaced by the boisterous horn from hundred of motorbikes hustling in the streets.

Her image, once again changes, after another few years. Now that she is a businesswoman. Stepping out from the Ford Escape, she enters the International Center at the fourth floor quickly, to be sure that she has enough time for preparation right before the meeting with her partners coming from New York. Turning on her 'notebook laptop' to check all the information, she sips the Highland coffee with the most energetic spirit. Everything now cannot seem to be more convenient than that, she may think.

That's how the picture of a young schoolgirl changes and continues to be changed. As it changed an image of a small girl trying to travel a long distance from home to school on a bicycle, to a businesswoman working in a center skyscraper, using her laptop as an inseparable thing, and as the girl changes herself, a new picture with much more lines and details, in the future can be now imagined, the picture of Vietnam.

Without a doubt, Vietnam has been changing vigorously and developing comprehensively in terms of **economic, social, cultural** and **international** dimensions.

**Economically**, Vietnam still maintains a stable socio-economic environment, ensuring confidence among foreign investors in the context of a volatile international economic and political situation, like oil price hikes, terrorism, and political instability.

Over the past 20 years, Vietnam has made the shift from a central command-based economy to one with significant market elements. Over that period, the economy has experienced rapid growth, averaging around 8% annual gross domestic product (GDP) growth from 1990 to 1997 and 6.5% from 1998-2003. In 2004-2005, GDP grew over 8% annually. Vietnam's inflation rate, as measured by the consumer price index, which stood at an annual rate of over 300% in 1987, was below 4% from 1997 (except in 1998 when it rose to 9.2%) until 2003.<sup>1</sup> Vietnam's GDP grew 8.6 percent last year and has average growth more than seven percent in the past five years. This means a lot to a developing economy trying to affirm its potential.

Vietnam exerts itself so as to reach the **2010 goal**, in which Vietnam will be basically considered as industrialised country, with strong and stable economy. This long-term plan has been gradually carried out by Vietnamese government, ministries, economic sectors, enterprises, organisations, and each citizen's involvement. This significant

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/4130.htm>

goal has been well-awared and been implemented through efforts to reverse some setbacks which Vietnam suffered in the mid-1990's and concentrate on strengthening key industries, intensify capital and technology by improving the environment for investment, battling corruption, and raising productivity. Precisely, when this long-term goal is reached, a firm high level economy will be established for Vietnam. Two factors to support the goal fulfilment are open markets and good government. This means accelerating trade and strengthening institutions always go together. Prospectively, this close linkage will be more consolidated to boost the economy and complement the goal successfully.

Undergoing the vigorous economic changes, the relationship between the US and Vietnam also contributes to boosting mutual trade. As the two countries can gain benefits through this cooperation, promotion of this mutual partnership in the future will be continuously affirmed.

The December 10, 2001, entry-into-force of the Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA) between the U.S. and Vietnam was a significant milestone for Vietnam's economy and for normalization of U.S - Vietnam relations. The economic relationship between the U.S. and Vietnam is a vital component of that partnership. The United States regards Vietnam as an important trading partner. And, with a private sector commitment of more than \$120 million (1999 figure),<sup>2</sup> the U.S. ranks as Vietnam's seventh largest foreign investor. This is an important consideration. The BTA also helped Vietnam prepare for the next major step in its integration into the world economy: membership in the WTO. Thanks to WTO full membership, Vietnam's goods now can have a better and fairer chance of penetrating into international markets. In the future, Vietnam's target is to expand its market more broadly, attract more foreign direct investment, to increase the competitiveness of the economy itself.

Looking to the future, with its position of strength, Vietnam may become an attractive destination of foreign investors. Statistics in 2006 shows that foreign investment which

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<sup>2</sup> CRS Report

is licensed in Vietnam reached 10.2 billion USD, 7 times higher as compared to the time before Asia Economics crisis. Within 5 years ago, Vietnam economy has attained an average growth by 7.7% per year, one of the highest levels in the world, just after China and Indian. In practice, in recent 2 years, Vietnam obtained a record economic growth over 8%.<sup>3</sup> Foreign direct investment into Vietnam in the future is expected completely to be in a healthy state with investors from a number of countries finding success already or just knocking on the door.

Vietnam in the near future will have a dynamic and open economy, offering its citizens an improving standard of living and opening its markets to imports and attracting investment. Vietnam has the potential to contribute to regional stability and security, and to be an engine for economic growth in this region.

As a citizen of Vietnam, I strongly do believe in a great progress in which Vietnam plays a role as a center of foreign interest and investment, whistle expresses itself as a real dynamic economy. Due to what's really happening to Vietnam's economy, I don't think I am a day-dreamer.

