



Vietnam culture

Vietnam has an age-old and special culture that is closely attached to the history of the formation and development of the nation.

Hat cheo

Historians have shared a common view that Vietnam has a fairly large cultural community that was formed around the first half of the first millennium B.C. and flourished in the middle of this millennium. That was Dong Son cultural community. This culture attained a degree of development higher than that of others at that time in the region and had its own characteristics but still bore the features of Southeast Asian culture because of the common South Asian racial root (Southern Mongoloid) and the wet rice culture. Different development routes of local cultures in various areas (in the deltas of Red River, Ma River, Ca River and so on) joined together to form the Dong Son culture.

This was also the period of the very “embryonic” state of Vietnam in the form of inter- and super-village community, which came into being and existed in order to resist invaders and to build and maintain dykes for rice cultivation. From this pattern of “embryo” state, primitive tribes grew into nations.

Van Lang-Au Lac State: (lasting for nearly 3,000 years up to the end of the first millennium before Christ) in the early Bronze Age with 18 Hung kings was regarded as the first apogee in the history of the Vietnamese culture, which was typified by the Dong Son bronze drum and stable technique of cultivating wet rice.

The post-Chinese domination period was characterized by the two parallel trends of Han assimilation and anti-Han assimilation. The Dai Viet (Great Vietnam) period was the second apogee of the Vietnamese culture. Throughout the time of independent feudal states, milestone by the Ly-Tran and Le dynasties, the Vietnamese culture underwent comprehensive restoration and quick boom, under the tremendous influence of Buddhism and Taoism.

After the chaotic Le-Mac and Trinh-Nguyen period, when the country was separated, and since the Tay Son dynasty reunited the country and territory, the Nguyen dynasty tried to restore Confucian culture. They, however, failed because Confucianism had already been fading and the Western culture started to penetrate into the country. The period up to the end of French domination was marked by a cultural mix brought about by two opposite trends - i.e. of Europeanization and anti-Europeanization; that presented the fight between patriotic culture and colonialist culture.

The period of modern Vietnamese culture has gradually taken shape since the 30's and 40's of last century under the banner of patriotism and Marxism-Leninism. Vietnamese culture, with the increasingly intensive integration into the world modern civilization and the preservation and enhancement of the national identity, promises to reach a new historical peak.

It can be said that there were three layers of culture overlapping each other during the history of Vietnam: local culture, the culture that mixed with those of China and other countries in the region, and the culture that interacted with Western culture. The most prominent feature of the Vietnamese culture is that it was not assimilated by foreign cultures thanks to the strong local cultural foundations. On the contrary, it was able to utilize and localize those from abroad to enrich the national culture.

The Vietnamese national culture emerged from a specific living environment: a tropical country with many rivers and the confluence of great cultures. The natural conditions (temperature, humidity, monsoon, water-flows, wet-rice agriculture) exert a remarkable impact on the material and spiritual life of the nation, the characteristics and psychology of the Vietnamese. However, social and historical conditions exert an extremely great influence on culture and national psychology. Thus, there are still cultural differences between Vietnam and other wet-rice cultures like Thailand, Laos, Indonesia, India and others.

Though sharing the same Southeast Asian cultural origin, the Vietnamese culture was transformed and bore East Asian cultural characteristics because of the long Chinese domination and its cultural imposition on Vietnam. The Vietnamese nation was formed early in the history and often had to carry out wars of resistance against foreign invaders, which created a prominent cultural feature: a patriotism that infiltrated and encompassed every aspect of life. Community factors with primitive origin were amalgamated early in the history and became the foundations for the development of patriotism and national consciousness.

Continual wars were the major cause of the vicissitudes of the Vietnamese social development history. All the social and economic structures were often dismantled by wars, so the social development could hardly reach its peak. Also because of the destruction of wars, Vietnam has virtually no gigantic cultural and artistic construction, or if any, they could not have been preserved intact.

Vietnam has 54 ethnic groups living across the country. Each ethnic group has its own cultural identities, thus, the Vietnamese culture has both diversity and unity. Apart from the typical Viet-Muong culture, there are other cultural groups like Tay-Nung, Thai, Cham, Hoa-Ngai, Mon-Khmer, Mong-Dao, and especially the groups in the Central Highlands that still maintain fairly diverse and comprehensive traditions of a purely agricultural society that is closely attached to forests and mountains. The following is an overview on main culture fields which are introduced to tourists who join our [Vietnam tours](#):

1. Philosophy and ideologies

At the start, with primitive and rudimentary cognition of materialism and dialectics, Vietnamese thought was mixed with beliefs. However, originating from agricultural culture that differs from nomadic culture by the appreciation of stillness over movement and closely related to natural phenomena, the Vietnamese philosophy paid special attention to relations that was typified by doctrine of yin and yang and the five basic elements (not exactly the same as the Chinese doctrine) and manifested by the moderate lifestyle tending towards harmony.

