

A BRIEF DISCUSSION ABOUT THE VIETNAMESE AND AMERICAN FAMILY

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ABSTRACT

It is an undisputed fact that getting to know a culture is difficult but interesting. Vietnamese culture or that of any country all over the world conveys its own features expressing nation and its people's characters.... Family is a cultural category. Knowing about family structure, customs and habits is to partially acquire the nation culture. This article discusses the history of Vietnamese and American family. Family structure, customs and habits, family member education in Vietnamese and American family are described in comparison with each other.

Keywords: family customs and habits, family structures.

TÓM TẮT

Một vài nét về gia đình Việt và gia đình Mỹ

Ít ai phủ nhận việc tìm hiểu một nền văn hóa rất khó nhưng thú vị. Văn hóa Việt Nam hay bất kỳ một nền văn hóa nào trên thế giới đều mang đậm nét đặc trưng, thể hiện tính cách dân tộc, tính cách con người... Gia đình là một phạm trù trong văn hóa. Hiểu biết cấu trúc gia đình, những tập tục, truyền thống trong gia đình là hiểu biết một phần về nền văn hóa dân tộc. Bài viết đề cập lịch sử gia đình Việt và gia đình Mỹ. Cấu trúc gia đình, phong tục, thói quen, cách giáo dục thành viên trong gia đình Việt và Mỹ được trình bày rõ ràng, có sự đối chiếu, so sánh.

Từ khóa: thói quen trong gia đình, cấu trúc gia đình.

1. Introduction

Getting to know a culture is quite difficult but wonderful. Vietnamese culture is said to be an interesting culture. It is a fact that Vietnamese people take pride in living in a country strongly imbued with national identity. The Vietnamese family is regarded as the most important foundation for the country's development as well as people's growth. They long for a true and happy family. Vietnamese people always bear in mind "Home Sweet Home". The Vietnamese family exists with family

customs which are sophisticated but exciting. These customs are numerous. Which are listed here are in a descriptive style with some critical thinking. Since this is a kind of cultural prominence, it's not easy to judge or say whether these customs are good or not. In this brief discussion I discuss the history of the Vietnamese family and its history and the American family. Finally, the comparison between the Vietnamese family and that of America is dealt with.

2. Data

2.1. The Vietnamese family and its history

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2.1.1. *What constitutes a Vietnamese family?*

Families make a country. Whether a country is prosperous or not depends much on the stability of families. Ho Chi Minh, the greatest Vietnamese leader, put it,

“A good society makes good families.

Good families make a good society.

The center of a society is families”.

“The people or members belonging to the same line of descent unite into a Vietnamese family” [1:232]. In the broadest sense, there are nine generations in a traditional Vietnamese family:

9 generations of a traditional Vietnamese family:

Cao - Kì: (Father and Mother of father and mother of grandfathers and grandmothers)

Tằng - Cụ: (Father and Mother of grandfathers and grandmothers)

Tổ - Ông: (Grandfather and Grandmother)

Khảo (Phụ) – Cha: (Father and Mother)

Kì - Con: (Son and Daughter)

Tôn – Cháu: (Grandsons and Nieces)

Tằng tôn - Cháu

Huyền tôn - Cháu

All the relatives of the father are called “Father Stock”. Those of the mother are named “Mother stock”. A traditional Vietnamese family has more members than a western or American one. In each family the roles and responsibilities of each member are quite

different. In the specific and narrowest sense, a Vietnamese family is a kind of families with a husband, a wife, and one or more children. However, when a Vietnamese think of their family, he often thinks about his traditional family with grandfathers, grandmothers [1:323]. In this article I would like to talk more about a traditional Vietnamese family and the culture expressed in its customs.

2.1.2. *The family changes throughout history/ the family history*

In the societies of the old times, there were kinds of families with the same blood line (marriages happened among the relatives) or kinds of “the Palauan” family (men belonging to the same descent shared the same wife). According to Professor Vu Ngoc Khanh [3:11], at the beginning of the history of Vietnamese family, Vietnamese people only knew Mother, taking no notion of Father. At that time, Mother of the Sky, Mother of the Sea, Mother of the Earth came into being and impressed the Vietnamese much. That, hence, limited and influenced the roles of Father. These families along with their ethics and customs changed with time. Long before the 15th century, the roles of Father were much more emphasized. Along with feudalism, the Vietnamese family became a stable family with its thorough and steady ethics and habits. There were three kinds:

The most popular kind was a medium-sized private property family whose members were workers, farmers owing their property to manual labor.

They had to suffer depression from the royals and their lives were full of toil and moil¹.