**Socially**, it is no doubt that Vietnam Doimoi process has been a driving force in promoting a stable process of industrialisation and modernisation. Vietnam's government has tried its best to innovate its regime. Improving the living standards of the people, and narrowing the gap between urban and remote area have been the heart of government's policies. The long-term objective of Vietnam social policy is a secure, stable, prosperous, and open Vietnam.

Vietnam's goal in the near future is to implement the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) set by the United Nations. Eight goals are included in MDGs, including:

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.dtwoodvn.com/?show=nws&id=81>

**Culturally**, VN is a country with long history, specific cultural identity of some 54 ethnic groups. This means Vietnam's culture is a real mixture of ethnics and folklores, which are considered as intangible property of a nation which have been accumulated after a long period of time and cannot be changed overnight. However it is globalisation that affects all cultures in the world and creates both positive and negative impacts to a nation's. In this process, strong and specific identity must be conserved, while other positive cultural elements should be selectively acquired. In other words, a culture should be active and open towards new elements from other countries, in the context of global mutual sharing, along with maintaining and bringing into play its traditional identity.

My belief in the culture identity of my nation is a traditional, open, and selective one. Vietnam is willing to integrate deeply, however, its culture will neither be dissolved nor collapsed with this integration.

**Internationally**, Vietnam's status has been raised to a new height owing to its efforts in co- dealing with regional and global issues with other countries. The country's diplomatic relations have expanded more than ever and becoming an active member of many regional and international organisations, typically such as ASEAN, APEC, ASEM, WTO....

A question needed an answer is how Vietnam participates more effectively in the region, and in the world.

Regionally, Vietnam still has to face with challenges, when ASEAN (an organisation in the region in which Vietnam participates the most) still can neither eliminate differences in economic level nor gaps among these countries. Another challenge for Vietnam's participation in this association is that the cooperation among this community has still been limited to some extent. Thus, in the future, hopefully, the cooperations within the community will be consolidated to make sure that relations

among these countries may bring back real benefits to its members, and Vietnam can play more active roles in the region to heighten its geo-political position.

Internationally, the position of Vietnam have been enhanced. Thanks to active participation in the UN, Vietnam may create for itself greater opportunities to get involved in solving issues of global magnitude to interact regularly with big powers.

In the future, with further contributions to UN to share its burden as the non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, hopefully the status of Vietnam will be heightened in the international arena, as the recognition of international community for Vietnam's multilateral diplomacy.

For the time being, although there are still difficulties and challenges, Vietnamese are all proud to push up the comprehensive Doimoi process so as to lift the country out of the underdeveloped status, which is a positive step towards making Vietnam an industrialised country.

Taking a close look at the picture of the Vietnamese girl again, I see the background, painted with bright colors. Bright colors for a bright future. Everything now has just started. A wild new world is out there and needed to be explored. Good morning, my Vietnam.

# **Search for Cultural Ambassadors**

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**Asia Foundation and Vietnam National Library, Hanoi**



**Belief and hope in the future of Vietnam**

**GOOD MORNING, VIETNAM**



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## **BRAIN DRAIN AND HOPE IN VIETNAM'S BRAIN GAIN**

Last month, I went to the airport to say farwell to one of my friends going abroad to study. I asked him if he has the intention of settling abroad. "It depends", he replied. Asking the obvious, "on what", I asked. My friend told me that he has not yet made up his mind and following a period of hesitation, he concluded that his life might be better if he stays abroad.

The plane took off and I went home, thinking about what my friend had said.

By introducing with a brief history of the current situation of Brain Drain in our country and backing up with three causes and effects, I hope to instill in you the same hope and desire that I have for future of our great country.

I recently had a chance to visit Van Mieu – Quoc Tu Giam, the first Royal college of Vietnam. The college has a dedicated memorial to famous talents. I also had the pleasure of visiting the Forbidden Palace in Hue, where talent's names were carved on a memorial inside the Ngo Mon Gate. The message of these memorials to me is clear. Talent has not disappeared within Vietnamese people. Recognition has not disappeared. A long time ago, our forefathers appreciated the role of talented individuals to our country's development.

Parallel to the desire to preserve our traditions, we are also required to make progress in all fields. Nevertheless, it is impossible for us to do so without the "human capital". Vietnam has pride in its rich cultural traditions. From my point of view, the conservation of talents is also a longlasting tradition of our country.



### **Stone steles at Van Mieu\_ Hanoi.**

Getting back to the story of my friend, as far as I know, most Vietnamese students traveling abroad to study think like that on their departure. Therefore my friend is not an exception. Currently, there are no exact statistics on the number of Vietnamese overseas students who return after the completion of their degree. However, there is no denying that Vietnam, like other developing countries, is suffering from the popularly termed “brain drain”.

