

Vietnamese

The name *Vietnam*, meaning 'Land (or People) of the South', came into Western use in 1946 to describe the eastern part of French Indochina, from the Chinese border in the north to the Mekong delta areas in the south. Much earlier the country was called Nam-Viet (Southern Land) by the Chinese, who conquered it in the third century BC. The people of Nam-Viet were the ancestors of the present-day ethnic Vietnamese who belong to a Mongoloid race. They have a recorded history of over 4000 years, during which they spread from north of the Red River delta southward to the Mekong delta.

By about the third century BC a kingdom called Tonkin became established, centred in the north. After AD 938 the country was ruled by three dynasties: the Lê, the Trinh and the Nguyễn. With the advance of technology early in the nineteenth century, European countries were looking for raw materials and markets for their products. Colonialism was born and the French took Vietnam as one of their colonies. From the 1860s, there was sporadic resistance to French rule and from the early 1900s nationalist movements began to gather strength. A Vietnam Communist Party was founded in 1930 under the leadership of Nguyễn-Ái-Quốc, who was later known as Hồ-Chí-Minh.

Although Vietnam was occupied by the Japanese in 1940, the French administration continued to operate until 1945. In 1941, Hồ-Chí-Minh, who had long been in exile in China and elsewhere, returned to Vietnam and organised a revolutionary movement known as the Viet Minh to wage guerrilla warfare against the Japanese. After the Japanese surrender, the Viet Minh proclaimed the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam by eliminating all other groups. Most of the non-Communist elements that survived withdrew from the Viet Minh at this point.

In 1949 the French set up a nominally self-governing State of Vietnam headed by Bao-Đai, the former Emperor. The United States gave diplomatic recognition to the government and aid. The war continued between the French-assisted National Army of the State of Vietnam on

the one hand and the Viet Minh on the other. The French were defeated in 1954 at Điện-Biên-Phu, North Vietnam. In July 1954 a peace agreement was signed in Geneva between five great powers. The French left Vietnam and the country was divided at the seventeenth parallel. North Vietnam came under the control of the Communist Viet Minh and South Vietnam under the Republic Government of the State of Vietnam.

After a referendum in the South in 1955, Ngô-Đình-Diêm replaced Bao-Đai as Head of State, and remained President of the Republic until his assassination in 1963. In spite of the direct involvement of rapidly increasing numbers of American and Allied forces, including a significant contingent of Australian troops, the military situation in the war against the communist insurgency from the North deteriorated. The Communist advance continued until April 1975 when Saigon was occupied.

After the fall of Saigon, large numbers of refugees fled from South Vietnam and were admitted to the United States and other Western countries including Australia.

Economy

The economy of Vietnam was seriously disrupted by the war. The two halves of the country remained economically different, with the socialist system well established in the North, while in the South, a considerable amount of private enterprise was still permitted. Some moves, however, were made towards agricultural collectivisation. 'New Economic Zones' had been set up in the South to increase the area under cultivation and to transfer the population from urban centres to the countryside. The economy, especially in the South, is predominantly agricultural. The staple crop is rice. While considerable efforts are being made to increase agricultural output by mechanisation, production rose only 4 per cent from 1965 to 1975, while the population rose by 26 per cent over the same period. This contributed to Vietnam's failure to become self-sufficient in food. Industry is mainly concentrated in the

North, although heavy bombing from 1965 to 1973 destroyed an estimated 70 per cent of Vietnam's production capacity.

The principal industries are food processing, cement, metallurgy, chemicals, paper, (off-shore) oil exploration by BP, coal and iron-ore mining, engineering and textiles. Due to the failed economy and the unfavourable climate, Vietnam is now one of the poorest countries in the world with the average earning per head only about A\$200 per year. The Vietnamese economy has changed for the better since the removal of the US economic embargo from February 1994.

Ethnic Composition and Language

The ethnic Vietnamese, who constitute about 80 per cent of the population of Vietnam, belong to a southern Mongoloid race. Minority groups include the Montagnards (tribesmen of the central highlands), the Chinese and the Khmer of the South. A large percentage of the present Vietnamese population in Australia are ethnic Chinese. The Vietnamese language is spoken by the majority of Vietnamese, and has been strongly influenced by the Chinese language. Catholic missionaries invented a Roman transcription using a modified alphabet. This system became 'The National Language' and is the Vietnamese language used today.

During the period under French domination, French was the official language, and most educated Vietnamese were fluent in it. Since 1954, Vietnamese has been the official language for education and administration. Chinese is spoken by the ethnic Chinese population. At high schools English is taught as a second language and is widely used among young people and officials. The Vietnamese way of writing names is the reverse of the Australian way. A typical Vietnamese name has three words. For example: Nguyễn Van Nam (family) (middle) (given).

