

4. Emotions

While Vietnamese culture is different from any other culture in many tangible aspects such as dress, food and arts it is harder to detect the cultural differences in the way Vietnamese navigate emotional challenges. “Understanding and responding effectively to the emotional and psychological needs of refugees is the least recognised and most difficult task facing the caring professions” (1).

This section will address these emotional expressions noting of course that the descriptions that follow are generalised guides and should be used with caution. As Saunders would suggest,

Look with open eyes; listen with open ears; don't allow the stereotypes of media images of cultures different from your own to blind you to the individualness of that person who seeks your professional expertise. Learn what you can of other cultures ... and then treat each person as an individual (2).

- (1) The Ethnic Affairs Commission of NSW, *Survival and Beyond, Vol 1, Refugee Services in NSW*, Sydney, 1979, p 46.
- (2) Ross Saunders, ed., *Cross Cultural Issues for Health Professionals in Australia*, The Multicultural Centre, University of Sydney, Sydney, 1990, p 2.



4.1 Anger

While anthropologists have found that the experience of anger is universal, the expression of anger is undoubtedly cultural. Each culture forms rules, stated or unstated, about the acceptable practices for expressing anger.

Vietnamese believe that the moral ideal is to contain their antisocial emotions, so that social relations will not be adversely affected. The Vietnamese 'quân-tử' (closest English translation 'gentleman') is expected to behave in a manner described by Nguyễn Công Trứ, a 19th century poet,

*Close your ears to provocative comments,
Smile in spite of your deep resentment.*

Reflecting this, for the Vietnamese, smiling in many

cases is just as likely to be a cover for hostile or angry impulses as stoic behaviour in adversity (1).

There is a Vietnamese saying “*quân tử hận tam niên, tiểu nhân hận nhãn tiền*” which suggests that cultured people can bury their feelings for three years whereas unrefined people express them immediately. The line of social distinction is drawn between people who can or cannot maintain self-control, politeness and a neutral expression, even when angry. Anger in social relationships is forcibly discouraged with such discourse as ‘*giận mất khôn*’ – to get angry is to lose reason and ‘*một sự nhin, chín sự lành*’ – ignoring one bad thing done to you yields nine good things for you.

Even more critical are the rules around family and anger: “No hostility towards parents or

elders and stringently limited hostility toward siblings and peers” (2). Vietnamese state that they not only suppress outward shows of anger such as quarrelling or violence they also deny or repress conscious awareness of any hostile ideation towards parents.

While it is unacceptable for a younger person to express anger towards a parent or authority figure it is permissible for an older person to be angry with younger people. Traditional morality even suggests that corporal punishment of a child is motivated by love rather than anger or aggression. “*Yêu cho roi cho vọt*”, to love the child is not to spare the rod. Hostility is also permissible in situations involving transgressors of cultural or moral standards and foreigners – especially invaders or in the situation of colonisation.

It is possible that the tendency to bottle anger is linked to the harmony- oriented philosophies of Taoism, which have been practices in Vietnam for over two millenniums (3). Harmony-oriented Vietnamese cope with conflicts either through suppression or withdrawal either physically or emotionally. Confrontation and assertiveness are not highly valued personal qualities in social encounters. “Reluctance to confront conflict situations, preference for allowing time to work out seemingly insoluble problems and reliance on personal inner strength in facing difficulties are inherent factors that discourage people from communicating their needs” (4).

As psychology would suggest that buried anger does not disappear but smoulders and can surface inappropriately when defence mechanisms are not strong enough to block it, for

Vietnamese a common outlet is nasty speech while physical fights are also not uncommon. Relationships may be damaged irretrievably as a result of a backlog of anger and hostility.

Notes

- (1) P.G. Bourne, cited in Imogene C. Brower, Counseling Vietnamese, *The Personnel and Guidance Journal*, June 1980, p. 648.
- (2) Walter H. Slote, Psychodynamic Structures in Vietnamese Personality, *Transcultural Research in Mental Health, Vol 2 of Mental Health Research in Asia and the Pacific*, edited by William P. Lebra, the University Press of Hawaii, Honolulu, 1972, p 125.
- (3) National Indochinese Clearinghouse, *A Cross-Cultural Glimpse of the Vietnamese People*, Center for Applied Linguistics, Arlington, VA, 1976-1977, p. 30.
- (4) The Ethnic Affairs Commission of NSW, *Survival and Beyond, Vol 1, Refugee Services in NSW*, Sydney, 1979, p.46.



