

# asia insights

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THE ALLURE & GRACE OF VIETNAM'S TRADITIONAL DRESS

Visitors expecting a land of black pajamas are pleasantly surprised to find slender, long-hair women clad in 'áo dài', Vietnam's national costume. This dress consists of a split-sided tunic over silk pantaloons. In world fashion, the áo dài stands out in several respects. As the uniform of school girls and shop clerks, it is both a formal dress and daily street wear. It remains far more visible in today's culture than either China's qipao (cheongsam) or Korea's hanbok.

To many, the allure and grace of the áo dài is irresistible.

Words by Peter Kauffner  
Photography by Paul Levrier





**The** garment is often made of sheer fabric. Each is individually made and a careful tailor will do 20 measurements to ensure a tight fit. The slits may extend above the waist to expose part of the midriff. “The ao dai covers everything, but hides nothing,” according to one saying. This feature allows the dress to combine sexuality and tradition, although the traditional version of the ao dai was an unrevealing multi-layered gown. “The shape of the female body is accentuated, but hidden as the dress clings tightly to it,” wrote Nhi Lieu, an assistant professor at the University of Texas at Austin. This sexualised image, however, is contained within the bounds of respectability and curbed under the sight of ‘cultural’.

The Vietnamese ao dai pervades every aspect of daily life in both the city and the countryside. Unlike many traditional dresses seen elsewhere in the world the ao dai is not merely for show or for tourism, it is still respected even by today’s younger, more materialistic generation.

Vietnamese beauty contests generally include a segment in which the contestants wear ao dai. Such contests are extremely popular with both sexes in Vietnam. The contests seek queens who can represent the nation and uphold the four traditional virtues of cong (tidy), dung (pretty), ngon (soft-spoken) and hanh (chaste). Yet at the same time they must entertain audience members who look for physical beauty and sexuality. Cong-dung-ngon-hanh was what a man looked for in a wife back in the days of arranged marriages. Such talks sounds very old fashioned to today’s younger generation. “No one thinks about the four skills anymore,” said Thuy, a university student. “They fall in love-and that’s it”.

The white ao dai as a high school uniform is also too much culture for many. “When we were in middle school, we looked forward to wearing the ao dai,” said Nhung. “But after we wore it for a while, it just seemed inconvenient”. The ao dai is too hot for classes without air conditioning, Thuy explained. The use of solid white silk makes any stain immediately visible. Students must be careful of rain, since this can make the thin fabric transparent. The great fear of a Vietnamese teenage girl is to have a flap of her tunic caught in the spokes of a motorcycle. In the worse case scenario, the top is pulled off, leaving the girl wearing only a bra and pantaloons. This is why today, one can see how careful the girl is with her dress when riding side saddle.

Although the motorcycle is the main form of transportation in urban Vietnam, an ao dai clad student on a bicycle is still a common sight. These beautiful ‘butterflies’, as poets call them, brighten the appearance of the street. Writers who advocate the use of the ao dai as a uniform cite its inconvenience as a virtue, a feature that teaches students feminine modesty and caution. There are many tales of tomboys trained in feminine demeanor by a father who requires them to wear ao dai.

The general meaning of ao dai is ‘gown’. It thus refers to a range of garments that an English-speaker would not think of as aoi dais. For example, a qipao is a Chinese ao dai. A Vietnamese ao dai simply specifies the split-sided Vietnamese gown.

Folk legend traces the ao dai back to the Trung sisters, who led a rebellion against Chinese rule in 39AD. The two sisters (Hai Ba Trung) are Vietnam’s most celebrated heroes and are depicted in folk opera as wearing ao dai. Trinh Bach, who led a team that restored royal gowns in Hue, argues that basic design features of the ao dai can be traced back to medieval times and originally reflected a desire by the Hanoi court to distinguish its fashion from that of Beijing.



The classic imperial Hue ao dai, as worn by courtesans during the Nguyen Dynasty

The traditional white ao dai, still commonly worn by high school students



# vietnam

► Europe had its first glimpse of Vietnam from a short book by Jesuit missionary Cristoforo Borri published in 1631. Vietnamese women, he describes, wore multiple layers of ‘petticoats’ and ‘doublets’. It was “the modest garb in all Asia, for even in the hottest weather they suffer no part of the body uncovered”. They wore transparent veils that “shows all their gaiety with modesty, and makes a beautiful majestic appearance”. Their huge hats nearly covered their faces and their hair was so long that it fell “down to their heels”.

