

2. CULTURAL INFORMATION

2.1 Names and Addressing System

The order of the parts of a Vietnamese name is in reverse of an Australian name. For example, Nguyễn Văn Sang - *Nguyễn* is the surname, *Văn* the middle name, which is written in the middle and *Sang* the given name last. On a form that asks for surname separately to given names, a Vietnamese person will still list their middle name prior to their first name. As a result, workers unfamiliar with this practice will call clients by their middle name.

A middle name will often indicate the gender of the person. *Văn* often indicates the person is male while a female name may have the additional part *Thị* directly after the surname prior

to the middle name. A name such as Nguyễn Thị Kim Liên is a female name. Alternatively if *Thị* is not used as a feminine gender indicator, the translation of a middle name can indicate gender as words are more effeminate, for example; Cao Lệ (tears) Hằng, Võ Ngọc (jade) Hương, Trần Ái (love) Vân. However this is not always the case as they can be used as male middle names also or as first names for either gender.

Another interesting fact around names is that a Vietnamese married couple will use different surnames when filling out documents and in interviews.

Legally in Vietnam women keep their family name after marriage. Also the given name is more

important for identification than the family name because there are only a couple of hundred of family names, the so called 'bách tính' or 'trăm họ' (100 surnames), for 80 million people. In contrast given and middle names have precise meanings. Thus in Vietnam, Dr Sang or Dr Nguyen Van Sang are identifiable whereas Dr Nguyen is not.

In Vietnamese there are many different lexical forms, often referred to as 'status pronouns', to mean the same English personal pronouns *I* and *you*, depending on the quality of the relationship between two people. A quotation from Bang follows to clarify this point.

The English have only one way of addressing: You call me 'you' and I call you 'you'. But when I, as a Vietnamese person, approach a person older than me, for example, a husband in a

family, I would call him 'uncle' and he would call me 'niece'. And the wife I would call 'auntie', and the children I should call 'smaller sister' and 'smaller brother' or by their name...

A Vietnamese teacher would call a single young man his name, while the young man calls the teacher 'teacher'.

The English people can only call their clients 'you' and 'you' and 'you'. Our system helps and gives a secure and warm feeling. (1)

Titles are another aspect of the addressing system. Vietnamese do not address a person so much by his or her personal name as Anglo Australians do. They usually like 'Sir' or 'teacher', 'father' (to a priest), 'Madam' or 'Mr Director'. Social status, education and age are pivotal to determining which form of address to use.

- (1) Suzanne Bang, *We come as a friend: Towards a Vietnamese Model of Social Work*, Refugee Action, Leeds, 1983, pp 12-13.

2.2 Family

There are a number of notable characteristics of a Vietnamese family in the context of Australian society.



First, family, for the Vietnamese, can be a much extended group (1). Many refugees, when asked about family, stress those remaining in Vietnam, in France or in another state of Australia. The transfer of goods or money revitalises contact with these members. The extended sense of family partly reflects the reality of many families being separated with a parent or sibling left in Vietnam and so family reunification is a task while families are working towards establishing themselves in the country of resettlement.



While the family is extended, the loss or absence of family support is difficult for some and other links are formed within the community to replicate family - 3

or 4 blood unrelated single people from the same factory or school living together and creating a supportive unit. People with close emotional and family ties who were dispersed all over the Australian continent through the migration process have begun to aggregate again. The tendency toward family regrouping and creation of “pseudo-families” or mutually supportive units are noted as adaptational measures of Vietnamese refugees (2).

Secondly, Vietnamese family life is unique. Adult children live in parents’ home until married. Children consider this as filial piety while parents consider it parental responsibility. Older people are rarely placed in retirement villages or nursing homes. They stay with family until their last days either as a result of their wishes or the wishes of their children.

Though family recreation is usually home-based and both adults and children spend most of their free time at home, less communication is entered into between Vietnamese parents and children than their Anglo-Australian counterparts and hitting is frequently used as a form of discipline. The notion of the state interfering in a child protection context is absolutely unbelievable to many Vietnamese. This appears to be a conflict of child rearing between the two cultures. (3)

Customarily Vietnamese people, no more virtuous than other people, avoid talking about sex in the family and sex education for children is practically nil. “In my family we don’t discuss it (sex), and personally, I am more comfortable when I discuss about it with my Western friends than with my Vietnamese friends, even if we left the

country while young and could be considered 'westernised'" (4).