4.2 Sadness

The title of Jenny Leak's report on the incidence of emotional stress in refugee children from Vietnam "*Smiling on the outside, Crying on the inside*" mirrors the verse by the Vietnamese poet Nguyen Du who in his masterpiece *Kim Vân Kiều* (The Tale of Kieu) suggests that Vietnamese people are inclined to cover their true feelings. He suggests that a smiling face cannot be taken as a true representation of inner feelings. Children are instructed to accept punishment in a cheerful way whereas they are not to be proud of their individual achievements and personal or emotional growth, as 'loud laughing leads to quick crying'. Other quotes that highlight these emotional discrepancies include 'when we are cheerful we feel like crying, when we are extremely sad we laugh instead'

and 'cheer up to mask the silent tears'.

While it could be argued that there is some level of socialisation around tears being linked with sadness and smiling with joy, perhaps showing sadness on the face is universal. Vietnamese often say '*buồn ra mặt*', which exactly means that sadness reveals itself in facial features, but they also show sadness in other parts of the body. '*Buồn miệng*', literally sad in the mouth, is an expression that means the person finds something to eat because of their sadness. '*Buồn chân*' or '*buồn cẳng*', meaning sad in the feet or the legs, suggest that the person keeps active to avoid boredom. '*Buồn tay*', sad in the hands or fists, suggests a feeling of not knowing what to do with ones hands or fists but needing to do something, possibly to fight or destroy things. These

expressions of sadness may be particularly cultural.

Other possible behavioural patterns include withdrawal, smoking, drinking, moping around, reluctance to engage in oral communications, staying in bed at unusual times or personifying their sadness. For example, if a Vietnamese person says that 'the weather is sad today' they may be feeling down. Similarly the poet Nguyen Du wrote 'when a human being is sad the scenery cannot be otherwise'. He goes on to point in other lines to the link in Vietnamese thinking between moods and nature:

*She sadly watched the harbour
in grey dusk -*

*Whose boat was that with
fluttering sails, far off?*

*She sadly watched the river flow
to sea -*

*Where would this flower end,
adrift and lost?*

*She sadly watched the field of
wilted grass,
The bluish haze where merged
the earth and clouds.
She sadly watched the wind
whip up the cove
And set all waves a-roaring
around her seat. (2)*

The Vietnamese are seen by cross-cultural specialists as ‘heart-oriented’ people in contrast, say, to Americans who are said to be ‘mind-oriented’ (3). This comparison suggests that Vietnamese behaviour is motivated by feelings, sentiments and emotions independently of the dictate of reason and rationality. According to the Clearinghouse study there seems to be a distinctive predilection amongst Vietnamese for literature and music dealing with deeply sentimental and sad themes (3). The Vietnamese classics such as, *Kim Vân Kiều* (The Tale of Kieu), *Chinh Phụ Ngâm* (The

Lament of the Warrior’s Wife) and *Cung Oán Ngâm Khúc* (The Complaint of the Royal Concubine) all carry sad themes as do musical tunes such as *Vọng Cổ* which literally translated means yearning for the times of yore and has been reviewed as mirroring the deeply sentimental mood of the Vietnamese soul. The study also compared the Vietnamese phrase ‘*tủi phận*’ or lamenting one’s fate with the American attitude of not self pitying, feeling sorry for oneself or moping (4).

Notes

- (1) Jenny Leak, *Smiling on the Outside, Crying on the Inside – The Prevalence and Manifestation of Emotional Stress in Refugee Children from Vietnam, Aged 9-12 Years*, South Australian College of Advanced Education, Bedford Park, S.A., 1982.
- (2) Lines 1047-1054 of Nguyen Du, *The Tale of Kieu*, A Bilingual Edition, translated by Huynh Sanh Thong, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1983, p 55.
- (3) National Indochinese Clearinghouse (NIC), *A Cross-Cultural Glimpse of the Vietnamese People 1976-1977*, Center for Applied Linguistics, Arlington, Virginia, p 21.
- (4) NIC, *Ibid*, p 21.

