

DIPLOMAT
6-10-21

From Delay to Desperation: The Story of Sinophobia and COVID-19 Vaccines in Vietnam

During its recent COVID-19 outbreaks, the Vietnamese government has found itself trapped between the virus and a Sinophobic public.

By Travis Vincent

Last month, Mai's family was awaiting their turn to receive a COVID-19 vaccine at a vaccination center in the Vietnamese capital, Hanoi. In Vietnam, people can register for vaccination in their neighborhoods or with their affiliated organizations, but none of her three family members fell into any of the 16 priority groups for vaccination, as laid out in the Ministry of Health's 2021-2022 vaccination rollout plan. Mai's district, Dong Da, located in the center of Hanoi, had been very slow in communicating vaccine-related information to local residents. As a result, Mai asked her well-connected sister to secure three vaccination slots for her family, which she successfully did.

On September 20, both Mai and her daughter received notifications that they could get their first shot the next day in Hoang Mai district. Her husband had received an AstraZeneca vaccine the previous week at the same location. The SMS notifications, however, did not specify which vaccine they would receive. As they were told to proceed to the vaccination booth, they were stunned to learn that they would get the Chinese-made Verocell vaccine.

"I stood up and walked away as soon as the doctor said I would get the Chinese shot, despite having queued for almost two hours and done all kinds of screening," said Mai, who was thrilled to obtain her first AstraZeneca dose in her own neighborhood a week later. "Had I learned that there were only Chinese doses on that day, I would not have come. I'd rather not have a job at all rather than have a Chinese job."

Interviews with 26 people across six provinces – Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Quang Ninh, Bac Ninh, Hung Yen, and Phu Tho – showed the extent to which vaccine skepticism and anti-China sentiment are closely interrelated in Vietnam. Last year marked the 70th anniversary of diplomatic ties between the two neighboring countries, which claim to be united by "shared mountains and rivers, ideology, culture, and destiny."

Yet the public does not see eye to eye with the communist government's approval and purchase of Chinese vaccines. On top of that, many expressed distrust of and discontent with the government's lack of transparency about the availability and allocation of vaccines, as well as the gravity of the pandemic situation in the economic hub of Ho Chi Minh City, which is now leading the country for both COVID-19 cases and fatalities, after an almost virus-free year.

'No' to Chinese Vaccines

"Normally they would inform people in advance which vaccines they would receive," said Mai. "But on that day, even the security guards, volunteers, and nurses at the vaccination station were quiet when I asked which doses to be rolled out. I already felt something was fishy."

Both Mai and her daughter said their outright refusal did not take the doctors by surprise.

A few weeks earlier, she heard from a friend who was a nurse that there were no Chinese-made vaccines in Hanoi. The government instead announced that it would roll-out Chinese vaccines in Ho Chi Minh City and to certain provinces along the border with China.

According to a doctor at a Hanoi-based state hospital who spoke on the condition of anonymity, her institution received Chinese doses on very short notice. “In the beginning, Hanoi was completely without Chinese vaccines. As a result, people were happy to be vaccinated,” the doctor said. “Now many people turned away upon learning that they would get the Chinese vaccines.”

The doctor added that due to delays in the production of Vietnam’s homegrown vaccine Nanovax, the government decided to distribute Chinese vaccines. “Chinese vaccines are not recognized by Western countries,” she said. “Why should we take them so quickly?”

A week after Hanoi announced its two-week lockdown in July, Nguyen, a retired civil servant and Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) member living in Hanoi, started exhausting her own contacts to secure Western vaccine shots for her family members.

“I would rather die of the Chinese virus than of the Chinese vaccine,” said Nguyen, who used the Vietnamese word tau, a derogatory term for China and Chineseness.

Her husband, Vu, a fellow VCP member and former architect at a state-owned company, echoed her sentiments. Vu said he had tried to sniff out information from community leaders in order to confirm whether Chinese vaccines would be distributed in their neighborhood. The couple anticipated a long wait for the jabs, given that their ward had been completely free from COVID-19. In this case, they might be the last people to receive jabs and were afraid that when their turn arrived, there might be only Chinese doses available.

“In Vietnam, you cannot trust official sources. You must rely on hearsay and informal sources. If the Chinese vaccines were really up to par, why didn’t the leaders take them first? I am sure that they only opted for Western vaccines,” Vu said.

Nguyen’s family did not expect to be vaccinated, just like many of her neighbors and friends, who had grown complacent due to the country’s initial success in handling COVID-19. Nguyen and her husband kept a close watch on the national COVID-19 tally, and insisted that Vietnam was on the right track when it came to its response to the virus. Nguyen recalled storing food as early as when she first read news about the virus in December 2019. But the Vietnamese government was resting on its laurels, and Vietnam’s near-perfect record in controlling the virus until early 2021 was interrupted by the highly contagious Delta variant. For the first time since the outbreak, Vietnam has recorded four-digit increases in the number of daily cases in Ho Chi Minh City, the country’s economic hub.