Thirdly, marriage is viewed as a social contract between families more than between individuals and therefore both sides of the family often handle conflict within a marriage. When there are problems between husband and wife in a Vietnamese marriage, the conflict is often expressed much more violently than in a British marriage (5). Divorce is not common with women staying in unhealthy marriages 'for the sake of the children'. Statistically, Vietnamese marriages last longer than American (6). Finally, to talk about *feelings* in Vietnamese marriage seems less relevant than to talk about what the husband and wife are actually doing (7). A statement from a Vietnamese man follows to illustrate this last point.

If a Vietnamese husband loves his wife, he is not going to say, I love you or cuddle her or give her a kiss. He shows it by helping the wife, looking after the children, helping in the house, no words. (8)

Notes

- (1) D. Haines, D. Rutherford & P. Thomas, Family and Community among Vietnamese Refugees, *International Migration Review*, Vol 15, No 1, 1981, pp 310-319.
- (2) K.M. Lin, M. Masuda & L. Tazuma, Adaptational Problems of Vietnamese Refugees, Part III – Case Studies in Clinic and Field: Adaptive and Maladaptive, *The Psychiatric Journal of the University of Ottawa*, Vol 7, No 3, September 1982, pp 173-183.
- (3) S. Bang, *We Come as a Friend: Towards a Vietnamese Model of Social Work*, Refugee Action, Leeds, 1983, p. 21.
- (4) "Talking about sex in Vietnamese families", <http://www.asiafinest.com/forum/index.php?showtopic=29129>
- (5) S. Bang, *op. cit.*, p. 18.
- (6) National Indochinese Clearinghouse, *A Cross-Cultural Glimpse of the Vietnamese People*, Center for Applied Linguistics, Arlington, Virginia, 1976-1977, p. 31.
- (7) S. Bang, *op. cit.*, p. 19.
- (8) S. Bang, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

2.3 Food Habits

“Vietnamese culture is full of proverbs and mythology which centre on food” (1). This comment, made by a Western observer, points out a truth that in an agricultural society like Vietnam food is a consistently powerful mode of human expression.

The Vietnamese translation of having a meal means eating rice. This is the principal food on the dining table. The bowl is considered to measure a person’s capacity of food consumption and is taken to the mouth using chopsticks. Both lunch and dinner are main meals in Vietnam.

A Vietnamese typical meal comprises four dishes: rice, soup, a vegetable dish and a fish or meat dish. Rice noodles cooked with chicken or beef and special condiments make a special soup called *phở*. This is

a popular breakfast dish and is often served in restaurants. A meal in itself, *phở* can be taken at other times of the day as well. Dessert is usually fruit and tea is often drunk at dinner and coffee with canned milk for breakfast.

Some people claim that Vietnamese cuisine uses less oil and fat than some other Asian cooking styles and relies on *nước mắm* (fermented fish sauce) as a seasoning rather than soy sauce or salt. This sauce is often thinned with water, fresh lemon juice, sugar, fresh chillies and garlic to create *nước chấm*, a dipping sauce for a variety of snack foods such as spring rolls.

Other popular seasonings include chillies, garlic, mint, basil, coriander and spring onions, to name a few. These herbs are added not only to enhance food flavours and increase appetite but also to aid

digestion and preserve good health allegedly owing to their medicinal properties. Le Thanh Khoi (2) wrote in *Le Chant du Riz Pilé* that the delicate perfume of a herb or a leaf constitutes perhaps the greatest contribution of Vietnam to world cuisine.

In Western culture it would be polite to ask table companions to pass a dish or condiments beyond one's reach. Vietnamese believe that this causes unnecessary trouble to others and would instead reach across or stand up to reach. It is also customary for young people to invite older people to serve themselves first.

In a restaurant, who pays? A Vietnamese who invites someone out for a meal or a drink will pay for it and may not expect to pay if they were invited out. Separate bills are not the

norm in Vietnamese culture and are considered rather mean.

