

# Vietnamese Perceptions of South Korea and South Koreans

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Diplomats and politicians are preoccupied with how to deepen relations between Vietnam and South Korea in political and socio-economic areas and people-to-people ties. They point to factors such as South Korea's substantial investment in Vietnam, the cultural exchange between South Korea and Vietnam, and their geopolitical similarity, to reach conclusions about the prospects for a different South Korea-Vietnam relationship. All of these factors are no doubt significant. Generally neglected, however, is a far more tangible factor; the opinions of the Vietnamese public on South Korea and its people that will have clear policy implications.

As Hanoi and Seoul are making concerted efforts to broaden and deepen their relationship, this article seeks to examine how Vietnamese people perceive South Korea and South Korean people. The article begins with a brief description of how both countries have built up their links since the

establishment of diplomatic relations on December 22, 1992. Then, it will explore both the positive and negative impressions that the Vietnamese have about South Korea and South Koreans. The article will show that an increasing number of Vietnamese people, particularly the youth, have developed an interest in South Korean commodities, tourism, culture and people; however, some Vietnamese people remain uncomfortable with South Korea for specific reasons, including the Vietnam War, the life stories of Vietnamese brides in South Korea, and the treatment of Vietnamese workers by South Korean employers.

## Vietnam-South Korea: A Closer Relationship

Relations between Vietnam and South Korea have developed in both scope and content over the last 26 years. It is something of a miracle that South Korea and Vietnam have been able to shelve the historical legacy and overcome their ideological differences and social systems for the sake of mutual benefits. South Korea was Vietnam's adversary during the Cold War but has now become a friend and partner of Vietnam.

Contact between Vietnam and South Korea can be traced back to the 13th Century; the Ly Dynasty was replaced by the Tran Dynasty in 1226, and Prince Ly Long Tuong of the Ly Dynasty crossed the sea and arrived in Korea seeking asylum.<sup>1)</sup> He was warmly welcomed by the Koryo Dynasty; he became a general under the dynasty and helped to defeat two Mongolian invasions.<sup>2)</sup>

Sharing a historical and cultural background in Sino-centric Confucianism, Vietnam and South Korea have many cultural similarities; therefore, it is not surprising that the Korean Wave (or Hallyu) has been received with such enthusiasm in Vietnam. Korean products relating to Hallyu can be divided into two main groups: (i) content-based products including movies, pop music, online games and comics; and (ii) hardware and services including fashion, cosmetics, cuisine, mobile phones, electronic parts and tourism. After capturing the hearts of Vietnamese people, South Korea continued to penetrate the Vietnamese market. By the end of November 2018, bilateral trade between the two countries was US\$62.6 billion, and South Korea is one of Vietnam's key trading partners.<sup>3)</sup> Vietnam is presently the fourth largest recipient of South Korean investment and the largest recipient of South

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1) The Voice of Vietnam. 2011. Ly Kings' Descendants Receive Vietnamese Citizenship. Viewed on 22 January 2019, <https://english.vov.vn/culture/ly-kings-descendants-receive-vietnamese-citizenship-117028.vov>

2) VUSTA. 2007. There were Two Vietnamese Princes Becoming Famous in Korea. Viewed 11 January, 2019, <http://vusta.vn/en/news/Vusta-Head-quarter/There-were-two-Vietnamese-Princes-becoming-famous-in-Korea-19477.html>

3) Vietnam News. 2018. Vietnam - the Republic of Korea's Fourth Largest Trading Partner This Year. Viewed on 11 January, 2019, <https://vietnamnews.vn/economy/482480/viet-nam-the-republic-of-koreas-fourth-largest-trading-partner-this-year.html#gOToHEZ3kOYYA5M3.97>



Korean development assistance.<sup>4)</sup> The Vietnamese and South Korean governments expect that the two-way trade will reach \$100 billion by 2020.

Indeed, the last 26 years have witnessed a new dynamic in South Korea-Vietnam relations. With increasing interaction in various fields, from diplomatic and socio-economic to cultural and people-to-people ties, the public in the two countries have developed ideas and thoughts about each other. The following section will focus on Vietnamese perceptions of South Korea and its people.