Most of Vietnamese overseas graduates are often indecisive of whether they should settle in those places or return to their home country. Commonly, they tend to stay in country to continue their research, to work and live as well.

There are tangible differences between the opportunities, technological facilities and wages in Vietnam and those available in Western countries. Hence, despite the patriotism and responsibility, Vietnamese scientists, technologists and especially students cannot deny that at least once they wanted to make their home abroad. Human capital flight therefore is a concern of our country, particularly in this period of time, when talented individuals are of great necessity for Vietnam's development and increasing role within the global community.

As far as the problem is concerned, there have been many different ideas and solutions raised. However, according to Dr. Chia Swee Ping, president of Malaysia Physics Institute, brain drain is not worth worrying about. Personally, I have the same point of view as he does, simply because I believe in the Vietnamese young generation.

In the past we have had to face severe brain drain owing to our unfavorable social economic conditions. Young people were apprehensive regarding their return as they would not be offered good opportunities and the appropriate environment to apply their knowledge gained in more developed countries. Nowadays, it is easy to see that everything has changed in modern Vietnam. Technology, education, as well as the typical working environment is given top priority to develop. At the moment, the question raised is not about conditions for young people but about whether they are competent enough to express themselves and their abilities.

Secondly, lack of award schemes and unsatisfactory wages are one of main reasons for brain drain. We used to spend the majority of our efforts and money on developing our economy, culture and the like and nearly forgot our human resource and the local human capacity. The government did not pay skillful people satisfactorily. Not all people are dependent on money but they need to feel secure to concentrate on their work. However, the Vietnamese Government has realized these shortcomings and is now doing its best to issue such suitable policies that can appeal to Vietnamese people that have been educated

abroad. Hence, with these reward schemes we are in the right to hope that Vietnam is going to retain talented individuals.

Finally, as I mentioned before, I have a strong belief in Vietnamese youth. On their studying or traveling in the world, they are still deeply aware of their Vietnamese origin. Vietnam is their motherland where they were born and brought up. Here live their family and relatives. The psychological commonness of Vietnamese people is the desire to reunite with family. Therefore, the tradition of “leaves never fall far from the tree” combined with family customs and particularly the happiness to live and work among their beloved family will encourage them to return to Vietnam.

Chinese Taipei and Korea are two models that give us much hope of a “future Vietnam”. They had to face extremely serious brain drain in the 1950s and 1960s. At first, only 1% of overseas students and officers responded to the country’s appeal to return to work for their former nation. However, many more people came home and made their countries wealthy and strong ones. The same might be true for Vietnam. Recently, new rising waves of Vietnamese overseas people’s returns and investments have fired new hopes in me. Not only talented individuals return but also their well educated children. They together with their family will soon create a professional working web that makes great contribution to the social cultural development of Vietnam. Besides, regardless of the type of migrant - for education or not - great amounts of money the migrants send back home do help alleviate poverty in our country.

It is a fact that Vietnam is not lacking in talent. As far as I know, Vietnam is now processing a “potential human treasure”. They are the famous astrophysicist, PhD Trinh Xuan Thuan, the mathematician, PhD Ngo Bao Chau, the youngest female Vietnamese Doctor of Physics, Nguyen Kieu Lien and many other people. They are the talents not only of Vietnam but also of the world. However, all of them are now living and working abroad. Their leaving is a loss for Vietnam. Hence, should Vietnam be more active in the process of pulling back talents, we will have the right to expect a promising future of Vietnam.

In conclusion, hope is a desire for something to happen while expecting or being confident that it will come true. Hope also implies a certain amount of perseverance believing that something is possible even when there is some evidence to the contrary. Although there are still many people who go abroad and stay there permanently, Vietnam is still “bleeding”. I do believe that my hope will come true. In the near future, brain gain will exist in Vietnam and talented individuals like the aforementioned people will return. I believe Vietnam as a community has the capacity to strengthen knowledge and develop our country for the good of our people within the globalizing world.

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# “SEARCH FOR CULTURAL AMBASSADOR” CONTEST

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## WHAT DO I BELIEVE IN A FUTURE-VIETNAM?

Last year, I won an exchange scholarship to join Semester at Sea of Virginia University. My role was, somehow, similar to a culture ambassador introducing about Vietnam and Vietnamese traditions. Listening to my foreign friends from many countries, I found out that they knew almost nothing about Vietnam. Some even asked me if Vietnam had televisions or Internet. Maybe in their mind, Vietnam is just a poor country as it was at the wars decades ago.