Notes

- (1) Annabel Doling, *Vietnam on a Plate – A Culinary Journey*, Round House Publications, Hong Kong, 1996, p. 30.
- (2) Cited in Annabel Doling, *ibid*, p. 26.



2.4 Festivals and Celebrations

The following poem captures the ritual of Vietnamese life and festivals.

January, celebrate the New Year at home

February, gambling, March, local festivals

April, measure out beans for cooking sweets

Celebrate the feast of Doan Ngo at the return of May

June, buy longans and sell wild cherries

At the mid-July full moon, pardon the wandering spirits

August, celebrate the lantern festival

When September comes, trade lemons and persimmons

October, sell paddy and kapok

November and December, all work is finished. (1)

The months in the poem are those of the lunar calendar,

which is still used for many traditional festivals nowadays. In Australia some of these festivals have been dropped, but the *Tết* is still widely observed.

Tết Nguyên Đán, or simply *Tết* (the Lunar New Year), usually falling in late January or in February of the solar calendar, is the most important festival for the community and the family. This celebration is considered both joyous and solemn and in Vietnam is marked with three public holidays when special rites and ceremonies are organised. New clothes are worn, traditional dishes prepared, houses cleaned up and decorated with boughs of peach or plum blossom, debts paid off, past mistakes forgiven, gifts delivered in person to people's homes and wishes of happiness, prosperity, good health, good luck, peace and longevity given to each other. David Tornquist has aptly

captured the spirit of the Vietnamese *Tết* when he wrote, “*Tết* is a celebration of renewal” (2).

Tết is also an occasion to pay homage to ancestors and to show gratitude to the people who are still alive: parents and grandparents, teachers, spiritual advisors and other benefactors. Usually on the eve of the New Year the family gathers in front of the ancestral altar and remembers the departed. As a custom children visit parents’ homes and students, teachers’ homes and not the other way around.

Other celebrations in the Vietnamese diaspora include *Lễ Vu Lan* (Wandering Souls Day) and *Tết Trung Thu* (Mid-Autumn Festival).

Lễ Vu Lan (Wandering Souls Day) is the second largest festival of the year (2) and is a

special occasion when “the living and the dead meet in thought” (3). It falls on the 15th day of the seventh lunar month but can still be celebrated at any convenient time during the second half of the month. Originally a Buddhist feast, this festival has become a tradition of Vietnamese popular culture.

There is an age-old belief that after sunset on this day the spirits of the dead are set free from hell for some time. Hungry, they roam about in search of food. Thus plenty of food is left at family altars for deceased relatives and outdoors to reach out to the wandering souls. Another belief, more religiously-based, is that the sinful souls can be absolved of their sins and delivered from hell through the prayers of the living said particularly on the Wandering Souls Day. Thus there are ceremonies, most often conducted at the pagoda, where

people call upon the Lord Buddha to grant general amnesty to all souls, of their ancestors as well as of the dead who have no descendants to pray for them.

Tết Trung Thu (Mid-Autumn Festival) falls on the 15th day of the eighth lunar month when the moon is full and at its brightest. An ancient festival to mark the end of harvest season in Southeast Asia, this seasonal event has become the children's festival. Many Vietnamese communities in Australia hold this Moon Festival for the children to enjoy themselves and learn about Vietnamese history and culture.

The festival begins at noon and ends at midnight. Highlights include lantern processions, colourful shows and traditional songs and dances. The lit lantern is important in this event because it is a wish for the

return of the sun's warmth and light. The dragon dance is a re-enactment of the earth and sky duality, the yin and yang of the World. (4)

There is a legend (5) associated with the Tết Trung Thu that parents would love to tell their children on this occasion. It is about a carp (6) that wanted to become a dragon (7). How could the carp become a dragon? The carp just worked and worked and eventually transformed itself into a dragon.

