

VIETNAM - INFORMATION SHEET

BACKGROUND

Vietnam is bordered by Cambodia, Laos, and China and the South China Sea along the east coast. Vietnam regained its independence after a century of rule under China. Several invasions led to the submission of Vietnam to a tributary of Yuan until the country was colonised by France in the middle to late 19th century. The French were expelled by Japan during World War II, and a later attempt to regain power failed. Eventually the country was partitioned in two. This paved the way for the Vietnam War (known by the Vietnamese as the American War) North Vietnam was supported by the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China and South Vietnam was supported by the United States of America. USA withdrew in 1973 and Vietnam was again reunified. Still governed by the Communist party of Vietnam, the economic policy has changed and today reforms to the private sector have seen significant growth.

LANGUAGE

Vietnamese is the official language with English favoured as a second language. Some French, Chinese, and Khmer (mountain area languages Mon-Khmer and Malayo-Polynesian) are also spoken.

RELIGION

Even though Vietnam is a communist country the constitution supports religious freedom. Most Vietnamese follow a Buddhism that is an amalgam of Confucianism, Taoism and ancestor worship. The Vietnamese regularly visit religious temples several times a year.

FESTIVALS

The festivals are not tied to any particular religion.

VU LAN - held in August when prayers are offered and forgiveness is asked of one's ancestors. Traditionally coins are thrown out of windows to ensure that wandering souls have money to spend on their journey.

TET - is the Vietnamese New Year, determined by the lunar calendar. It is celebrated regardless of religion or social class. Firecrackers are used. The loud noise is believed to frighten away the evil spirits that have played havoc with the people in the past year. On this day children receive small red packets, with new money in them, symbolic of new life. In Australia the Vietnamese community celebrate their New Year on the weekend following the actual New Year.

DO SON BUFFALO FIGHTING FESTIVAL - This festival has twelve young Vietnamese men dressed in red, who lead the buffaloes into a fighting circle. Two buffaloes fight until there is one remaining.

ETHNIC MAKEUP

Kinh – Vietnamese 86.2% of the Vietnamese are known as Kinh. The remainder are made up of Tay 1.9%, Thai 1.7 %, Muong 1.5%, Khome 1.4%, Hoa 1.1 %, Nun 1.1 % and Hmong 1%.

SOCIAL CUSTOMS

The notion of filial piety informs all aspects of Vietnamese life. The correct observance of respect for one's parents, living or dead, is seen as a fundamental guide to how to live one's life. A small altar dedicated to the family, is seen in every house, often in the main living area.

SLEEPING: Babies generally sleep on their backs. They are protected from rolling and from evil spirits, by the placement of pillows around them.

SOCIAL ETIQUETTE: It is seen as swearing if you cross your fingers. It is rude to call a child to you with a 'come here' finger as this is seen as the way you call a dog. Do not touch a child's head as this offends parents.

CLOTHING: Western clothing is mostly worn by Vietnamese men, but the women continue to wear the *au dai*, a front opening, knee length long top with splits from the hem to the waist on both sides. It is worn over loose flowing pants. The tribal groups of Vietnam all have their own distinctive style of dress often with colours, materials and embroidered cloth specific to that group.

CHILD REARING PRACTICES: Babies are normally breast fed for at least 12 months with this practice only varying if another child is born. The baby is wrapped with a piece of clothing belonging to the oldest living relative (usually grandparent/s) as a symbol of inheriting longevity. After the birth of a baby, the mother's strength is revived from having 'lost heat, blood and breath' by wearing heavy clothing (regardless of the temperature) and confining herself indoors for 30-100 days.

Vietnamese children, unlike western children, are not encouraged to walk early. Most children are carried until they are four years of age. There are two reasons newborn Vietnamese babies are not kissed. Firstly it is seen to be unhygienic and secondly it is believed the Spirit of Birth will be jealous if the baby is shown too much affection and so will be taken away. It is more common to see babies sniffed; a practice that is common in many eastern cultures. Ceremonies take place at one month and one year known as the 'Ceremony of Quitting the Cot'. Selected items, each with symbolic significance, are placed upon a tray and according to what the child chooses from that selection will predict the future occupation of the child.

At the first anniversary of birth the child is said to be two years old because the age is estimated from when the child was in the womb. Birthdates are calculated according to the

lunar calendar and so a Vietnamese child may be said to be one year older than their Western counterpart. Vietnamese can calculate birth by knowing one's birth sign and so they tend to ask 'What is your birth sign?' rather than 'How old are you?'

NAMING: Vietnamese children are usually named by the father and/or grandfather. The names are accorded in keeping with desired virtues such as mercy, benevolence, loyalty, dignity, respect, honesty, trust, determination etc. The order of a name differs from Western names. The first part of a Vietnamese name is the family name; the second usually refers to the gender (*van* for males and *thi* for females) and the third part is the given name.

STATUS OF WOMEN: A woman's place within the family is measured by her relationship to men. Her first obedience is to her father, then her husband. Upon becoming a mother a Vietnamese woman is referred to as the 'mother of...'. Thus a woman's identity is always dependent upon her relationship to another family member.

CUISINE

Rice and noodle soup are the staple food and are supplemented with meat, fish and vegetables. Banh Mi Thit is a Vietnamese baguette filled with a selection of cheese, meat, pickled carrot and cucumber slices. At the conclusion of eating, the chopsticks should be placed across the bowl horizontally. When taking food from the service bowl the opposite end to the one that touches the mouth should be used. Soup may be consumed by lifting the bowl to the mouth. When eating in a traditional Vietnamese house, the children will eat first but only after being given permission to do so by the adults.

REFERENCES

1. VICSEG Newsletter, vicseg Limited 1993
2. A Cultural Cameo: Vietnam, Multicultural Child Care Unit Inc, 1997
3. Wikipedia.com (accessed 14/08/08)