“We have been handling the disease well since the beginning. Up to May [2021], most of our cases originated from returnees from abroad,” said Nguyen. She said the recent community transmissions “must have emanated from illegal Chinese border-crossers.”

Vu recalled the 1980 version of the Vietnamese Constitution that he had to memorize in his early years of Party membership, which contained the line, “China is the eternal enemy of Vietnam.” Centuries under Chinese occupation and periodic invasions lie at the roots of popular anti-China sentiment in Vietnam, which have been inflamed in recent years by disputes in the South China Sea and notorious Chinese business practices.

“The Chinese conspired to destroy Vietnam,” said Vu. “Look at the way they destroyed the environment, dumped low-quality goods in our country, kidnapped brides, and took away our sea, our land. How can we trust their vaccines?”

Duong, a medical graduate who is now a social worker at an international NGO in Dien Bien city in northwest Vietnam, was unsuccessful in convincing her parents about the Chinese vaccines. The couple, who currently live in Phu Tho province, was haunted by their experiences during the brief and bloody Sino-Chinese border war in 1979. Her mother accompanied her grandfather to Lang Son province to farm, while her father was mobilized to fight the border war in Dien Bien prior to their marriage.

“I retired and do not need to go out to work. I can wait for our [Vietnamese] vaccines. Under no circumstances will I use the Chinese vaccine,” said Mrs. Le, Duong’s mother. “We can use Chinese consumer goods, but Chinese food and medicines cannot be trusted. I cannot afford to inject this Chinese thing into my body.”

Duong added, “In my hometown [Phu Tho], fellow villagers are very fussy about the origin of agricultural produce. For example, they would never buy fruits that they suspect are being imported from China.”

Duong also witnessed the short supply of vaccines first-hand. Between March and May 2021, she was interning at a local hospital in Bac Giang province, which was at the time a COVID-19 epicenter due to its high concentration of industrial parks.

“We felt like suicide bombers,” said Duong. “We were all frontliners but not vaccinated at all. Even doctors at the hospital were not vaccinated.”

Acceptance Amid Apprehension

Not everyone has refused the Chinese vaccines. Trinh, who had been earning her keep by selling shoes imported from China online, was shocked to receive a Chinese dose the moment she arrived at the vaccination station in Long Bien, Hanoi. Her husband received an AstraZeneca jab just a few days before, and so Trinh was safe in the knowledge that she would get the same. But after calling her friends and husband to ask for advice, Trinh decided to accept the Chinese-made jab, afraid that the available doses in her neighborhood might run out. Trinh had no income during the lockdown period in Hanoi and was searching for odd jobs.

“I took the plunge so that I would be able to go out and ship shoes to my customers. If more people are vaccinated, the lockdown will be over soon. I leave it to fate,” she said.

Trinh had been in touch with friends in Ho Chi Minh City and learned that the situation is far worse than what has been reported by the state media. The daily 7 p.m. newscast, produced by the state-owned VTV 1, Vietnam’s top political channel, has stopped reporting the number of COVID-19 deaths since August, while reporting in detail about the number of recovered cases.

“I prayed for the best. I do not loathe Chinese vaccines, since China also uses them for their own populations,” she said. “But I am afraid it might be like Chinese products exported to Vietnam, which are not the same as those for their domestic use.”

Do, a young professional living in Ho Chi Minh City, recalled that her community leader went door to door in late July to inform local people that they would receive Chinese vaccines.

“He asked me, ‘Are you sure that you are willing to take the Chinese shots?’ I am sure that he would have never asked this question had other vaccines been rolled out,” said Do.

Do claims that some of her friends even pretended to have long-term diseases in order to avoid getting Chinese jabs. She also hesitated about taking a Chinese vaccine at first, but then decided to receive the shot out of concern for her well-being. She had grown depressed during the months-long lockdown in Ho Chi Minh City, and chafed at the increasing security presence in her neighborhood.

Tran from Bac Ninh province outside Hanoi obtained an offer to do her MA degree in Beijing and could not wait to go back to the country this fall. However, the Chinese government has not allowed international students to reenter the country. Unlike many of her friends, Tran took the Verocell vaccine without any hesitation.

“My Chinese teachers told me to take the Chinese-manufactured shots to increase the chance of obtaining a visa and coming to Beijing early,” said Tran, who was currently starting her new semester online after deferring the offer for a year.

Mrs. Be, a seafood seller at an open market in Quang Ninh province, which shares both a land and sea border with China, said that her whole family took Chinese jabs. “It is better to get European or American jabs, but we did not have such diverse options here. I just wanted to be vaccinated in order to work and live normally rather than not to have it at all. We cannot afford to have a complete lockdown like Ho Chi Minh City,” she said.