Notes

- (1) Dang Lam Sang, Lunar Time and Festivals in Vietnam, *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, Vol 1, No 3, 1990, p 47.
- (2) Ann Crawford, *Customs and Culture of Vietnam*, 1966, cited by Herbert Friedman in *Wandering Soul – Vietnam Psychological Operations*.
<http://www.psywarrior.com/wanderingsoul.html>
- (3) Tet Trung Nguyen (Wandering Souls Day) Vietnam.
[http://www.asiarooms.com/travel-guide/vietnam.../tet-trung-nguyen-\(wandering-souls-day\)-vietnam.htm](http://www.asiarooms.com/travel-guide/vietnam.../tet-trung-nguyen-(wandering-souls-day)-vietnam.htm)
- (4) Tet-Trung-Thu (Mid-Autumn or Children's Moon Festival).
<http://www.csuchico.edu/~cheinz/sy>

<http://labi/asst001/spring99/xiong/XiongV.htm>

- (5) Bet Key Wong, Tết-Trung-Thu. <http://www.familyculture.com/holidays/tettrungthu.htm>
- (6) Lanterns carried on parade have different shapes including carps.
- (7) In Vietnamese culture the dragon is a symbol of nobility.



2.5 Beliefs

Before the French colonial period, the main religions of Vietnam were Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism. Over the centuries, these religions became fused into a vague code of ethics and a philosophy of life rather than a practised religion. “The average Vietnamese is apt to mingle beliefs from all these sources without being aware either of their origin or their full meaning” (1). The fusion by the Vietnamese of different religious beliefs and practices has been seen as resulting from their “pluralistic approach to lifemanship, with a strong inclination for eclectic adaptations” (2). It has also been attributed to “Vietnamese syncretism”, the ability to reconcile opposing principles and practices in an effort to make them work harmoniously (3).

Vietnamese are taught to be proud of being descendants of dragons and fairies. This cultural belief holds great meaning for the Vietnamese. According to Whitmore (4), to be a Vietnamese is to be aware of mythic and historical events that go back more than 2000 years. This appears to be a folk sense emerging out of both mythology and history and helping to provide ethnic identity for the Vietnamese as they strive to achieve common goals. In Vietnamese culture the dragon is a symbol of nobility while in Western mythology it is a symbol of noxious strength.

Âm-dương is a metaphysical construct originating in Taoism and Taoism is believed by Vietnamese cultural historians to have played a very important role in the development of the Vietnamese cultural personality (5). The *Âm* (*yin*) and the *Dương* (*yang*) principles regulate the

functioning of human beings and the universe. Both the energy of the universe and the energy within the human body are under the influence of these two basic factors, which constantly interplay and interrelate with one another in opposing but complimentary ways.

Metaphysical determinism seems fairly dominant in Vietnamese thought, speech and action. Fate and destiny, karma and metempsychosis, hell and heaven, good and evil, reward and punishment by the Supernatural, are all common themes in everyday language as well as classical literature. Astrology and horoscopes have also been widely practised for centuries to date despite a ban on the practice by the Communist government.

Ancestor worship is also a cultural norm. Ancestral spirits are believed to be present

amongst their descendants on the family altar and temples are erected for national heroes.

Notes

- (1) Department of Education and Youth Affairs, *Cultural Background Papers – Vietnam*, Commonwealth of Australia, Woden, A.C.T., n.d., p 6.
- (2) National Indochinese Clearinghouse (NIC), *A Cross-Cultural Glimpse of the Vietnamese People*, Center for Applied Linguistics, Arlington, Virginia, 1976-1977, p 26.
- (3) NIC, *Ibid*, p 29.
- (4) John K. Whitmore, The Vietnamese Sense of the Past, *The Vietnam Forum*, Yale University, USA. Reprinted in Sunday English Section, *Viet Luan Bi-Weekly*, 25 July 1987, p 20.
- (5) NIC, *op. cit.*, p 29.



2.6 Wedding Ceremonies

Marriage is considered a once in a lifetime event and a hugely important occasion; therefore families will often consult an astrologer when setting a date for the auspicious occasion.

On the wedding day the groom and his party either march or drive in procession to the house of the bride, with many presents, mainly jewellery and foodstuffs. Traditional weddings cannot go without betel leaves and areca nuts. Some food is placed on the ancestral altar to pay homage to the bride's ancestry and the jewels of course go to the bride. The bride also receives money and gifts from her own parents and relatives. Refreshments are served which is the only cost to the bride's family. Before leaving the parents' home the bride prostrates herself and kowtows

three times to her parents as a sign of her filial gratitude.

