



Drinking in Hanoi: Alcohol and Politics in Vietnam

A very short history of alcohol and politics in Vietnam.

By David Hutt
December 27, 2017



A man is stood in a half-mile long queue outside a shop on the outskirts of Moscow waiting to buy some vodka.

"That's it," he says impatiently to his friend, "I'm off to the Kremlin to kill Gorbachev."

He sets off to murder the Soviet leader. An hour later, he returns.

"Did you kill him?" his friend asks.

"Kill him?" the man replies, "That queue was longer than this one."



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Like most jokes on political oppression, the above includes the right levels of pathos and pluck, while bringing radical demands down to the level of quotidian desires. In the Soviet Union, that was vodka. "What is Soviet business?" goes another joke. "Steal a lorry of vodka, sell it, and use the money to buy more vodka." I once tried these jokes on some human rights activists in Hanoi, over quite a few 50-cents beers, and received an attentive chuckle.

But, rather than humor, indignation was the reaction this month to the alcohol habits of a former Vietnamese Communist Party senior official. The country's political blogs were **piqued** about the expensive tastes of Dinh La Thang, the former Party leader of Ho Chi Minh City who was booted out of the Politburo in May, then arrested this month over "economic mismanagement" charges relating to his time as PetroVietnam chairman. He apparently had a thirst for Macallan 30, a Scotch whisky that costs around \$2,000 a bottle. Pronunciation might render it unusable, but I offer the opening of a limerick that someone might like to finish:

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*There was an ex-comrade named Dinh La Thang
who had a taste for Macallan,*

...

Authoritarians have a particular fascination with alcoholic matters. Only last year, North Korea's state-run *Pyongyang Times* **claimed** the regime had concocted a rice-based liquor so fine it leaves you with no hangover, news that must be taken as some form of gallows humor by most North Koreans, who have long been denied a functioning rice-based economy that doesn't leave them malnourished. Mark Lawrence Schrad's wonderful book, *Vodka Politics: Alcohol, Autocracy, and the Secret History of the Russian State*, makes the argument that booze was a determinant of Russian history.

Vietnam's relationship with alcohol is no less interesting. It was with some fortune, years ago, that I laid my hands on Erica J. Peters' innovative book, *Appetites and Aspirations in Vietnam: Food and Drink in the Long Nineteenth Century*. Innovative, first, because of its concept of Vietnam's "long nineteenth century," an attempt

(successful, in my view) to equate the revanchist and unifying policies of the Nguyen Dynasty with those of the French colonialists.

About alcohol, I would direct readers to chapters three and four, which deal with how the French tried (and failed) to manipulate and control Vietnamese alcohol consumption, first by taxing rice-wine production and, later, by monopolizing its production, while also criminalizing bootlegging.

As an element of the *mission civilisatrice*, the French also wanted to steer the Vietnamese away from rice liquor and toward beer, which they argued was not only of superior taste and quality, but also produced using safer, more modern techniques. Beer, then, became a potent symbol of France's attempt to "modernize" Vietnam. Not to be overlooked, the French also claimed they were merely breaking the Chinese monopoly on rice-wine production, the old divide-and-rule.

But, as Peters notes, the colonialists' rice-liquor monopoly sparked resentment among the Vietnamese, leading to violent protests when officials attempted to prevent homebrew production, which many thought superior to the French-made stuff. Nguyen Dinh Chieu, a poet of the time, put pen to paper:

*What good it is to live as a mercenary,
Getting drunk on bland alcohol.*

"Metaphors about rice liquor served to express... fears over the French occupation and how it would change their country," Peters wrote, adding shortly afterwards: "The idea of a traditional rice liquor emerged as a marker of Vietnamese resistance to unwanted changes." Indeed, radicals and anti-colonialists soon learned to seize public anger as a recruitment tool. "The constant threat of prison for those who either produced or consumed nonindustrial rice alcohol galvanized everyday resistance to the colonial regime," Peters added.