4.3 Grief

While Vietnamese tend to suppress many other feelings they are not culturally inhibited to publicly and profusely express feelings such as grief. “Unlike the stiff upper lip repressed suffering that the Anglo-Saxon Australian goes through and the backing off to bear grief alone, the Indochinese client is often very expressive and shows grief to a large extent and the anguish, sorrow, guilt and other feelings that make up grief are clearly ventilated, unashamedly” (1).

The most common expression of grief is crying. However there are social norms that govern this crying. People are allowed to cry loudly over the death of their dearest family members and there is even stigma attached to a lack of tears if a child does not cry profusely over a dead parent.

The rituals around the death of a loved one are also considered to be a crucial element to grieving. The deceased would be kept in the family home for a couple of days allowing friends and family to mourn. This would be followed by a loud mournful procession to the cemetery where it is not unlikely for mourners to down on the coffin as it is going into the ground. Back at the house there would be further condolences from community members and friends and more time allowed for the family to mourn. Afterwards the immediate family and relatives would observe ceremonies to commemorate the dead at 7 days, 49 days, 100 days and yearly anniversaries.

Crying is viewed as a connection to the painful feelings and in this situation Vietnamese usually choose to share their pain with a close friend or an older person, never with an outsider (2). Often

this sharing is non-verbal, like doing things together, showing attention in practical matters, physical touching, looks, etc. (3)

While grief can be the product of losing a loved one it can also be around the massive social losses caused by uprooting and migrating. Eisenbruch (4) labelled the catastrophic loss of social structure, cultural values and self-identity as cultural grief or cultural bereavement. The uprooted person or group “continues to live in the past, is visited by supernatural forces from the past while asleep or awake, suffers feelings of guilt over abandoning the homeland and culture, feels pain if memories of the past begin to fade, but finds constant images of the past (including traumatic images) intruding into daily life, yearns to complete obligations to the dead, and feels stricken by anxieties, morbid thoughts, and anger that mar the ability to get on with daily life”.

Eisenbruch (5) observed that the comfort from religious beliefs and religious practice seems to be an antidote to the refugees’ cultural bereavement. This can be seen in the participation by large numbers of Vietnamese from all walks of life at religious gatherings in churches, pagodas or temples.

Notes

- (1) R.A. Fordham, *Social Work Practice and the Indochinese, Occasional Papers*, No 16, the Clearing House on Migration Issues, Richmond, Vic., May 1982, p 5.
- (2) Suzanne Bang, *We Come as a Friend: Towards a Vietnamese Model of Social Work*, Refugee Action, Leeds, November 1983, p 22.
- (3) *Ibid*, p 28.
- (4) M. Eisenbruch, *From Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder to Cultural Bereavement: Diagnosis of Southeast Asian Refugees*, *Soc. Sci. Med.*, Vol 33, No 6, 1991, p 674.
- (5) M. Eisenbruch, *The Physical and Mental Well-being of the Indo-Chinese Communities in Australia*, Plenary Paper presented at National Conference, Indochinese Communities: Health Needs and Responses, Melbourne, June 19-20, 1989, in *Australia and Indochinese Health Issues*, AAVS, Melbourne, 1990, pp 67-75.

4.4 Joy

Joy is expressed in different ways, depending on situations. The social or communal aspect of joy finds expression in the noisiest possible way, with use of drums and firecrackers a good example of this. The term for joy is also symbolised by colourful decorations around the home and is a wish given to each other at events such as New Year or weddings. The colours red and yellow cannot be missing from any ceremonial decorations. It is interesting to note that Vietnamese tend to show their happiness and inspiration by vocal music rather than by body movements; singing is present in social gatherings but dancing is not. This may be due to the traditional belief that dancing is royal entertainment and not for the masses.

