

Book publishing and book selling in Vietnam

by
Nicholas Martland

This article will begin with a brief introduction to Vietnam and will glance at the historical background to writing and publishing in the country. It will then examine the state of book publishing in contemporary Vietnam and suggest some of the opportunities and challenges facing anyone wanting to acquire Vietnamese books.

As Librarian for South East Asia & Pacific Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London, one of my responsibilities is the Vietnamese collection. There are more than 10,000 items in the Vietnamese collection, about half in Vietnamese (including a small amount of material in *chu Nôm*, a character script modelled on the Chinese, used until the beginning of the 20th century, when it was replaced by the roman script, *quoc ngu*). The remainder of the collection is in Western languages, mostly English and French.

Material has been collected on Vietnam since the School was founded in 1917. After Vietnam's reunification in 1975 a small amount of material was acquired annually by SOAS Library through an on-going exchange programme with the National Library of Vietnam in Hanoi. Books and journals are also purchased through the state importer and exporter of books, Xunhasaba, also based in Hanoi.

Over the past few years in the UK, there has been an increasing interest in Vietnamese language, and in Vietnamese studies generally. It was therefore thought a visit to Vietnam to obtain a clearer picture of what was being published would be useful, as well as taking the opportunity to visit bookshops and publishing houses to meet people and to purchase material in the local currency, the Vietnamese Dong. US\$1 will buy about VN Dong 14,000 and considerable savings can be made by buying books locally.

Through funding from SOAS Library and a grant from the John Campbell Trust, I was able to undertake a three-week trip to Vietnam in March and April 2000. I visited the capital, Hanoi in the North; Huê, the former imperial city in central Vietnam; and the commercial centre in the South, Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon). Prior to the trip I undertook six months of weekly evening classes to learn some basic Vietnamese. I acquired only a rudimentary knowledge of the language and although I could choose books by subject, I could not analyse their content in any depth. Fortunately, I was helped by SOAS students visiting Vietnam at the time and I also found that speaking French with older Vietnamese, especially booksellers and publishers, allowed me to select a good range of material for the SOAS Library.

Vietnam is still sadly best remembered because of the Vietnam War (known in Vietnam as the American War) that ended in 1975 and saw the reunification of North and South Vietnam. However, the country has a rich history, including a thousand years of Chinese rule from 111 B.C. until A.D. 939, and from 1407 to 1428, that influenced Vietnamese culture, language and religion ¹. French influence arrived in

¹ SarDesai (1998), p.12, 43

1615 when Jesuits missionaries came to Vietnam – aside from the sizeable Catholic minority still in Vietnam, their legacy was the introduction of *quoc-ngu*, the roman script that replaced the Chinese character based script.² France colonised Vietnam from the mid-nineteenth century until 1954. The United States then became embroiled in Vietnam until defeated in 1975.³ Since reunification of the country under communist rule in 1975, the most significant policy decision was the implementation of *doi moi* (renovation) in 1986 – the equivalent of Gorbachev’s *perestroika* and *glasnost* - that liberalised the economy, decentralised the administration and for a short period until the early 1990s allowed for greater intellectual and artistic freedom.⁴

There is a strong tradition of learning in Vietnam, in part a legacy of its Confucian heritage. Literacy rates are high – nearly 95 per cent of the population. The number of bookshops and publishing houses is higher than in other South East Asian countries, and from my observations of other countries in the region, there is a stronger culture of reading in Vietnam. In 1998 there were 639 public libraries in Vietnam, holding more than 17,000,000 books,⁵ serving a population of nearly 77,000,000. I noticed that bookshops were always full of customers, of all age groups. Many people were just browsing, and that more buying went on in Ho Chi Minh City than in Hanoi suggests that people have greater disposable incomes in the south, rather than being more interested in books compared to those in the less affluent north.

There is a growing market for learning English, reflected in the large quantity of dictionaries, primers, readers, grammars and other language material, found in bookshops and stalls. Some of this appears to be plagiarised or pirated, and much of it is somewhat dated and of dubious quality. Copyright law in Vietnam is in its infancy and there remains a lack of knowledge about copyright issues, even within the publishing industry, although some publishing houses have signed agreements to publish French and British material.⁶ Piracy is a big problem, both with printed and electronic material. It is not only overseas publishers who complain about copyright infringement and piracy, but also local writers and publishers. Vietnamese music CD manufacturers complain that a new CD can be launched in the morning and pirated copies will be found in markets in the afternoon.⁷

The period after 1986, *doi moi*, saw greater literary and artistic freedom. Writers did not have to follow the party line and became increasingly critical of official corruption, waste and inefficiency and the inequalities brought about by economic liberalisation.⁸ Writers also became more experimental, breaking away from stereotypes and formulas.⁹ Yet this new found freedom was short-lived as the government cracked down on criticism and attacked “cultural pollution” and other “social evils” in the early 1990s.¹⁰ Certain authors have had their works banned in the

² SarDesai (1998), p. 31

³ SarDesai (1998), p. 93

⁴ Healy (2000), p. 187-188.