Afterwards, the influence of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism, that were conciliated and Vietnamized, contributed to the development of the Vietnamese society and culture. Particularly, Zen-Buddhists in the Tran dynasty came up with the interpretation of most philosophical subjects that was set forth by Buddhism (Heart-Buddha, being or not being, life and death) in an original and distinguished way. Although Confucianism flourished afterward, many famous Vietnamese Confucian scholars did not stick blindly to Confucianism and Mencianism, but rather adopted the spirit of Buddhism and Taoism to make their ideology more open, closer to the people and more harmonious with nature.

Under autocratic dynasties, deep feudal ideologies were imposed on farmers and bound women, however, village democracy and primitive community still existed on the basis of self-supplied agriculture. Farmers' thoughts that penetrated deeply into the Vietnamese agricultural society had many positive and typical features of the traditional Vietnamese. Farmers were the core of wars of resistance and uprisings against foreign invaders. Many talented generals, topped by Quang Trung Nguyen Hue - the hero of the common people in the 18th century, came from farmers. The policy that facilitated agriculture and restrained trade, prevailing in the Nguyen dynasty, blocked the development of city-dweller's consciousness. In the past, the Vietnamese ranked agriculture and education as their first and second priorities of occupations, while having a low opinion of business people. Other trades were regarded as minor ones, including cultural activities.

In the 19th century when Vietnamese feudalism faded and Chinese civilization declined, Western culture started to penetrate our countries, following the colonialists' guns. The working class formed at the start of the 20th century as a result of the colonial exploitation programs. Marxism-Leninism was introduced in Vietnam in the '20s and '30s, combining with patriotism to become a momentum of historical changes, which led the country up to independence, democracy and socialism. The person representing this era was Ho Chi Minh, who was recognized by the international community and UNESCO as Vietnamese hero of national liberation and great man of culture.

The agricultural society is characterized by the village community with many prolonged primitive vestiges that have formed the specific characteristics of the Vietnamese. Those were the thoughts of dualism, a concrete way of thinking that was tilted to emotional experiences rather than rationalism and preferred images to concepts. However, it was also a flexible, adaptable, and conciliatory way of thinking.

This was a way of living that highly valued emotional ties and attachment to relatives and the community (because "there would be no home in a lost country" and "the whole village rather than a sole roof would be engulfed by flood"). This was a way of behaving toward conciliatory, equilibrium and relations-based settlement of conflicts and disputes. This way of living could cope accordingly with the situation, which many times in the history was successful in using suppleness to prevail over firmness and weakness to resist strength.

On the scale of spiritual values, the Vietnamese highly appreciate "Benevolence" and closely combined it with "Righteousness" and "Virtues"; no benevolence and righteousness are tantamount to no virtues. Nguyen Trai once described the Vietnamese concept of Benevolence and Righteousness as the opposition to fierce

violence, which was enhanced to the foundation for the policy of ruling as well as saving the country.

The Vietnamese understood that Loyalty meant being loyal to the nation, which was higher than the loyalty to the ruler, and respected Piety without being so bound with the framework of family. Happiness was also among the top social values; people often make compliments on the happiness of a family rather than wealth and social position.

2. Customs and practices

The Vietnamese gastronomic habit tends towards vegetarianism; rice and vegetables are the main course of the meal that may be diversified by aqua products. Boiling is a special way of cooking of the Vietnamese people. Vietnamese people like a synthetic food processing style that involves many materials and ingredients. Today, although meat and fish are the main dishes of the meal, the Vietnamese do not forget pickled egg-plant.

The Vietnamese preferred to wear light, thin, well-ventilated kind of clothing that originated from plants and was suitable for such a tropical country as Vietnam, with grey, indigo and black colours. Men's clothing changed from loin-cloth with bare upper part of the body to short jackets and Vietnamese traditional trousers (re-designed from Chinese trousers). In the past, women often wore brassieres, skirts and four-piece long dresses that were later modified to the modern ao dai. In general, Vietnamese women adorned themselves subtly and secretively in a society where "virtue is more important than appearance". Old-time clothing also paid attention to kerchiefs, hats and belts.