Personal joy is not expressed outwardly as corporate joy is, instead like sadness it is considered too personal. Formerly virtuous girls were expected not to laugh loudly. There are smiles, which are forced, jokes, which are wry, and joys, which are muted. The joy of love or victory has clearly defined boundaries with kissing in public considered inappropriate, “who laughs last laughs longest” and other sayings that restrict public displays. These restrictions may also be viewed as a philosophical or moral stance as moderation is believed to be a virtue to cultivate or an ideal to achieve and while enjoying themselves people are to always be aware of the cloud of misfortune overhead, the impermanence of the existential moment and the frivolity of worldly pleasures.

While a smile and laugh may be indicators of real joy, they can sometimes be misleading and an enigma (1), as it is called, especially on social occasions. Duong Thanh Binh (2) describes the Vietnamese smile as follows:

The Vietnamese smile about almost everything and anything. In Vietnam they will smile when foreigners cannot pronounce their names properly; they will smile as a friendly but silent gesture to welcome foreigners to their homes; they will smile to please their superiors; they will smile to show their interest in what a speaker is telling them; they will smile to help their friend forget a mistake the latter made. On the other hand the Vietnamese smile can be used as a polite screen to hide confusion, ignorance, fear, contrition, shyness, bitterness, disappointment or anger... Smiling at all times and places is a common characteristic of all

Vietnamese. There are, however, no guidelines to tell foreigners what meaning each smile represents in each situation. Remember that the Vietnamese smile may mean almost anything and that people from other cultures need not feel frustrated, irritated or offended at not being able to guess its exact meaning.

Just as there are bitter tears, so there are tears of joy like those of the girl whose boy returns from the war, or of a girl on her wedding day. What a paradoxical way of showing happiness! Strangely enough, the tears of sadness can be concealed, but the tears of joy are seemingly uncontrollable.

Notes

- (1) Nguyen Dang Liem, Vietnamese-American Cross-cultural Communication, *Bilingual Resources*, Vol 3, No 2, 1980, p 13.
- (2) Duong Thanh Binh, *A Handbook for Teachers of Vietnamese Students*, Center for Applied Linguistics, Arlington, Virginia, 1975, p 23.

4.5 Loneliness

In a Melbourne-based longitudinal study of the mental health problems of Indochinese refugees aged 5-24, loneliness is reported as the greatest source of stress (1). Similarly Indochinese adolescents participating in camps with the Sydney Indochinese Refugee Youth Support Group indicated that the major issue they face is loneliness and homesickness (2). Again the most frequently reported stressor of Vietnamese women in Australia is homesickness (3). These findings are not surprising in view of the lack of traditional support networks in the Vietnamese community and the splitting of families due to geographical separation. While loneliness exists in the country of origin, it is aggravated in the new country by the unfamiliarity of physical surroundings, scattered community,

incomplete family and separated friendship networks,

Responses to this loneliness vary and include strolling the streets aimlessly, indulging in drinking bouts or smoking endlessly, engaging oneself in busy work or study almost around the clock and coming into non-conformist relationships like gang-style activities, de facto partnerships, etc. This need to belong has perpetuated the formation of mutual support organisations and networks. Lin, Masuda and Tazuma (4) noted a pattern of acculturation called traditionalism, the strong attachment to and awareness of the traditional culture, which many Vietnamese refugees use as a way of easing feelings of loss and reducing the impact of culture shock. Common themes of oriental decorations, Vietnamese magazines and novels, video tapes, CDs and

DVDs can be found in most Vietnamese homes.

This loneliness and need for company, support and care are clearly identified by young people who come to Australia without parents. The following poem, "Pain and Hope", was written by an unaccompanied minor.

*And how lonely I am now for my
parents*

Staying in this foreign country

Without parents beside me.

*So I need to share the love and
care*

With others round me

To warm my heart and my life

And to share my loneliness. (5)

Notes

- (1) Jerzy Krupinski & Graham Burrows, eds, *The Price of Freedom: Young Indochinese Refugees in Australia*, Pergamon Press, Sydney, 1986, p 241.
- (2) G. Thornton, C. Hepperlin & I. Ferguson, Preventative and Primary Mental Health Services for

Displaced Indochinese Refugee Children – A Successful Model of Community Health Intervention, *The Lamp*. September 1986, pp 15-17.