The bride then follows the groom to his family home and both proceed together to the family altar. There the man's parents offer incense to the ancestors to inform the dead of the arrival of their daughter-in-law and the bride presents herself to the groom's ancestors by bowing at the altar. She has now become a part of his family.

Some couples prefer to have a religious marriage in a church or pagoda. Whether performed at home or in a religious setting the wedding ceremonies are always followed by a reception either in a restaurant or in the home of the man. Guests are invited to the reception but only family and close friends are invited to the private ceremonial stage. The reception, which includes activities such as introducing all relatives of both partners,

toasting, cutting a cake, music, singing and dancing and giving of money, is the 'public' conclusion of a familial contract.

2.7 Funeral Ceremonies

In Vietnam a deceased person is cleaned, shrouded, embalmed (if conditions allow) and cofined in the family home. Final respects are paid to the dead and the usual time between death and disposal of the body is from two to three days. However these rituals are not possible in Australia due to laws that require a body to be brought to a funeral parlour.

At the funeral the family of the dead would normally wear white mourning apparel, but during mourning periods after the funeral sombre colours would be worn to social occasions. The relationship between the living and the dead continues throughout the mourning period,

for example when a child is mourning for a parent the period is three years, one year when a husband is mourning for his wife, whereas a bereaved wife mourns for three years. Customarily Vietnamese parents do not attend the funeral of their children and do not go into mourning.

Special anniversaries are observed for the deceased on the third day, the 49th day and the one-hundredth day after the death, and then there are yearly anniversaries. On the yearly anniversary, family members gather together in front of the altar, present to the deceased some dishes that were their favourites and invite them to enjoy. After the commemorative ceremony, people share a meal, consisting of the dishes like those offered and conversation around fond memories of the deceased. This ceremony is underpinned by the belief that

the spirit of the deceased is always present in the home of the living people who loved them and were left behind and this commemoration is a link between the dead and the living.

2.8 Infant-Feeding and Child-Rearing Practices

Despite the challenges experienced by the majority of Vietnamese females in Australia, i.e. low incomes, employment as well as settlement difficulties, there is a 'baby boom' in the Vietnamese community (1).

Health care and family support services may find the contrasts between Vietnamese and Australian infant-feeding and child-rearing practices interesting and useful when working with clients.

In Vietnam a baby is breast fed for the first month. After this month rice milk or a thin gruel is added. From the fourth month

solids such as porridge made from rice or mung beans and flavoured with minced pork or sometimes beef, chicken or fish and a few vegetables such as potatoes, carrots and cabbage are introduced and condiments such as soy sauce, salt and sugar are used. Other foods are introduced gradually by the end of the twelfth month such as sweet fruit and other vegetables. 'Safe' meats and eggs are used by eighteen months. Raw vegetables and sour fruit are not introduced until a child is 5 years of age with the exception of orange juice for constipation or vitamin C (2).

Studies outlining changes in infant-feeding practices following migration from Vietnam to Australia suggest that there is a radical decline in the incidence and duration of breast-feeding and that commercially manufactured solids,

supplements and baby foods are introduced much earlier (3).

Childrearing does not appear to change as dramatically as child feeding practice. In some regards parents may be regarded as extremely permissive when it comes to issue such as toilet training, eating and sleeping schedule, access to TV and video programs and other modes of home entertainment and freedom to leave the house to play in the neighbourhood. While on another level parents are regimented when it comes to interpersonal behaviour, moral conduct and basic value systems. Clearly the Vietnamese child is subject to two widely disparate patterns of parental authority leading to two deeply divergent levels of behaviour. On one hand they are allowed "almost unlimited determination over needs and desires", which appears to offer

an “unrealistic sense of power”; simultaneously on the other hand they can exert “almost no influence” over their “personal destiny”, which appears to induce a profound “sense of powerlessness” (4).

