The Red Dao

Since 1992 when tourism was opened again by the Vietnamese government, droves of people have flooded to Sapa to see the colorful tribes of the region. To get to Sapa, a traveller must take an overnight train from Hanoi to Lao Cai, the largest city in the area, and then an hour long minivan journey into Sapa. Once there tourists can visit the vibrant weekend markets, trek along mountain trails, and witness the beautiful terraced rice paddies tended to by the Red Dao and other tribes. Members of the agrarian hill tribes seek financial benefit from the tourists by trekking to Sapa each day to sell intricate handicrafts and offer homestays, the Red Dao is one such tribe. Most Red Dao men wear mostly Western clothing, but the women adorn themselves in traditional garments. The most distinguishing characteristic of Red Dao women are the red turbans they wear. Around their necks they hang a long bib of colorful embroidery and silver jewelry. Red Dao women are extremely welcoming towards visitors, and can be quite pushy when it comes to selling their wares. Regardless of this these women make excellent travel companions and many visitors will buy goods from Red Dao women just as a show of

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1 Kara Murphy, "Hills are alive with sound of shopping," *The Sunday Mail (Australia)*, December


appreciation towards their hospitality. The Red Dao have lived in the very northern tip of Vietnam for about two thousand years, but their ancient history is still largely shrouded in mystery.

For the many ethnic minority groups that exist within Vietnam it can be difficult to track or analyze their history due to a significant portion of the groups having no written language, and therefore no records of their past. What most scholars do know is that a majority of these groups originated in southern China, and for a variety of reasons were pushed past the border into northern Vietnam where they are settled to this day. The Red Dao of northern Vietnam is one such minority group out of fifty-four other legally recognized ethnic groups in Vietnam. Due to the secrecy and restrictions of the Vietnamese government many archival pieces that would better elucidate the past of the Red Dao are inaccessible to Western scholars who must work with secondary sources that have been translated into English or French. Clear and consistent histories of these people that are accessible to Western people only exist on paper since the early


7 The Montagnards, Michaud, 333.
nineteenth century when French missionaries stumbled upon an inhabited area they claimed to have discovered.\(^8\) Because of this it is only possible for most researchers to track the history of the Red Dao back to this time when the Red Dao had already become influenced to some degree by Western culture. Since the introduction of the French to the northern regions of Vietnam the Red Dao way of life has changed, but they still manage to simultaneously straddle the line between ancient subsistence farmers and marketplace entrepreneurs.\(^9\)

When the French managed to make their way up to the extremely isolated northern tip of Vietnam they were stunned by what they saw. They stumbled upon the village of Sapa and knew almost immediately that it was a place other French colonist would want to see. Sapa is a village in valley in the Hoang Lien Son mountain range in northwest Vietnam.\(^10\) It did not take long for the French to start building resorts, churches, tennis courts, and markets to attract vacationing colonist to the area.\(^11\) The actual town of Sapa, as it is known today, was officially built by the French in 1922.\(^12\) The French hired the highland tribes people (Red Dao being one) to work as unskilled

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\(^10\) Nga Ton, 26.


\(^12\) Nga Ton, 27.
Prior to the French development in the area, marketplaces were vital to the existence of the Red Dao because they served as locations to trade goods and communicate with others from scattered communities across the region. Sapa was already established as a trading post due to it being located right on the border with China, but the introduction of tourism by the French expanded this market tremendously and increased the range of goods sold. The French also highly encouraged the production and selling of opium, which became a cornerstone of the Sapa marketplace. Eventually, a specific area was chosen by the colonist to build a single, stationary and large market so that it would be much easier to manage and tax by the French. However, when the French were forced to abandon the region in 1954 due to losing the Indochina War, the market fell into disrepair and for many years the Red Dao were forced to return to subsistence farming.

The Vietnamese government encouraged Kinh people (the largest ethnic group in Vietnam making up about 86% of the population) to relocate to Sapa as a part of Doi Moi, or the renovation period after the Vietnam War. It was not until 1992 that the Vietnamese government opened up the tourism industry in Vietnam again, which led to a boom in the economy of Sapa. The Kinh people could not keep up with the demand for

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13 Michaud and Turner, 88.
14 Ibid.
15 Michaud and Turner, 89.
16 Michaud and Turner, 90.
17 National Geographic: Vietnam, 103.
18 Michaud and Turner, 91.
labor so they decided to bring in the ethnic tribes of the area to pick up the unskilled labor yet again. The Red Dao and other highland people had seen the transformation of their economy before, but never quite to this scale. Unfortunately, in the past, and even currently, they maintain little control over the day-to-day business of their markets; Kinh businessmen control most tourist based economic activities. Even from a local political standpoint the Red Dao and others have little control because most cannot read or speak Vietnamese. The Red Dao have experienced considerable discrimination throughout most of their existence in Vietnam because of their minority status. They were deemed less important peoples, but because of their role as helpers to the Americans in the Vietnam War they have suffered intense reprisals at the hands of the Vietnamese government.\textsuperscript{19} This has led to them being pushed out of having a main stake in the economy of Sapa, and to becoming some of the poorest people in Vietnam.\textsuperscript{20}

Surprisingly, the Red Dao are not singularly committed to the marketplace in Sapa. Attending the markets and buying and selling goods have always been a cornerstone in the lives of the Red Dao, but their lives do not depend on the monetary gains from their participation in this entrepreneurship. The social and cultural aspects of the market are much more important to the Red Dao, while the Kinh who have shallow roots in the area rely more on the economic benefits of the market. To this day the Red Dao are very self-sufficient and depend more on subsistence farming to keep themselves

\textsuperscript{19} Rumsby.

\textsuperscript{20} Michaud and Turner, 94.
alive.\textsuperscript{21} From an anthropological perspective this means that the Red Dao are considered more of a “primitive” society, but the introduction to monetization and markets allows them to act as peasants as well.\textsuperscript{22} The Red Dao rely heavily on tradition and are thus not overly interested in complete modernization. It is important to remember that although tourists may see some Red Dao women selling goods in Sapa it does not mean that this is an economic option these people depend on (Michaud, Turner). In Sapa the Kinh run the market and capitalize on the trade while the Red Dao and other minority groups use it on the weekends, which is what attracts the most tourists to Sapa.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{21} Anna Murphy, "A taste of Vietnam's village life; After a rude awakening, Anna Murphy settles in to daily rituals and spirited encounters with the people of Ha Giang," The Daily Telegraph (London: November 23, 2013 Saturday): ,web, date Accessed: 2016/05/02.

\textsuperscript{22} Michaud and Turner, 97.

\textsuperscript{23} Michaud and Turner, 94.
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