Little Room for Disagreement

Nguyen’s 80-year-old mother lives in Thanh Xuan district of Hanoi, which was deemed a COVID-19 hotspot due to a surge in community transmissions in mid-August. On 11 September, the community leader sent for her mother to get a jab on the afternoon of the same day. Not having followed the news and often bowing to the authorities’ pressure, she took the Verocell jab, without knowing that it was a Chinese vaccine. Some residents in that ward refused to take the Chinese jab and then received a threatening message from their community leader on Zalo, a Vietnamese version of Whatsapp. The message read: “The People’s Committee invited 100 percent of citizens to get tested and vaccinated. Whoever refuses to be vaccinated and gets infected later, the Ward will prosecute those individuals as well as their family members.”

During the pandemic, domestic media outlets have portrayed Sino-Vietnamese as “going from strength to strength,” grounded on the “16 golden words” guidelines formulated in 1999 as the two communist parties strove for a better relationship in the wake of the border war in 1979, an event that is now mentioned only in passing in the Vietnamese national history textbooks.

According to Tuong Vu, head of the Department of Politics at the University of Oregon, anti-China sentiments have been on the increase, manifested by increasing mass protests. Hanoi’s dependence on Beijing in the aftermath of the Soviet Union’s collapse, and the close political and historical ties between the two communist parties, put it at odds with its sinophobic populace.

In May of this year, then-Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc invited Chinese President Xi Jinping to visit Vietnam. But as of July 2021, Vietnam was the least vaccinated country in Southeast Asia, and was the last country in ASEAN to receive Chinese-made vaccines.

On the heels of Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's trip to Vietnam on September 10-12, the Vietnamese government announced its purchase of 20 million doses of Chinese vaccines.

"The Chinese are not happy with our success and mostly our closer ties to the U.S." said Vu, who has been following international news outlets in the Vietnamese language.

On September 25, Mac Van Trang, a well-known professor and former VCP member in Ho Chi Minh city, published a post on his Facebook account calling on the Vietnamese government to think twice about purchasing Chinese vaccines. The next day, he received death threats for such criticisms.

By August, the government had accelerated its vaccination campaign in major cities, which was portrayed by local media as moving "at lightning speed." In late July, less than 6 million doses had been administered. By October 3, according to the Ministry of Health, that number had leapt to 45.2 million. According to the anonymous doctor, the vaccination center at her institution worked day and night and on the weekends to meet the government's vaccination targets.

Courting the U.S., Coveting Pfizer

Within three weeks of asking friends for a favor, Nguyen from Hanoi was able to secure Pfizer doses for her daughter and AstraZeneca doses for herself. Her friends quipped that her daughter obtained Pfizer shots thanks to "a maternal grandfather," a euphemistic phrase for personal connections.

This euphemism has become widely used since a scandal in late July, when Phuong Anh, a former winner of a beauty pageant, posted on her own Facebook account that she and her husband obtained Pfizer doses right after Hanoi's lockdown was enforced and without having to register in advance, thanks to her grandfather's connections. The post drew strong public ire amid scant information and severe shortage of vaccines. She was then fined 12.5 million VND (about \$550) by the Ministry of Information and Communications for publicizing false information online.

All sources interviewed agreed that Pfizer doses are reserved for privileged and connected people, which has become an open secret. As stories on deaths allegedly due to AstraZeneca in Vietnam and Moderna in Japan circulated, people jumped into the fray for Pfizer.

"Imagine, all vaccines are free of charge. Everybody craves the best vaccine. Nobody likes Chinese vaccines. Some people died of Astra. Moderna [doses] were recalled in Japan. Then, Pfizers are the best," said Trinh from Long Bien district. "Of course you need certain privileges to get the rare Pfizers."

Mai from Dong Da district agreed: "It is not too surprising. You need connection or corruption to gain an upper hand anywhere and everywhere in Vietnam."

A shrinking budget and severe COVID-19 outbreaks in Ho Chi Minh City and a few other southern provinces have pushed the government to call for crowd-funding since June in order to meet its target of inoculating 70 percent of its population by the first half of 2022, either by developing local vaccines or purchasing international doses.

None of the interviewees has contributed to the fund, despite numerous online and offline outreach attempts by the government.

“I do not think they [the government] lacked money. They were extravagant about pre-election activities,” said Nguyen, referring to the legislative election that took place with fanfare in May.

Both Nguyen and her husband, the two VCP members, were happy about U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris’ three-day official visit to Vietnam on August 26-28, during which she announced a donation of 1 million Pfizer doses to Vietnam. The trip was warmly received by the Vietnamese public.

“I am so glad that she came,” Vu said, “because it means we will definitely have more Pfizer doses.”

All interviewees for this report asked that only their last names be used for security purposes.

GUEST AUTHOR

Travis Vincent

Travis Vincent is a social activist based in Vietnam.