The old-style Vietnamese house was related to the watery environment (stilt-houses with curved roof). Then came thatch-roofed houses with clay walls, which were built mostly from wood and bamboo. This kind of house did not stand too high to avoid strong winds and storms, and more importantly, the house should face to the South direction to be free from hot and cold weathers. The interior of the house was also not so spacious to leave room for the courtyard, pond, and garden. Also, the Vietnamese thought that "spacious home was no better than sufficient food". Sizeable ancient architectures were often built shrouded and in harmony with natural environment. The traditional means of transport is waterways. Ship of all types together with the river and the wharf, are familiar in the Vietnamese geological and humanitarian images.

Vietnamese customs of weddings, funerals, holidays and rituals all are attached to village community. Marriages not only reflect the lovers' desire but also had to meet the interests of the family lines, the village; thus, the choice for would-be bride or bridegroom was done very carefully, which had to go through many formalities from the plighting ceremony, the official proposal to the bride's family, the wedding to the marriage tie, the ritual of sharing bridal cup of wine, the newly-weds' first visit to the bride's family.

Besides, the bride had to pay a fine in order for her to be accepted as a new member of the village. Funeral service is also proceeded very thoroughly to express the grief and see off the decease into the other world. The family of the deceased does not have to take care of the service by themselves, they are also helped by the neighbors.

Vietnam is the country of festivities which take place all year round, especially in spring when there is little farming work. The major festivities are Lunar New Year, Nguyen tieu (15th day of the first lunar month), Han thuc (3rd day of the third lunar month), Doan ngo (5th day of the fifth lunar month), the Day for Wandering Souls (15th day of the seventh lunar month), and Mid-Autumn Festival.

Each region has its own ritual Vietnam holidays, the most important of which are agricultural rituals (such as the rituals of praying for rain, getting down to the rice field, and new harvest) and handicraft rituals (like the rituals of copper casting, forging, making fire crackers, and boat race). Besides, there are also rituals dedicated to national heroes and religious and cultural services (e.g, Buddhist rituals). Ritual holidays are usually divided into two parts: the service is carried out for blesses and thanksgivings, the holiday is the cultural activities of the community consisting of many folk games and contests.

3. Languages

There have been many theories regarding the origin of the Vietnamese language. The most persuasive one argues that the Vietnamese language previously belonged to the Mon-Khmer group of the Southeast Asian linguistic system, it was later transformed into Viet-Muong language (or old Vietnamese language) and then separated to form the modern Vietnamese language. In the present-day Vietnamese language, many words have been proved to contain Mon-Khmer roots and to be phonetically and semantically relevant to the Muong language.

Throughout a millennium of Chinese domination and under the Vietnamese feudal dynasties, the official language was Chinese, but the Vietnamese always demonstrated its strength for self-preservation and development. The Chinese language was pronounced in the Vietnamese way, called the Han-Viet way of pronunciation, and Vietnamized in various ways to create many commonly used Vietnamese words. The diverse development of the Vietnamese language brought about the birth of a system of writing scripts transcribing the Vietnamese language on the basis of the Han script in the 13th century, called the Nom script.

Under the French domination, Chinese script was gradually eliminated and replaced by French that was used as the official language in administrative, educational and diplomatic activities. Thanks to the Quoc ngu (Romanized) writing script that boasts the advantages of simple figure, composition, spelling and pronunciation, the modern Vietnamese prose was actually formed and then accepted positive influence from the Western cultural language.

The Quoc ngu writing script was produced by some Western missionaries including Alexandre de Rhodes; they cooperated with some Vietnamese to transcribe the Vietnamese language on the basis of the Latin alphabet for using in evangelism in the 17th century. The quoc ngu writing script was perfected and popularized to become a significant cultural tool. In late 19th century, publications were published in the Quoc ngu script.

After the August 1945 Revolution, the Vietnamese language and the quoc ngu script have seized a dominating position and strongly developed and established itself as a

multi-functional language that has been used in every field, at every educational level and has reflected every reality of life. Today, thanks to the Revolution, some ethnic minorities have their own writing scripts.

The Vietnamese language is characterized by mono-syllables, a concrete, abundant, acoustic and imaginary vocabulary and a proportionate, rhythmical, lively, flexible, symbolic and emotional way of expression, which tremendously facilitates artistic and literary creation. The Vietnamese dictionary published by the Center of Lexicography in 1997 consists of 38,410 entries.

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