Preparatory training for conformity to familial traditions and the code of social behaviour starts at a very early age as a ballad runs “train your child when they are three”. Failure to conform results in punishment of a physical, emotional or social nature depending on how severe the non-conformity is. A village father expressed the following view.

(When you are angry with the child, how do you discipline them?)

I hit them.

(With what?)

A switch.

(How do they react?)

First they cry, then they get up and fold their arms and apologise for having done wrong. Then they say that they won't do it any more.

(Is this how they always react?)

Yes, always! (5)

Other sanctions to ensure obedience may include isolating or ostracising a member from participation in family life, or even disowning that member potentially for life (6).

Though child rearing is considered a joint venture, roles are clearly defined with the father providing teaching and moral guidance and the mother responsible for tasks such as feeding, bathing and toilet training (7). Often both parents neglect the task of sexual education for adolescents and young people remain ignorant and naïve concerning sexual intercourse and contraception (8).

Notes

- (1) Phan Giang Sang, The Childbearing Customs, Beliefs and Practices of Vietnamese Culture, *Đặc San Y Tế* (Special Issue of Health Journal), Vietnamese Health Professionals Association in NSW, 1992, p 69.
- (2) Megan Mathews & Lenore Manderson, Infant Feeding Practices and Lactation Diets amongst Vietnamese Immigrants, *Australian Paediatric Journal*, 16 (1980), p 264.
- (3) Megan Mathews & Lenore Manderson, *Ibid*, p 265.
- (4) Walter H. Slote, Psychodynamic Structures in Vietnamese Personality, in William P. Lebra, ed., *Transcultural Research in Mental Health. Vol 2 of Mental Health Research in Asia and the Pacific*, the University Press of Hawaii, Honolulu, 1972, p 125.
- (5) Walter H. Slote, *Ibid*, p 126.
- (6) Department of Education and Youth Affairs, *Cultural Background Papers – Vietnam*, Commonwealth of Australia, n.d., p 10.
- (7) Riaz Hassan et al., Vietnamese Families, in Des Storer, ed., *Ethnic Family Values in Australia*, Prentice-Hall of Australia, Sydney, 1985, p 273.
- (8) Riaz Hassan et al., *Ibid*, p 273.



2.9 Perspectives on Conduct Disorders*

Many pieces of Vietnamese folklore can be interpreted in the light of theoretical approaches to maladaptive behaviour.

One perspective regarding human behaviour within Vietnamese folklore is congruent with learning theory. The main idea behind this learning perspective is that behaviour is acquired as a response to stimuli in the environment. The response gets fixed through the process of cultural conditioning and social modelling. To change the behavioural response, it is necessary to change the environmental stimuli, reinforcing sources and role models.

The content of this Vietnamese outlook on behaviour can be seen in numerous popular wise sayings, ditties, tales, poems

and the like of the Vietnamese folk literary treasury.

Inexperienced children are warned about the risks of choosing friends with this proverb:

Near dark, you will get darkened.

Near light, you will get lightened.

Parenting lessons remind parents of their educative role:

Bend the plant only when it is still tender.

Train your child when he/she turns three.

If a critical stage has been missed, education becomes more difficult:

Bend the plant when it is already too big and you will certainly break it.

The irresistible effect of the conditioning process on the system of overt behaviour is pictured by the cliché:

The tree prefers to stand still, but the wind keeps swaying it.

Here, it appears that the tree is the whole personality, the wind the myriad of external events, and the passive swaying the learned response to the stimulating events. Through the conditioning process, some behaviours – adaptive or maladaptive – are acquired. Depending on the roles, models and circumstances that a child is exposed to, he/she can become ‘good’ or ‘bad’, a perfect fit or a misfit.

There is another view held by Vietnamese parents on conduct and misbehaviour. Examples to illustrate it again can be found in popular literature.

Eat sufficiently in order to live morally.

Wealth gives birth to manners.

Destitution leads to robbery.

Hungry, we steal food; destitute, we commit offences.

These and many similar sayings seem appropriate to illustrate the so-called community perspective on maladaptive behaviour. They clearly convey the message that our behavioural response at least in part results from our living conditions. Conduct disorders may result from the living conditions that inhibit personal development. Hence emphasis is placed on examining the individual's social support system, which has failed to back up the individual's developmental needs.