Religions

Most of the Vietnamese habits, customs and traditions are rooted in, and conditioned by, religious beliefs. The main religions in Vietnam are Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Christianity and two Indigenous sects, Cao-Đài and Hòa-Hảo. About two-thirds of Vietnamese regard themselves as Buddhist, although only a small proportion practise their religion in an organised way.

Taoism ('Tao' means 'the way') was essentially a philosophy of passivity, Chinese in origin with an emphasis on simplicity, selflessness, frugality, tranquillity and accord with nature. Confucianism (Confucius 551–479 BC) is a philosophy of social order that venerates status, age, obedience and virtue.

Christianity was introduced into Vietnam in the sixteenth century by Catholic missionaries from France, Spain and Portugal. The number of Catholics in South Vietnam in 1975 was about 2 million. The main Protestant church in Vietnam is the Baptist Church.

Cao-Đài originated early in the twentieth century and is a mixture of Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism and Christianity. Hòa-Hảo is a Buddhist sect that was founded in 1909 in the village of Hòa-Hảo in the Mekong delta in South Vietnam. The ideals of Confucianism have played an important part in the Vietnamese ways of life. The virtues of filial piety and obedience are still the basis of ancestor worship and support an extended family system in which age is the basis of authority. This could well be the reason why some Vietnamese feel more at home with Christianity when living in a Westernised society, which does not have the same idea of an extended family.

Family, Society and Customs

Like almost all Eastern cultures, Vietnamese society is based on an extended family system rather than on the smaller Western nuclear family. Children are gifts from God and may well be the providers for older parents or grandparents. Vietnamese families tend to be large, and there are many younger members to rear, support and educate. Having extensive family connections is also one of the means by which the average family can sustain itself and provide opportunities for the advancement of their children.

To the Vietnamese, the family is the centre of the universe. Anything the Vietnamese do is done out of family consideration rather than for themselves. Vietnamese cannot act freely but must act in accord with their parents, their distant relatives, and their fellow villagers. Ancestor worship encourages them to consider how their deceased forbears would view their actions. Most Vietnamese are devotees of ancestor veneration, a custom that originated from Confucian teachings.

Traditionally, marriage has been a family affair and arranged by the parents. Only recently have young people been given greater freedom to choose.

Women and Children

Traditionally, women's role is purported to be subordinate to that of men in the family, but in real life, women's role in Vietnamese society enjoys a much wider scope. The man may be the nominal head of the household, but the skilful and perceptive wife understands enough practical psychology to have her ideas followed most of the time. Children are brought up to respect their parents and elders, and to treat them with politeness, obedience and great reserve.

The major role in the maintenance of the home and the raising of children is with the mother, while the father is normally the bread-winner. Fathers assist children with their homework and are interested in their overall education.

To Western people, the Vietnamese smile can be an enigma. It is said that the Vietnamese smile at almost everything and anything. In Vietnam they smile when foreigners cannot pronounce their names properly. They smile as a friendly and silent gesture to welcome foreigners to their homes. They smile to please their superiors. They smile to show their interest in what a speaker is telling them.

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. There are, unfortunately, no guidelines to tell foreigners to what meaning each and every smile is to be attributed in a particular situation. People from other cultures need not feel frustrated, irritated or offended when they cannot guess a smile's exact meaning.

Celebrations and Festivals

Many popular festivals are celebrated by every Vietnamese family, such as: *Tết Nguyên-Đán* (the Lunar New Year); the *Đoan-Ngo Feast* (the Fifth of May Festival); the *Vu-Lan* (Wandering Souls' Day) and the *Tết Trung-Thu* (the Mid-Autumn Festival for the children).

The most important of all festivals is *Tết Nguyên-Đán*, the Lunar New Year's Day, or simply *Tết*. The festival marks the end of one lunar year and the

beginning of another. *Tết* is both a joyful and happy festival and yet also a solemn one, which is usually celebrated in the family for at least three days. It is also an occasion for the reunion of all members of the family as well as of the ancestral spirits.

Tết Trung-Thu is a festival for children and is celebrated on the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month. This is also a festival to celebrate the moon. There are moon cakes and tea for the adults and moon cakes and coloured lanterns for the children.

Vietnamese in Queensland

Vietnam is only one-tenth the size of Australia, but the population is four times larger. Australian military involvement in the Vietnam War and the settlement of large numbers of refugees from that area have focused attention of the Vietnamese community in Australia. The vast majority of Vietnamese who have come to Australia and Queensland have come as political refugees. They left to survive, leaving behind their beloved green bamboo wall, the village temple and the immense yellow ricefields, not to mention many dear relatives and friends.

