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**Transition of the Japanese Language Education Policy  
of the Socialist State of Vietnam and its Purpose (1945-1991)  
from the Perspective of Historical Development  
of Foreign Language Education Policy**

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Japanese language education continues to develop in Vietnam, having been introduced as a primary foreign language in middle schools since 2003, and in elementary schools since 2016. A survey conducted by The Japan Foundation in 2015 showed that in Vietnam 64,000 people were engaged in learning Japanese, that being the third greatest number in Southeast Asia, following Indonesia and Thailand. Although Japanese language education can now be said to be enjoying a boom in Vietnam, its official introduction in Vietnamese schools only came about in 1986, following the Doi Moi reforms, and then only in higher education. After the Second World War and until Doi Moi, official policy made Russian the most important foreign language taught in schools, reflecting the close ties with the Soviet Union. The principal foreign languages then taught in schools were languages considered important for international relations: Russian, Chinese, English and French.

It is significant, however, that in addition to those four languages, Japanese was also being taught, albeit on a small scale. Two questions arise from this background. First, diplomatic relations between Vietnam and Japan were established in 1973, so what was the purpose of Japanese language education in the period when no such relations yet existed? Second, for each historical period how did the policy on Japanese language education develop, and what was its purpose? The approach taken by this study begins with an examination of the primary sources consisting of Vietnamese and Japanese government documents, and supplements gaps in the official record with an oral history constructed from interviews conducted with individuals who studied Japanese before Doi Moi. Research on Japanese language education in Vietnam has hitherto been limited to an overview of its history, whereas this study attempts to proceed via a detailed analysis of primary sources supplemented by oral histories, to arrive at a re-evaluation of Japanese language education in Vietnam not just from an official standpoint, but from the perspective of individual learners as well.

This study covers the period from the foundation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) until 1991 when Doi Moi was well underway. The reasons for this limitation are: 1) Little previous research has been done on this period, but an understanding of it is essential as it forms the foundation for current Japanese language education; 2) Following the revision of the Constitution in 1992, Vietnam began actively accepting assistance in foreign language education from Western countries, which

entailed major changes in governmental policy and which thus requires a separate study to deal with it adequately.

To begin with, from the 1950's until the early 1970's, when there were no diplomatic relations between Vietnam and Japan, my interviews reveal that students were being dispatched to North Korea and the Soviet Union to study Japanese for the strategic goal of acquiring information about an "enemy country" and for the practical goal of facilitating trade and business transactions. This formed part of an "allocation policy" in which students would be required to take employment in various government agencies overseeing diplomatic relations, trade and domestic affairs. Next, following the establishment of diplomatic relations with Japan in 1973, Japanese language education programs were gradually established and expanded in institutions of higher learning. This development reflects how the official utilitarian educational policy foresaw further increases in political and economic dealings between Japan and Vietnam, resulting in an increasing need to foster human resources competent in Japanese. However, due to the 1979 freeze of Official Development Assistance (ODA) by Japan following Vietnam's intervention in Cambodia, there was a policy retreat on Japanese language education. In 1986 began the social reforms, moving the country to a market-based economy, accompanied by major reforms in education policy, including the teaching of foreign languages. As a result, there was a decisive shift toward the teaching of English, Japanese and other languages of Western countries. The teaching of Japanese had by this time been greatly scaled down, but now the Vietnamese government of its own accord revived the program even before the restoration of ODA by Japan in 1992, foreseeing future progress in relations between Vietnam and Japan with a corresponding need for personnel competent in Japanese.

Thus, the policy on Japanese language education, while showing differences during each of the periods surveyed above, was always incorporated in the nation's policy for the training of human resources, with the aim of producing a limited number of officials and staff to serve in government and party administration. Further, the teaching of Japanese, dependent as it was on national policy, suffered from a certain degree of instability, and was subject to sudden changes in direction dictated by current trends of thought in government and party circles, in response to changes in international and domestic conditions.

The above is the picture that emerges from an analysis of the primary sources. Below is an evaluation of Japanese language education derived from the oral histories obtained through interviews. First, the pioneering generation that received instruction in Japanese language via the "allocation policy" was continually at the mercy of policy trends due to changes in international political and economic conditions. Among instructors in Japanese who experienced the retreat in Japanese language education in the 1980's, there were some who changed professions due to anxiety about their future, but those who persevered made up for cancellations of courses by devoting their energies to the production of textbooks and the compilation of dictionaries. Some of those interviewed state that even in the period of retreat, they continued to believe in the future development of relations between Vietnam and Japan, and would hold Japanese lessons at various companies or in their homes. The interviewees eventually came to head Japanese programs at their universities or to hold important positions at research institutions, and now, even in retirement, they are a vital presence for Japanese language education and research on Japan. They

are indeed the generation that has sustained Japanese language education in Vietnam, as well as cultural exchanges between the two countries, and their efforts led to the great flourishing in Japanese language education that took place from the latter half of the 1990's on into the next millennium.

In contrast to liberal capitalist countries that institute foreign language education as a means to deepen international and intercultural understanding, the pre-Doi Moi Vietnamese policy regarded such education as an essential part of diplomatic, political and economic strategy, to be incorporated into the national plan for the training of personnel, thus stressing the utilitarian aspect of foreign languages. Focusing as it did on producing personnel who would be competent in Japanese, through the instruction of selected individuals, in order to meet the needs of the socialist nation of Vietnam, the Japanese language education policy lacked, from the national point of view, the function that foreign languages fulfill for multilingualism. And yet in reality, this policy produced additional motivation for language acquisition in the social space, in the course of intercultural contacts mediated through foreign languages. This spontaneous evolution may be glimpsed through the narratives provided by my interviewees. Foreign language competence made intercultural understanding by individuals and personal exchanges possible, which further influenced those individuals' behavior, a result perhaps unforeseen by the makers of national policy who simply intended foreign language competence to be a tool for personnel working in government agencies. This case study thus suggests that the driving force for continued language study and use is not compulsion by the nation, but the experience obtained through foreign languages by individuals.

It should be pointed out, however, that although this study covers the old regime of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the primary sources are limited, so the matters elucidated here are in no way general or comprehensive. Further, the contents of the interviews have not yet been cross-checked with the primary sources and other interviews, and there are large gaps between events which cannot be filled in by the interviews conducted for this study, an acknowledged limitation. It will be necessary to find ways to verify them with the help of further testimony and source materials.

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