The backup system for a Vietnamese individual also

includes significant persons: the father to the son, the teacher to the student, and the king to the subject – the three basic social relationships. Vietnamese often use the metaphor *the house leaks from the roof* to refer to the moral responsibility of superiors for the decadence of those under their authority. In another allegory, parents are to children what salt preservative is to fresh fish (“Fish spoils more quickly without salt preservative, and children spoil more certainly without taking parents’ advice seriously”).

Clearly, authority or parental figures as well as stimulating physical surroundings and enriching socio-economic conditions play an important role in determining socially desirable behaviour patterns. A breakdown of this system creates an imbalance most likely to produce stress and stress-

induced behaviour in young people.

* This is a reproduction of part of a longer article entitled "Parents and 'Naughty' Children: Two Vietnamese Perspectives on Conduct Disorders and their Implications for Intervention" by Tiep Nguyen, published in the *Journal of Australian Social Work*, September 1993.

2.10 Traditional Music & Traditional Musical Instruments

Vietnamese traditional music has been brought to Australia as part of the cultural baggage of Vietnamese refugees and migrants. It includes folk music, classical chamber music and theatrical music. (1)

Among the most popular of Vietnamese traditional genres is *dân ca* (folk songs) (2), which includes *ru* (lullabies), *lý* (village songs) and *hò* (work songs). Two genres of classical chamber music, the *nhạc Huế* (Hue music) and the *nhạc tài tử*

(music for talented artists), which have flourished in Central and South Vietnam since the 17th and 19th centuries respectively, have been preserved by a small number of musicians in Melbourne and Sydney (3). The South Vietnamese music drama *cải lương* is the only form of music theatre maintained by the Vietnamese Australians (4). This theatrical form combines spoken dialogues, chanted poetry and the *Vọng Cổ* songs. In the opinion of a senior *cải lương* actor it is "the deepest voice of the Vietnamese" (5).

Vietnamese traditional music is played on various traditional instruments, which can be divided into four groups: plucked strings, such as *đàn bầu*, *đàn tranh* and *đàn nguyệt*; bowed strings, *đàn cò* or *đàn nhị* and *đàn gáo*; winds, different kinds of flute; and percussion, *sanh*

tiền, *trống cơm*, *mõ* and *phách*.
(6)

The main instruments being used in Australia (7) include:

- The *đàn tranh* is a zither, similar to the Japanese *koto* and the Chinese *zheng*. The standard version of this instrument has 17 strings. Larger *đàn tranh* of 22 and 25 strings are also used.
- The *đàn nguyệt* (or *đàn kìm*) is a two-stringed moon-shaped lute. It has a long fingerboard with very high frets.
- The *đàn bầu* (or *đàn độc huyền*) is a single-string instrument unique to Vietnam.
- The *đàn nhị* (or *đàn cò*) is a two-stringed fiddle with a tube resonator.
- The *đàn gáo* is a two-stringed fiddle with a coconut shell resonator.

- The *đàn tỳ bà* is a four-stringed pear-shaped lute, similar to the Chinese *pipa*.
- The *sáo* is a bamboo or wooden transverse flute.
- A variety of percussions instruments, including *sanh tiền* (coin clappers), *phách* (clappers), *song loan* (foot clappers) and drums.

Within the Vietnamese community, traditional music performances have been rare. Traditional music only appears as single items of a variety program in community functions (8). A number of amateur groups in Melbourne and Sydney such as the Hoa Tình Thương, Lạc Hồng and Hoài Hương perform *cải lương* at the Vietnamese New Year Festival and a number of charity events.

Notes

- (1) Le Tuan Hung, *Vietnamese Music in Australia – A General Survey*, 2004.
<http://home.vicnet.au/~aaf/vietoz.htm>

- (2) Dr Phong Nguyen, *Vietnamese Music in America*, Institute for Vietnamese Music, 2003. <http://www.vietnamesemusic.us.NT/P1.html>
- (3) Le Tuan Hung, op.cit.
- (4) Le Tuan Hung, op.cit.
- (5) Dr Phong Nguyen, op.cit.
- (6) Vietnamese musical instruments, available at URL www.ncsu.edu/stud_orgs/vsa/www/music/music.html
- (7) Le Tuan Hung, op.cit.
- (8) Le Tuan Hung, op.cit. Regarding the predominant music of choice for Vietnamese refugees, see also Adelaida Reyes, *Songs of the Caged, Songs of the Free: Music and the Vietnamese Refugee*, 1999.



