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Historical View of Gender Aspects in the Vietnamese Language

Vietnam was dominated by China for many centuries; it was also colonized by France. Accordingly, Vietnamese culture retains various aspects introduced from China and France. The Vietnamese language was also affected by the Chinese and French languages. For example, Chinese characters were used in Vietnam for about 2,000 years. During the subsequent century of French colonization, many Vietnamese began to learn the French language. The Democratic Republic of Vietnam, a socialist state established in 1945, adopted Quốc ngữ (national language), primarily comprising the Latin alphabet.

After World War II, gender-equality was promoted in Vietnam, as in many other Asian countries. Consequently, many terms implying gender have been changed. For instance, many masculine nouns indicating specific occupations have been changed. Feminine nouns were invented for many such terms, since many women began to take up occupations that had previously been regarded as “men’s occupations.” Currently, however, Vietnamese women are not yet entirely free from the country’s patriarchic tradition. Many people still retain traditional concepts regarding gender-based roles inside the family. We still have only a feminine noun that indicates “housewife” (or homemaker), for instance. Like the Japanese language, the Vietnamese language has many feminine nouns of negative meaning, but only a few such masculine nouns.

In coming years, the advancement of gender equality is likely to result in women’s empowerment and higher social status in Vietnam. This in turn will facilitate changes in the Vietnamese language.