## South Korea: Impressive Country and People

It will be shown in this section that Vietnamese people generally hold a positive perception of South Korea. A thorough look at Vietnam's forums and social networks demonstrates that most Vietnamese people have a very high opinion of South Koreans. Many Vietnamese believe that, like the Vietnamese, South Koreans are hardworking, kind and determined. Many Vietnamese people enjoy watching South Korean drama series and have a special feeling towards South Korean people through the main characters in those dramas. For instance, drama series such as *Dae Jang Gum*, *Winter Sonata* and *Jumong* have left a very good impression on Vietnamese people and partly shaped the views of the Vietnamese towards South Korean people. In the eyes of Vietnamese people, South Koreans care and share with people around them. For example, Phu, a Vietnamese national, commented that most South Koreans "are very nice",<sup>5)</sup> that they are well-behaved and considerate, and that South Korean men are strong and reliable. Also, that South Korean women are family-oriented and devoted.<sup>6)</sup>

In a similar vein, Vietnamese writer, Tran Thi Thu Luong, emphasized that one of the main features of South Korean culture is a love-based spirit, which is manifested first and foremost in the love for family. The writer shows that love for family will lead to happiness, and that those who are not family-oriented will generally suffer in life.<sup>7)</sup> This is because, in South Korean culture, family is only a part of society but it is also the most significant factor. This outlook is similar to the Vietnamese culture, which places great emphasis on the role of family in society. From now on, Vietnamese people

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4) The People. 2018. Cementing Vietnam-Republic of Korea Strategic Cooperative Partnership. Viewed on 12 January, 2019, <http://en.nhandan.com.vn/politics/editorial/item/5954302-cementing-vietnam-republic-of-korea-strategic-cooperative-partnership.html>

5) Reddit. 2018. Korean View towards Vietnamese. Viewed on 12 January, 2019, [https://www.reddit.com/r/korea/comments/93e3uf/korean\\_view\\_towards\\_vietnamese/](https://www.reddit.com/r/korea/comments/93e3uf/korean_view_towards_vietnamese/), and Trung Rwo. 2014. Things Shock Me When Travelling in South Korea [Những Điều Gây Sốc Khi Tôi Du Lịch Hàn Quốc]. Viewed on 11 January, 2019, <https://news.zing.vn/nhung-dieu-gay-soc-khi-toi-du-lich-han-quoc-post468355.html>

6) Live in Korea. 2018. Văn Hóa và Đời Sống Ở Hàn Quốc [Culture and Life in South Korea]. Viewed on 12 January, 2019, <https://www.liveinkorea.kr/portal/VNM/page/contents.do?menuSeq=5312&pageSeq=12>

7) Tran Thi Thu Luong. 2011. Korean Cultural Characteristics Now and Then, Ho Chi Minh City Publishing House.

will quickly be able to develop special feelings towards South Korean tourist attractions and South Korean people, who are hospitable and helpful. The Vietnamese have fallen in love with South Korea; a country of exquisite natural surroundings and devoted people. During an event called “Little Korea” , organized in Ho Chi Minh City on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of Vietnam-South Korea relations, the Vietnamese who were asked about their feelings towards South Korea, expressed their love for South Korean culture, products, cuisine and people. They also added that they wanted to see continuing positive development in Vietnam and South Korean relations.<sup>8)</sup>

Now, various events and programs are organized in Vietnam each year to promote trade and cultural exchanges between the two countries. Among these were the Vietnam-Korea Investment Forum co-organized by the Ministry of Planning and Investment and the ASEAN-Korea Centre in July 2015. There was also the Vietnam-South Korea Culture and Food Festival in October 2017, jointly organized by the Embassy of South Korea in Vietnam, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, the Korean Association, the Korea Agro-Fisheries Trade Corporation, the Korea Project on International Agriculture, the Korea Tourism Organization, and the Korean Cultural Center in Hanoi. Held very recently, in June 2018, was the K-FOOD FAIR, co-organized by South Korea’s Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs and the Korea Agro-Fisheries & Food Trade Corporation. These activities will eventually enable more Vietnamese people to know about South Korea, and to have a deeper understanding of this East Asian country. For instance, with the recent great successes of the Vietnam national football team under the supervision of head coach Park Hang-seo, a South Korean citizen, South Korea has become much more widely known in Vietnam. Vietnamese people are very grateful to Park Hang-seo for his excellent guidance and strategy that has actively fostered the performance of the Vietnam national football players. Along with their admiration for Park Hang-seo, the Vietnamese now seem to like South Korea and its people much more; indeed, this very positive and surprising factor has had a valuable impact on the attitude of Vietnamese people towards South Korea.