⁵ Vietnam. GSO. (2000), p. 335

⁶ Silverman, A. (1998), p. 13-14

⁷ *Viet Nam News*, 30 March 2000, p.11-12.

⁸ Healy (2000), p. 189.

⁹ Healy (2000), p. 190.

¹⁰ Thaveeporn Vasavakul (1997), p. 349-350.

past few years, such as Pham Thi Hoai and Duong Thu Huong.¹¹ Books are often banned after publication, as the government issues guidelines to publishers rather than censoring material in advance. Bui Ngoc Tan's novel *Chuyen ke nam 2000* (*Story to be told in the year 2000*) was banned in 2000 and the government has rejected pleas by its Hanoi based publisher to have the ban lifted.¹²

In 1986 2,285 titles were published in Vietnam (all but 50 of them being in Vietnamese); in 1992 4,707 titles were published (3,971 in Vietnamese).¹³ In 1997 this had increased to 8,363 titles (8,285 in Vietnamese),¹⁴ and in 1998 there were 9,430 titles published (9,353 in Vietnamese).¹⁵ About one third of the titles published are school text-books, but literary works are also well-represented. Although there are constraints on publishing and some writers feel reluctant to publish controversial material at the present time, there is still a good deal of literature being published. Of the 9,353 titles published in 1997, 2,697 titles were classified as literary - novels, short stories, poetry, plays and works on literary criticism. In the past few years a good number of anthologies and works on literary criticism of authors writing throughout the 20th century have been published, particularly those writing in the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. Reissues or new editions of popular literary works continue to be published. Literature and novels are translated from other languages. There is still a good deal of translated Russian literature available, although much of it is tending to gather dust on out-of-reach shelves. French and English classics translated into Vietnamese are also stocked. Less cerebral authors, such as Barbara Cartland, Sidney Sheldon and Jeffrey Archer, are translated into Vietnamese. J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books are now available in Vietnamese. Whether any of these authors receive royalties for these translations is highly unlikely.

Although Hanoi is the administrative and political capital of Vietnam, and lays claim to be the cultural capital of the country, Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon) is the business, industrial and commercial centre of the country. Much of the printing is done in HCM City and the two cities publish the bulk of books in Vietnam. Hanoi publications are often printed in the south, and HCM City bookshops appear to have a greater range of material, and seem to stock material for longer periods, than shops in Hanoi. There are publishing houses in the provincial cities of Da Nang, Dong Thap, Hai Phong, Huê and Thanh Hoa. Much of this provincial material, especially from the larger publishing houses such as Thuân Hóa Publishing House in Huê and Da Nang Publishing House in Da Nang, is found in bookshops in HCM City and Hanoi.

By visiting the many bookshops and bookstalls in Hanoi, Huê and Ho Chi Minh City I gained a better understanding of publishing and book selling in Vietnam. Although there are bookshops and bookstalls in Hanoi, the publishing houses also sell material direct to the public, often an eclectic mixture of material published by other publishing houses, so that the distinction between what we would call a bookshop and a publishing house is often blurred. Most books appear to be only one to three years old. Print runs of material can be as little as 300 copies (although 500 to 1000 is more usual). Material therefore can go out-of-stock or out-of-print quickly. This seems to

¹¹ Healy (2000), p. 185

¹² Cohen (2000), p. 90-91.

¹³ Vietnam. GSO. (1994), p. 294-295.

¹⁴ Vietnam. GSO. (1999), p. 360.

¹⁵ Vietnam. GSO. (2000), p. 331

be particularly so in Hanoi. Bookshops in HCM City seem to hold a greater range of older stock.

Publishing houses are either separate business or are attached to an institution. All are still state owned and controlled, but there has been a push to make them more financially viable and less dependent on state handouts. In Hanoi I visited the Literature Publishing House, the Writers' Association Publishing House, the Ha Noi Publishing House, the Social Sciences Publishing House; the Cultural Information Publishing House; the Statistical Publishing House and the Ethnic Minorities Publishing House. At the last prices of the books were not printed on the book, the usual practice in Vietnam, and the cost was therefore calculated by adding up the number of pages in each book!