Ho Chi Minh was, then, a little self-defeating when he said that "to weaken our race [the French] have forced us to use opium and alcohol." He could have added "*their* alcohol" to make the point. Still, he was to write while in jail in 1942: "What is one to do in prison, without alcohol, without flowers?"

I have not done justice to Peters' book, which I would recommend reading, though it is difficult to find. But, to more recent history, alcohol has not lost its political and social importance in Vietnam, not least because the rumored expensive alcohol tastes of Party elites, like Ding La Thang, serve as the malodor of creeping inequality in the nominally Communist state.

The Vietnamese are thought to be among the heaviest drinkers in Southeast Asia, small wonder considering the prices charged. A WHO [study](#), in 2014, found average per capita consumption for adults almost doubled from 2003–2005 to 2008–2010. Another estimate suggests beer demand has increased by more than 300 percent since 2002, [Bloomberg reported](#). It also reported that Euromonitor International, a research firm, reckons per capita consumption of alcohol will be 40.6 liters (11 gallons) this year, and it is expected to continue rising. The same research firm described Vietnam as the "the next key battleground for brewers."

I hesitate to make any comment about a specific Vietnamese "drinking culture," only that it most likely reflects the human instinct *s'adonner à la boisson* as a means of bonding and hospitality, and serves as a steady companion at special occasions. *Vô tìu bất thành lễ*, I believe, translates roughly as "without alcohol, rituals lose their character." *Không say, không về* (something along the lines of "not drunk, not going home") I am told remains a popular expression saved for those arduous periods of a heavy-drinking bout.

Though, lightly dipping my toe into the salted waters of anthropology, I've long thought (which may or may not be true) that one can tell much about gender equality in a society by the sight, and multitude, of women drinking alcohol in public. A visitor on a night out in Vietnam cannot help but notice such a multitude, especially when compared to, say, neighboring Cambodia, where it is rarer.

But, today, alcohol has a more explicit political importance. Vietnam's main brewers, Saigon Beer Alcohol Beverage (Sabeco), the country's top beer-maker, and Hanoi Beer Alcohol and Beverage (Habeco), have been state-owned for a long time, ensuring the Communist Party sufficient revenue. The country's beer market was [worth](#) about \$6.5 billion last year.

Now, however, the Party has decided to sell off significant chunks of these firms, part of its plan to wholly or partially **divest** itself from 375 state-owned enterprises (SOEs) by 2020. This month saw the **sale** of the majority stake in Sabeco, reportedly the largest IPO of a SOE in Vietnamese history. Despite interest from several major international firms, Thai Beverage, controlled by the Thai magnate Charoen Sirivadhanabhakdi, was the only investor, taking a 54 percent stake for the handsome price of \$4.8 billion, most of the which will go into the government's coffers. The government also has plans to sell a sizeable stake in Habeco early next year.

“The Sabeco sale could provide a blueprint for other privatizations that Hanoi is considering as part of broader economic reforms,” *Reuters* **stated** last month, before news of sale. It didn't quite turn out as planned. There were expectations that major Japanese and European firms would invest, but they were reportedly deterred by the \$14.09 per share price-tag the government set.

Nonetheless, Sabeco's sale can only be seen as a success for the Party. Today, it finds itself in considerable **debt** and without enough capital to fund the necessary infrastructure projects that will keep the economy growing and, more importantly for the apparatchiks, retain some legitimacy for the Party in the eyes of the public, who are becoming increasingly inquisitive (and critical) of its purpose today. As such, the \$4.8 billion from Sabeco's sale could prove instrumental.

Indeed, unlike Vietnam's past rulers, the Communist Party has no desire to curb the inebriation of its citizens, nor control the alcohol market for oppressive means. Maybe history has taught it to leave alcohol well alone, lest it stir the spirits of an already repressed people. The Party's only goal, it appears, has been to make money from it.

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