In summary, during the course of 26 years, Vietnamese people have learned about South Korea and developed a real love for the country and its people. They see in South Korean people many characteristics that they value in themselves; warm-hearted, hard-working, family-friendly, determined and energetic.

Although the Vietnamese public in general likes South Korea and holds a high opinion of South Koreans, in reality a number of Vietnamese still hold a negative view towards South Korea. The legacy of what South Korean soldiers did during the Vietnam War,<sup>9)</sup> the abuse of Vietnamese brides in South

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8) Ariang News. 2018. “Little Korea” in Vietnam – Festival in Ho Chi Minh City Celebrates S. Korea-Vietnam Ties. Viewed on 12 January 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uS5W5mOnECQ>



Korea,<sup>10)</sup> and the exploitation of Vietnamese workers in South Korean factories<sup>11)</sup> somehow remain barriers to an increased mutual understanding between the people of Vietnam and South Korea. These experiences have all negatively impacted the thinking of Vietnamese people. For the Vietnamese, especially those who suffered from one of these three events, they are not prepared to accept what happened and want an apology or compensation. Their life stories are told in their communities, villages, and in newspapers. Consequently, there may be prejudice in Vietnam about South Koreans; however, efforts are being made by both the Vietnamese and South Korean governments to park the past and look forward to the future. With the increasing presence of South Korean businesses in Vietnam, creating prosperity for both Vietnamese and South Koreans, it is hoped that negative attitudes and stereotypical beliefs about South Koreans will be reduced or even eliminated.

In conclusion; the perceptions of Vietnamese people towards South Korea and its people are positive. In less than three decades, the people-to-people ties between the two countries have developed well. Most Vietnamese people can see that now is a good time for both sides to build diplomatic, economic and socio-cultural relations with South Korea. Vietnamese people see South Korea's economic miracle as an excellent example for Vietnam to follow, and many Vietnamese consider South Korea to be a good destination to pursue their higher education ambitions. The Vietnamese see in South Korea a people with personalities and characteristics like their own. They see opportunity to learn new knowledge and skills, and also wish to see more South Korean firms and businesses establish themselves in Vietnam. They also know that to develop and prosper in a world full of uncertainty, they need to learn how to tolerate differences and how to cooperate and work with people from foreign countries.

Sad stories about the activities of South Korean soldiers during the Vietnam War, South Korean husbands toward their Vietnamese wives, and South Korean employers to Vietnamese employees are told or retold in many parts of Vietnam; however, it is a fact that the Vietnam War ended almost 44 years ago, and Vietnam is now seeking to build a good relationship with its former foe, the United States. It is also a fact that many Vietnamese brides have integrated well in South Korean culture

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9) Jo Griffin. 2019. Women Raped by Korean Soldiers during Vietnam War still Awaiting Apology. Viewed on 21 January 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/jan/19/women-raped-by-korean-soldiers-during-vietnam-war-still-awaiting-apology> ; and Change. 2015. Apologize for the Systemic Rape of Vietnamese Women during the Vietnam War. Viewed on 12 January 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/change.org/posts/i-represent-the-thousands-of-vietnamese-women-raped-and-brutalized-by-south-kore/10154338601548079>

10) Robert. 2017. Vietnamese Bride Killed by South Korean Father-in-Law in Seoul. Talk Vietnam. Viewed on 11 January, 2019, <https://www.talkvietnam.org/2017/06/vietnamese-bride-killed-by-south-korean-father-in-law-in-seoul/> , Monica Suk. 2010. ABC News. Viewed on 12 January, 2019 <https://abcnews.go.com/International/mentally-ill-korean-grooms-apply/story?id=11177251>

11) Korea Herald. 2015. Korean Companies Accused of Exploiting Workers in Vietnam. Viewed on 11 January, 2019, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20150601000912> , and Phuoc Tuan. 2018. Vietnamese Workers Abandoned by S. Korean Employer Promised New Jobs. VnExpress. Viewed on 11 January, 2019, <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/vietnamese-workers-abandoned-by-s-korean-employer-promised-new-jobs-3718830.html>

and have had good lives with their South Korean husbands. Another significant fact is that Vietnam needs a greater flow of investment in order to develop its economy, and South Korea is an important investor and trade partner. With all these different dynamics, there are high hopes that Vietnam and South Korea will continue to overcome their difficulties and work together to achieve common goals. And, most importantly, that Vietnamese people will have a greater opportunity to properly understand South Korea and the South Korean people.