I also visited the Women's Publishing House that stocks a good selection of material on women's issues and novels published by other houses. The Education Publishing House mainly sells school textbooks, primers and exercise books, costing VN Dong 3,000 to 10,000 – about one third cheaper than most other books published in Vietnam. Education Publishing House books have much larger print runs than other imprints.

The best known bookshop in Hanoi is Xunhasaba, the state importer and exporter of books that was the only source for overseas buyers. Only in late 1999 was their monopoly on supplying overseas customers abolished and now Fahasa in HCM City can also supply overseas customers. There also appears to be no difficulty in buying material independently in Vietnam and shipping it out.

Most material in Vietnam is published in Vietnamese (although statistical data published by the Statistical Publishing House is in Vietnamese and English). The Gioi (The World) Publishing House (formerly the Foreign Languages Publishing House) is the main publisher of foreign language material, mostly English and French. Based in Hanoi, it is one of the more efficient book businesses in the capital. Book selling and book publishing is still a state run concern, and an atmosphere of bureaucratic lethargy and inefficiency still hangs over some Hanoi publishers. Nevertheless I was always made welcome, and people seemed genuinely pleased that SOAS Library was keen to buy Vietnamese books.

Huê, the old imperial capital and a major centre for Vietnamese culture, is the home of a large publishing house, Thuân Hóa. This publishing house is an important publisher of material on Vietnamese Buddhism; on Vietnamese culture; and on the history and culture of Huê and the imperial Nguyen dynasty. Unfortunately, during floods in 1997 the publisher lost much of its stock. Most books published by Thuân Hóa are available in bookshops in Hanoi and HCM City. Huê has few bookshops, although surprisingly well-stocked bookstalls are scattered along the river-front of the Perfume River.

Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon) is the entrepreneurial centre of Vietnam. This is reflected in the size, holdings and efficiency of its bookshops and publishing houses. Fahasa is the main bookshop in HCM City with more than 15 branches around HCM City. There are a number of other large bookshops. The publishing houses in HCM City, such as Tre Publishing House and Van Nghe, hold a good selection of books

other than their own imprints. English is more widely spoken in HCM City than Hanoi; staff at all levels seemed more enthusiastic and keen to do business, and the range of stock in HCM City's bookshops is better than Hanoi. In terms of acquiring stock HCM City is a better place to do business, although if both HCM City and Hanoi can be visited I would advise this. If only one can be visited, in terms of getting hold of stock, I would opt for HCM City.

Most Vietnamese paperback books cost VN Dong 10,000 to 50,000; hardback books, depending on size, from VN Dong 60,000 to more than 250,000. [US\$1= VN Dong 14,000]. If business is done from outside Vietnam, prices are quoted in US dollars at a considerable mark-up

In terms of the total number of books printed, school textbooks comprise the bulk of the material published. Included in this is the large number of English language material such as primers, grammars and dictionaries, that is often bought by people learning English independently.

Literary works, especially short stories, novels and poetry, form a sizeable proportion of what is published. Books on Sino-Vietnamese history, Chinese customs and architecture in Vietnam, and works on the imperial Nguyen Dynasty (1802-1945) suggest a more relaxed attitude to these previously contentious subject areas. There is a strong demand for local histories, not only of Hanoi and HCM City, but also of provinces and provincial towns.

Vietnam is still predominantly a rural country. There were a large number of handbooks and manuals on horticulture and animal husbandry, perhaps aimed at managers of larger farms, rather than at peasant farmers. There is also a sizeable canon of literature on medicinal plants and traditional medicine.

There are many smaller publishers, often attached to institutions, publishing in such areas as archaeology, geology, science, economics and anthropology. Some of these publications appear to be available for sale only at the institutions.

Restrictions on publishing material that is critical of the government or deemed to be culturally inappropriate mean that writers and publishers have to guess what is acceptable and take risks publishing certain material. The policy of *doi moi*, economic liberalisation, could lead to reduced subsidies to publishing houses, and might result in higher book prices. In spite of these negative factors, I came away with the impression that book publishing is thriving in Vietnam, and fulfils a thirst for reading that was evident where-ever I went in Vietnam.

I was struck by the courtesy, helpfulness and enthusiasm of many of the staff in bookshops and publishing houses I visited. Many thanks to them, and to the SOAS students in Vietnam who also assisted me during my visit.

Xunhasaba in Hanoi can be contacted by e-mail: xunhasaba@hn.vnn.vn and their web address is: <http://www.xunhasaba.com.vn/>

Fahasa in Ho Chi Minh City can be contacted by e-mail: fahasa-sg@hcm.vnn.vn and their web address is: <http://www.fahasasg.com/>

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