Vietnam is changing vigorously. Used to be a country dominated for over a century, Vietnam has gained brilliant achievements recently. Nobody can forget the success of APEC 2006, the day when Vietnam became the 150<sup>th</sup> member of World Trade Organization or when we got 183 per 190 votes to be a non-permanent member of The UN's Security Council. It is not by chance that we achieve these successes. The point here is aspiration for a stronger Vietnam and the whole population takes part in building up country. I used to have a pessimistic view about Vietnam's future when our weakness is mentioned everywhere. However, I then thought that, if everybody lost their believes like me, what would come to Vietnam? Nobody taxes our believes, so why don't we believe? When we believe, we are motivated to make it come true. My closed friend said "never lose your belief, never give up" when I was crying after failing a talent contest. Since then, I remind myself to keep belief for all my dreams and indulgence, and it is really useful.

I feel obviously that we are walking very first steps on the way to develop country. GDP increases 7-8% per year, government system has been improved, new law is passed, many changes have been done. These things are like a fresh wind blows through, wakes up an oversleep bud and helps it rise up confidently. It also infuses a new spirit into my mind that I strongly believe in a bright future-Vietnam. One day, Vietnam launches spacecrafts to explore the universe, or is known as the greenest country, or provides highest social welfare to its people. Why not? We keep our aspiration, our unanimity and we can do that.

Nevertheless, we have to admit that it is not very easy and we should have reasonable methods. I myself still cherish some hopes about a future-Vietnam, which can support effectively for our development.

In my opinion, a strong foundation to develop is the combination of traditional and modern. Luckily, we have a 4000-year culture, and our task is to conserve and expand it. "Vietnamese value" – the phrase seems to be simple but in fact not, it has more meanings than its appearance. We can take some examples. Vietnamese food is not only food, but also traditional values and inside is the love of cooks. A 2-hand-large *banh chung* (sticky rice cake) wraps the whole earth, a small round *banh day* (rice cake) hold the immense sky. Traditional music instruments bring us both harmonious melodies and great skill of artisans, as well as talent of musicians. Or *ao dai* is not just a costume but it is the symbol of Vietnam. However, in the integrating tendency nowadays, cultures from other countries, especially Westerns ones, import to Vietnam and somehow, fade out Vietnamese customs. If a country were a tree, its traditions would be the root on which modern customs grow up and develop. Therefore, it is very

important that youth should themselves keep our traditional values as our basic to strengthen Vietnam. I hope we – Vietnamese youngsters – can complete this mission so that the rest of the world have to admire us as a rich-cultural land.

So as we can see, youth is a very important source of our country, they are Vietnam's owners. Nevertheless, let see, most of them are not smart enough to build up a dragon-Vietnam. Why? The world is developing faster and faster, with amazing speed of Information technology and going to knowledge era. We need well-educated people to catch up with this development. Yet only 10% of Vietnamese youth are in universities. This rate is very low compare with Chinese or Thai. Obviously, it is not a happy sign for our integrating ambition. Moreover, beyond these students, who well knows information about other fields beside their majors as many foreign students do? I am sure that not a lot. Thus, only if this is improved, we can get our hopes on a better Vietnam.

Each of us has different roles and doing well our parts is an expression of patriotism. In the wartime, patriotism means fighting against enemies while now, it means building up the country, make it stronger and stronger. Let's imagine about a society that everybody complete their roles perfectly, that society will "automatically" becomes fine. Of course, government role is very important here to lead people do their tasks. Thus, the government itself should be reliable.

Here and there, Vietnamese people are said as brilliant ones in some fields, yet it is not a large number and most of them are living in other countries. Of course, this makes me happy, but my pride will be much higher if they are Vietnamese and they live in Vietnam, which will be an indirect speech to the rest of world about Vietnam's changes. To create talents, we need not only high-quality education but also social environment and living conditions to ensure their lives. Developed countries have these things, and that is the reason why they can attract good professionals who contribute to country's development. So if Vietnamese professionals stay in or come back to Vietnam, we can hope about a brighter future. Now our government has policy to attract overseas Vietnamese back to Vietnam and I wish that, this will spread more widely.

All I said are not non-sense words. I myself think that I have contributed some small things for our countries. I always try to be an excellent student, I take part in volunteer activities, I am acquainted with foreign friends and tell them about modern Vietnam. I will keep on doing what is good for myself, I believe they are good for our country too. Let's start from small ones like people say "Take after the pennies, and the pennies will take after themselves".

There is another saying "Thought leads to action, action leads to habit, habit leads to characteristic, characteristic leads to destiny". So our destiny is from our thought. I am not a daydreamer. All I believe in and hope about Vietnam base on what we obtained. Definitely, it costs a long long time to gain this developing level, but no start no result. I believe, you believe and everybody does the same, we all try our best for our believes, there is nothing impossible for a dragon-Vietnam.