Certainly fashions have changed since the seventeenth century, but we can see from this description that several characteristically Vietnamese ideas about fashion have been preserved in the *ao dai*; the desire to cover as much of the body as possible and the use of bright colours and thin fabrics to allow a woman to express her physical beauty and individuality.

A decree issued by Lord Vu Vuong of Hue in 1744 specified that the members of this court, both male and female, wear a gown over trousers. Contemporary writer Le Quy Don, described the newfangled garment as a ‘long shirt’ (*ao dai*), the earliest known use of the word. After the Gia Long emperor unified Vietnam in 1801, designers combined Hue’s gown and trouser outfit with Hanoi’s split-sided jacket (five paneled gown), the direct ancestor of the modern *ao dai*.

Two panels were sewn together in the front, two were sewn together in the back, and the fifth was a ‘baby flap’ hidden underneath. Thus the *ngu than* (as it was then called) gave the appearance of having two flaps. Fabric was expensive at this time, so aristocrats would

display their wealth by wearing multiple layers of clothing sacrificing comfort for fashion in Vietnam’s hot climate. The Minh Mang emperor (1820-1841) banned styles associated with regionalism and thus made the *ngu than* a national dress.

In 1917, the Dong Khanh Girl’s High School (now Hai Ba Trung School) opened in Hue, the capital of Vietnam at the time. The school uniform was a *ngu than* with a violet tunic and white pantaloons. Because of its long association with the *ao dai*, Hue today is still Vietnam’s most elegant and traditional city, with the pure white *ao dai* still the uniform worn by all girls at school.



In the 1920’s artists associated with the French Indochina College of Fine Arts in Hanoi redesigned the *ngu than* as a dress and a modernised version created a storm when it was featured in the newspaper Today in 1935. Shortages and economic turmoil associated with World War II and the Franco-Vietminh War (1946-1954) led to the reemergence of traditional styles but by the mid 1950’s and early 60’s the administration of President Ngo Dinh Diem and his first lady Madame Nhu, vigorously promoted the modern *ao dai* as a national costume.

**Above :** The *ao dai* is not only just worn by women. The male ‘*ao dai*, or *ao gam*, is still worn during traditional ceremonies and festivals in the country.



► The years 1960-75 were the heyday of the *ao dai* in the South. The *ao dai* for men, or *ao gam*, never recovered after Diem left office but the female version remained the dominant form of dress in all the cities and towns of the South. Even peasant women would wear them on their weekly market day. The *ao dai* was effectively banned under Communist rule for some years after 1975 and did not really re-emerge until 1983 when a high school in the Mekong Delta town of Ca Mau adopted it as a uniform. This breakthrough, however, was only a first step in a slow revival. With the annual cloth ration at only two meters a year fashions of the 1980's remained drab and spartan.

The doi moi political reforms that began in 1986 resulted in an opening up to the non-communist world, a revival of the economy and eventually a re-emergence of the *ao dai*.

The 1992 films *Indochine* and *The Lover* inspired worldwide interest in Vietnamese fashion, with several international fashion houses offering *ao dai* collections. In 1995, an *ao dai* worn by Truong Quynh Mai was chosen as 'Best National Costume' at the Miss International Pageant in Tokyo, triggering an 'ao dai craze' that lasted for several years.

During the mid 1990's it was common for young Vietnamese women to choose an *ao dai* over modern western style dress, although today the *ao dai* is no longer as common a sight as those days. Still, the dress is actively worn during formal occasions, festivals and traditional events as well as remaining the uniform of many schools in the South and for company staff, both private and government.

What does the future hold for the *ao dai*? A dress so delicate, elegant and sensual will always appeal to the feminine form and with such a strong identity associated with the beauty of Vietnam, it is hard to envisage a time when more modern western dress will over power basic national pride. A turbulent history has tried to change the *ao dai* or relinquish it altogether and failed. Surely, even Vietnam's pull into the modern age will keep the *ao dai* alive.



**Above :** A Vietnamese woman adjusts her 'ao dai' whilst sitting among the ruins of My Son, near Hoi An.