

# Folklore and the Vietnamese Community in the United States

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For refugees, community is an immediate concern. Vietnamese, the newest wave of refugees to American shores, have been plucked from their families and communities so suddenly that their children sometimes thought they were just taking a vacation in the Philippines or Guam.

Approximately 130,000 Vietnamese arrived in the U. S. in late 1975 and were sent to four holding camps—Camp Pendleton, Calif., Fort Chaffee, Ark., Eglin Air Force Base, Fla., and Fort Indiantown Gap, Pa. Most left the camps through the help of American sponsors in the form of various religious or secular groups who accepted financial responsibility for them.<sup>1</sup> After four years, they are now settled in major urban areas. The adults have learned English and have been retrained for new professions; their unemployment rate is below the national average. Cultural change also has been rapid; in some families the grandparents speak little English and the grandchildren speak little Vietnamese. Nonetheless, the traditional pattern persists of the three generations of an extended family living and working together. In Vietnamese terms, a family consists of the passing on responsibility and gratitude from generation to generation.

For the boat people fleeing Vietnam, the passage to America is longer and less certain. Families leave in small boats, not knowing whether they will find a country to accept them, or perish at sea. Many have seen the family mem-

bers they hoped to bring to safety lost in the escape. Arriving with fragments of their families and communities, the Vietnamese in Washington, D. C., have vigorously woven a network of community activities through neighborhood grocery stores, restaurants, the Buddhist church, Catholic organizations, a bistro, Vietnamese language schools, senior citizens' groups, and newspapers.

The history of Vietnam has often combined political domination by foreign empires with Vietnamese mastery of the colonizer's culture. China occupied Vietnam in 111 B.C., and during the 1000 years of Chinese rule that followed, the Vietnamese adopted the Chinese writing system, the Buddhist religion, and an administrative and governmental system based on Confucian philosophy. In A.D. 939, Vietnam gained its independence from China, and for the next



Music is among the rich traditions Vietnamese bring with them to this country. Photos by Nicholas Bocher for the Smithsonian

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1000 years struggled to maintain that freedom against the Mongols, Chinese, and French. Vietnam's relationship to China was like that of the European nations to Greece and Rome. China was the source of philosophy, art, and government, but Vietnam developed its own national style based on the classical forms of imperial China. The Chinese paid tribute to Vietnam's mastery of the arts by calling it "The Cultured Nation."<sup>2</sup>

Poetry and song are so much a part of life in Vietnam that the conical hats peasants wear are called "poetry hats." Poems are written under the brim, and when a hat is held up to the sun, the poem can be read.<sup>3</sup> One of the earliest recorded poems in Vietnam was composed in the following way: A Buddhist priest, chosen for his learning to meet the new ambassador from China, disguised himself as a ferryman and took the ambassador across the river. The Chinese Ambassador tried to impress the ferryman with an impromptu couplet. The disguised priest capped the ambassador's two lines with two of his own to complete the verse:

*There: wild geese, swimming  
side by side,  
Staring up at the sky!  
White feathers against a deep  
blue,  
Red feet burning in the green  
waves.*

*(translated by Nguyen Ngoc Bich  
with Burton Raffel)<sup>4</sup>*

While the educated wrote poems in Chinese or Sino-Vietnamese characters, boatmen, farmers, loggers, and grandmothers sang as they worked and on festive occasions.

Vietnam has three cultural regions with distinct music, dialect, and costume. The North has traditions of recited poetry and sing-



*Vietnamese grocery stores help maintain the familiar in the immigrants' daily lives by selling Vietnamese foods, newspapers and books, and cassettes of traditional and popular music.*

ing competitions. Central Vietnam with the old imperial city of Hue, has traditions of court music. In the South there are traditions of Vong Co. theater songs which originated in folksong.<sup>5</sup>

From the North come songs workers use to keep rhythm while hauling wood from the dock after it has floated down the river:

*Assembly house!  
How many tiles has the roof?  
I love you!  
As much as that!<sup>6</sup>*

In the South there are lyric boating songs like this one describing an island:

*Which place is more pleasant  
than this isle?  
Mosquitoes cry like flute music,  
Grapefruit trees grow like fog  
fences.<sup>7</sup>*

October is the season for the mid-autumn festival in Vietnam. Under the harvest moon children parade with beautiful lanterns of paper and bamboo. Young men perform acrobatic lion dances in costumes of silk and tassels, accompanied by a drum. Moon cakes are traditionally eaten at this festival. One kind of moon cake is square with a round egg yolk inside. The square part represents the earth and the round part the heavens or the idea of perfection. The cake, through the perfection of a circle in a square, symbolizes the relationship of heaven and earth.

The continually renewed vitality of Vietnamese art, music, poetry, cultural identity and family is a strong cultural value and is symbolized in Vietnam's national epic: "The Tale of Kieu." This poem, parts of which are known by heart by many Vietnamese, tells the story of a young woman of great





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beauty and talent in music and poetry who sells herself to save her family from unjust imprisonment. She suffers bitterly but retains her sense of morality, of fidelity to her family, and of obligation to her betrothed. When she is finally reunited with her family, she has been deeply marked by disaster but transformed rather than scarred or embittered. This poem is a collective expression of the Vietnamese as a people, a nation, and as welcome bearers of tradition recently come to their new-found land.

#### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> E. Jane Keyes, review of Gail Paradise Kelly, *From Vietnam to American: A Chronicle of the Vietnamese Immigration to the United States*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1977 in the *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. xxxviii, No. 3, May 1979, pp. 624-7.

<sup>2</sup> Nguyen Ngoc Bich, *A Thousand Years of Vietnamese Poetry*. New York: Random House, 1973, p. xvii.

<sup>3</sup> Alexander B. Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1976, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Bich, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Pham Duy, *Musics of Vietnam*. Carbondale: Univ. of Southern Illinois Press, 1975, p. xv.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

1 The rice cake, made of glutinous rice filled with mung beans and meat, is wrapped in banana or bamboo leaves and foil, and steamed. Photo courtesy of Mrs. Hoang.

2 Mrs. Hoang describes how she uses a wooden form in making bánh chưng, the rice cake traditionally served at Vietnamese New Year, Tết.

#### Suggested Readings

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