

Coining an Electronic Dialect? Erasing Regional Differences in Vietnam In Internet Chat-Rooms.

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The 1986 Doi Moi economic policy opened doors to foreign commerce and technology, and opened some minds to foreign ideas, creating the present environment of permissive electronic communication. The socialization produced by Internet cafes, e-mail usage, and participation in chat groups has created a communication savvy generation capable of communicating with the rest of the youth in the large municipalities of Vietnam. Ironically, the union of the North and the South has begun to have as much to do with the liberalization of electronic communication and foreign commerce as it does with the 1975 victory of Northern Communist forces over the South, which culminated in the expulsion of foreign powers from Vietnam.

For the generation of Vietnamese born since 1975, electronic communication has allowed the youth of Vietnam to sweep aside divisions of the thirty-year civil war that structured the lives of their parents and grandparents. When I have discussed divisions caused by the war with friends of mine from both the North and South, they have remarked that while ill feelings remain with the elders, the youth of Vietnam do not maintain these feelings. One friend from the North confided that she has good friends in Ho Chi Minh City. When I probed, I found to my surprise that even though my friends had not left their respective regions they could still name good friends in the other region who likewise had not traveled.

People from the North and the South maintained throughout the war--and have maintained since--that they all are Vietnamese people; However, because Vietnamese people do not move as frequently as Americans, they do not have a national, inter-city network of knowing one another through kinship, high school sweethearts or college

buddies; In the past, Vietnamese students rarely went to school away from their hometown or province. Although such movement is becoming more frequent, it is still rare to move from Ho Chi Minh City, for example, to attend college in Hanoi.

Moreover, most youth are expected to take care of their family, and since they are rarely wealthy, they tend after graduating from college to remain in their family's house or nearby instead of moving across what was once the DMZ. In comparison with Americans, who form a network of personal ties with their countrymen and cities through frequent moves and vacations around the country, most Vietnamese cities have yet to be interconnected through personal and familial ties--despite a few major exoduses from the North to the South.

Nevertheless, within less than a year, Vietnam has begun rapidly to unite its parts and establish a closer-knit national community. Because the growing tourism industry has created an insatiable demand for more internet cafes and lower prices, the cyber trend is developing along the backpacking belt of Can Tho, Ho Chi Minh City, Da Lat, Nha Trang, Hoi An, Hue, and Ha Noi. The resulting availability of computers and internet access through internet cafes, and the steadily declining price of internet access; declining from 800 to 100 dong per minute over the past 18 months; means that adolescents and college-aged Vietnamese in these cities often spend after school hours chatting with others of the same age group in different regions of the country. Internet cafes have produced a chaos of communication, as youths run from computer to computer, reading others' conversations, establishing romantic cyber relationships, and learning about people of different regions.

Electronic socialization brings Vietnamese youths of different cities and regions into frequent contact with one another. While not yet meeting their countrymen from different regions of Vietnam physically, they now conceive of them, interact with them, build friendships, and share common experiences with them.

The cyber world allows youths to develop a sense of Vietnamese community and nationality that bridges old barriers and develops a common construct of the relationships between the North and the South. This gives them the concept of a unified Vietnam that their parents lack.

Time may demonstrate that the new Vietnamese cyber youth & those Vietnamese fortunate enough to be able to put the past behind them; will expedite a new national unification based on the virtual bond of cyberspace and a shared construct of community and nation.

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