2.11 Vietnamese Society over Time

Confucianism, originating from China, has been a great force of social cohesion for Vietnam. “A situational ethic”, “the ethic of the human being in society”, Confucianism emphasizes the five basic relationships: between ruler and subject, between father and son, between husband and wife, between elder and junior, and between friends (1). These relationships are actually “moral bonds” and all, except the one between friends which is based on mutual respect, are governed by the norm of subordination – that of subject to ruler, son to father, wife to husband, and younger brother to elder brother (2).

The Confucian norms influenced the evolution of Vietnam as a hierarchic, authoritarian and patriarchal society in which Confucian scholarship,

monarchical absolutism, filial piety, the subordinate role of women and the family system were regarded as “integral to the natural order of the universe” (3).

The society was dramatically transformed in the mid-19th Century by the imposition of French rule. The old ruling class – the mandarin class – gave way to the new French-dominated governing class. New social groups emerged: the new intelligentsia which emphasized modern subjects like science and geography instead of the Confucian classics; the new white-collar group working in the French government bureaucracy and the private sector; a new class of workers introduced by the development of mining and industry; a new group of wage earners formed from the expansion of agriculture in the South and the cultivation of such crops as rubber, coffee and tea

(4). The French influence was also felt in the enthusiastic adoption of the new social ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity by almost all those who came into contact with French education and culture.

Vietnamese society was further transformed in the mid-20th century by the wars and eventually by Communist rule with its revolutionary socio-political practices of class struggle, dictatorship of the proletariat, elimination of private ownership, collectivization of production and public ownership of all means of production.

The wind from the West and the tidal wave of Marxism have transformed in many ways the structure of society and the way in which people behaved. The strict ethical rules binding people together have relaxed. The Confucian code of filial behaviour, for example, may not be strictly followed nowadays as

it was in the past (5). The concept of spousal fidelity, which was once accepted as natural and proper, has shrunk to allow for marital separation and divorce.

Although modern Vietnam has experienced comprehensive changes in the context of reform and globalisation, to many Western observers, the Confucian social and moral philosophy has been and still is very influential in the structure of Vietnamese society and the social behaviour of Vietnamese people. Let us quote just a few comments.

“In many ways – especially in the Asian countries we call ‘Communists’ – Confucianism is still at the core of society ...” (6).

“In present times we have seen different political ideologies come and go through Vietnam.

However the foundation of Confucianism remains” (7).

“As Marxism continues to lose its grip over Vietnamese society and culture and the country is exposed to Westernisation in increasingly large doses, Confucianism may well re-assert itself as an important and positive force” (8).

Notes

- (1) To Thi Anh, *Eastern & Western Cultural Values: Conflict or Harmony?* Hochiminh City, 1994, pp 8-9.
U.S. Library of Congress, “Vietnam - The Social System”.
<http://countrystudies.us/vietnam/38.htm>
- (2) James A. Crites, “Confucianism and its Spread to Vietnam”.
<http://www.angelfire.com/ca/beekeeper/cf.html>
- (3) U.S. Library of Congress, op.cit.
- (4) U.S. Library of Congress, op.cit.
- (5) Kimba Fung-Yee Chu & Robert Carew, “Confucianism: Its Relevance to Social Work with Chinese People”, *Australian Social Work*, Vol. 43, No.3, p7
- (6) Metanoiak! a weblog from China: Religion in Vietnam: Part One
http://www.metanoiak.com/archives/2005/02/religion_in_vie.html
- (7) James A. Crites, op.cit.
- (8) Bruce Lockhart, *Confucianism in Vietnam*, Hochiminh City, Vietnam National University and Hochiminh City Publishing House, 2002.
http://kyotoreview.cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp/issue/issue2/article_238.html