According to the 1996 census, there were 10 992 Vietnam-born people in Queensland of whom 93.5 per cent lived in the Brisbane area and only 6.5 per cent in the rest of Queensland. There were 102 Vietnamese in Townsville, 58 in Cairns, 52 on the Sunshine Coast, 48 in Rockhampton. Over 11 per cent of the Vietnam-born had degrees or diplomas. Yet 42.2 per cent said that they did not speak English well or at all. The main language spoken at home was Vietnamese: 79.4 per cent; Cantonese: 11.8 per cent; English: 4.3 per cent. Of the Vietnamese in Queensland, 41.3 per cent said that they were Buddhists and 27.8 per cent were Catholics.

Settling into a new home is always difficult. But for those who have escaped from their country, then been transferred to another country of refuge with a totally different culture, the initial difficulties seem to be enormous. The new arrivals have to adapt to the community. The host community also needs to make changes to accommodate the new settlers. This process of interaction and mutual adaptation has developed well in Australia.

The influx of Vietnamese refugees initially caused concern among teachers, welfare and health

agencies where the relevant services had to meet the needs of unfamiliar newcomers. The Vietnamese have had to learn how to survive in their new country, to integrate into the community and to cope with the changes of the old and new. The Vietnamese have required the tolerance and understanding of the host community to assist them in adjusting and functioning effectively in the new home.

The Vietnamese community is not a cohesive, homogenous one. Rather, it is differentiated along a number of dimensions including ethnicity (Vietnamese and Chinese), year of arrival (early and late 'waves') and type of migration (refugee versus family reunion or voluntary migration).

Social relations within the community can be described in terms of a number of small clusters of social networks connected by kin, friendship and religious ties. In addition, many families maintain social ties with kin in Vietnam. Members of the community tend to be within a short driving distance from each other. The Vietnamese have very high rates of Australian citizenship, and both the first and second generations maintain relatively extensive social ties with the broader community.

For over 20 years from 1975 to 1995, the majority of Vietnamese in Australia were refugees. However, as the United Nations closed the doors of refugee camps in the Asia-Pacific region, the Australian Government also scaled down its intake of refugees. From the late 1980s onwards, most of the Vietnamese arrivals were under some form of family sponsorship initiated by relatives in Australia. Some also came as short-term holidaymakers, and a couple of hundred are students who have taken up scholarships in Australian schools and universities.

The number of Vietnamese in Queensland now is estimated at about 12 000. Most have settled in the south-east corner of the State, particularly in Brisbane. In the earlier stages, the Vietnamese tended to concentrate in a few suburbs like Darra, Inala, Goodna and West End. Today people are better prepared to move out to mix with the broader community. Queenslanders of Vietnamese background can now be found in almost every suburb of Brisbane.

The Vietnamese community has overcome its initial settlement stage and has now developed into a well-organised mature community with about

30 community organisations. There is now a variety of cultural, political and religious groups. The main organisation is the Queensland Chapter of the Vietnamese Community in Australia.

Each year the organisation plans many traditional and cultural activities. The most notable are the Lunar New Year and the Mid-Autumn festivals. Sporting and entertainment events are organised almost every week. The Vietnamese in Brisbane can listen to two Vietnamese language radio stations; Radio 4EB broadcasts once weekly and SBS broadcasts daily from Sydney and Melbourne.

After a 25 years' presence in Australia, some Vietnamese families can count four generations who have lived in this land. The most interesting are the second and third generations, who are now in their late twenties and in their thirties. Although they were born and bred in Australia, they tend to maintain a lot of interest in the culture and language of their parents and grandparents. Some have even gone back to Vietnam, tracing their lives back to their roots.

There are four Vietnamese ethnic schools. They are open on Saturdays and teach children the Vietnamese language and help them be true bilingual Australians. Each year the Brisbane Vietnamese community welcomes between 150 and 200 new graduates in fields of studies such as engineering, medicine, law and science.

The business scene is also a very healthy one with many Vietnamese-owned shops and businesses serving the community. Unfortunately, unemployment within the younger generation is still high at about 20 to 25 per cent.

Many community members are still in need of appropriate information and education about their legal rights and the mechanisms in the wider society that will help to defend those rights. Reformed policies and programs must not only take into account the needs of Australians from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and the special needs of refugees, but also the important values, beliefs and practices of different ethnic groups. It takes a long time to change a system of society, and it may be that the next generation will be the one to benefit from the work being undertaken now.

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