- (3) Trang Thomas, Mental Health Issues and Vietnamese Elderly Women, *Migration Monitor*, December 1991, pp 16-20.
- (4) Keh-Ming Lin, Minoru Masuda & Laurie 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, p 180
- (5) Lee Borrodale, The Pain Behind the Smiles, *Perspective* (Educational Journal for M.S.C. Schools), No 21, Winter 1983, p 12.



4.6 Love

A pre-Second World War poet wrote,

How could you explain what love is!

Explanations do not make sense.

*It just came over me late one afternoon,
with pale sunlight, airy clouds
and gentle wind. (1)*

While it could be suggested that the emotion of love is universal there seem to be some traits that are culturally specific. There are a number of pieces of folklore to describe the passion of love, e.g.

When love calls, you do not at all mind

*Climbing high mountains,
Swimming across large rivers,
Walking over impassable passes. (2)*

Or,

The two young people loved each other dearly.

One took off his/her warm coat and put it on the other.

Upon getting home, he/she was confronted by Mother:

'What happened? Where was the coat?'

'The wind blew it away when I crossed the bridge.' (2)

Although the motive of love is strong, a Vietnamese girl and boy in love are normally reserved and self-restrained. Generally, Western girls would be proud to acknowledge that they have boyfriends. This may not be the case with Vietnamese girls who often deny having boyfriends when they do have. Vietnamese girls and boys are almost never found kissing each other in public; the most open loving act is no more than a touch of hands. "The prescription is: you are totally

free in loving another person, dreaming of an ideal person, and you are also free to keep it secretly, but as advised by the Vietnamese culture, you are not allowed to express it freely.” (3)

However, do not think that Vietnamese youth are unloving just because they do not kiss or do not admit they are in love. There is a linguistic clue for you to recognise two people being in love. Their forms of address have shifted from the equivalents of neutral English pronouns *you-me* to endearing terms of blood relationships *anh-em* (big brother-little sister).

The capacity to be loving or hating seems unlimited and non-discriminating:

When two people love each other

They love each other's roads of travel too.

When two people hate each other

They hate each other's relatives too. (2)

Two people who love and marry each other are said to have predestined affinity. Two people who love but eventually do not or cannot marry each other are said to have affinity but to carry no mutual debt. The literary reference about an old man reading in the moonlight a register of marriages fixed in advance, holding in his hand a bag full of red threads used to unite those who had been destined for marrying each other, illustrates the quite popular belief in the wedding predestination. Apart from this metaphysical reason used to explain the mutual debt, i.e. marriage, there is an evident social factor involved. The relative importance of one or the other is summarized by Kieu in

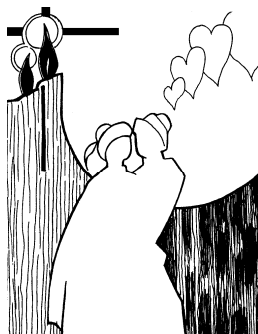
the classic *Kim Van Kieu* in two lines of verse:

*Whatever red love leaves or
rosy hymen threads may be,
They must depend upon my
parents' decision.* (4)

In old Vietnam marriages were normally arranged by parents and obeying one's parents' decision on marriage matters was a test of filial piety. "The parents or the members of the extended family such as your uncles and aunts have the right to transform your love into reality, not you" (5). For this reason, "girls in the past had only one way to refuse marriage: to commit suicide" (6).

There is hardly a case nowadays of two single people who are keen to tie a marital bond but are not allowed to do so. Today, parents only play an advisory role and the pre-arranged marriage system is

slowly and reluctantly giving way to courtship and dating.



Notes

- (1) Publication data not known. The poet referred to is Xuân Diệu, in the Vietnamese romantic poetry movement before the Second World War.
- (2) The Vietnamese folk lyrics quoted in this account are anonymous and transmitted orally from generation to generation.
- (3) Nguyen Xuan Thu, The Vietnamese Family Moral Code, *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, Vol 1, No 3, January 1990, p 34.
- (4) Le Xuan Thuy, *Kim Van Kieu – English Translation, Footnotes and Commentaries*, Nhà Xuất Bản Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh, 1992, pp 84-86.
- (5) Nguyen Xuan Thu, *op. cit.*, p 34.
- (6) Nguyen Xuan Thu, *op. cit.*, p 35.