The second kind of family was that of intellectuals with a good educational background. These intellectuals, most of whom were Confucian scholars were aware of the country's growth and the ups-and-downs of history. At this time the Vietnam's social system was the feudal system and Vietnamese people who had to suffer from Chinese rule were influenced by Confucianism, Buddhism, Khong Tu's and Lao Tu's patterns of thinking².

The third is the royal family. Feudalism is connected with noblemen and landowners who owed a lot of land and property. These royals, from whom people of the medium-sized private property family received land to work and gave money named as "tax" in return, were quite rich³.

After the Revolution in 1945, The Republic of Vietnam was born. There were great changes to the Vietnamese family. The royal families left, the other kinds of families remained. They took part in the struggle for independence in Vietnam War. In 1975, when the country reunited, two kind families came into being: the families of officials (intellectuals or the white collar) and those of farmers and workers (the blue collar). Although there were great changes to the Vietnamese family, the customs in a traditional Vietnamese remained the same and it is worth being taken into consideration.

2.1.3. *The family customs and habits*

The family customs play an important and outstanding role in forming and preserving a true Vietnamese family. The most significant factors in the Vietnamese family customs are family rituals (*gia lễ*); family ways of behavior (*gia phong*) and family rules (*gia pháp*). These which are taken for granted and which people obey without questioning are somehow protected by the Vietnamese governmental law. There is no doubt that these elements are popular to any Vietnamese family member. There will be, however, some habits which have to vary at some extent to make them suitable in a specific situation.

2.1.3.1. *Family rituals (gia lễ)*

The family rituals can be understood as the family ways of life guaranteeing a family stability and happiness. They are "the requirements a Vietnamese family has to meet about how to behave or act well to maintain the family and the country regulations." [3:37]. All the members of the family don't have to the rights to violate these rules. The family rituals' meaning lies in the four kinds:

Quan ("a "hat-wearing "party to celebrate the birth of a baby of a particular family and the time for the growth of a member in a family" [7:39]. This custom can be traced to Chinese custom. As the Chinese custom goes, when the person reaches the age of twenty, the family holds a party to mark the person's maturity and the time for that

person to enter life. This is, according to Bùi Tấn Niên (1996), no longer practiced in Vietnam.

Hôn (the wedding ceremony). Everybody who reaches a certain age will have to get married. The size of the wedding ceremony varies, depending of the financial situation of each family. This ceremony is extremely holy and the most important event in every Vietnamese's lives on the grounds that it marks somebody's maturity and responsibility as well as independence.

Tang (the funeral or mourning anniversary). Death comes to everybody. When a Vietnamese dies, he or she will be buried carefully by their family members. This is considered very significant in the Vietnamese culture because it shows the good relationship and uprightness among members in the family and neighbors. There are a lot of things to do when a person dies. After the anniversary of seven days, forty- nine days, one hundred days, people celebrate death anniversary and practice offering and worshipping annually which are called "Tết". Vũ Ngọc Khánh [3] put it; these days are related to what people believe in the symbols of the moon, the sky, Venus, Mercury, Jupiter, Saturn, and Mars and to what people explain about these symbols.

These family rituals are taken for granted and the Vietnamese people follow these rites to maintain family stability and relationship among members.

2.1.3.2. Family ways of behaviour (*gia pháp*)

Family ways of behavior are things that all members in a family have to bear in mind and preserve and things that must not be violated. Family ways of behavior lay much emphasis on family breeding and education. All opportunities are taken to educate children and other members of the family about how to live well and usefully. The most important the most important thing in this kind of education is teaching children the "hiếu" (duties) ; that is the duties to Father and Mother, grandfather and grandmother. All the children are taught to show filial piety towards their parents. Children without this personality are spoiled children. One thing to be mentioned here is the care for the old people. Children in the family have to understand their grandparents' feeling and wishes so that they can please their grandparents. This is a Vietnamese cultural character. This relationship is also expressed through the way to communicate in the family with many kinds of addressing people. (not like just "you" or "I" in American way) or Vu Lan (this day is similar to Mother's Day in Western cultures, in Vietnam; this holiday is celebrated on the fortnight of the lunar July). The gratitude of the children towards their parents and grandparents is that they worship their parents and grandparents. All Vietnamese people are quite aware of this ritual. There are anniversaries and ancestor-worshipping days all family members have to remember. On those days (days

which are agreed upon among the members of the family), members of the family gather or show their worshipping at their houses. Incense smoke spirals up and a tray of foods is offered on the altar. Besides the ancestors they have to burn the incense to other supernatural and the members of the family who die young. This is regarded as the most sacred and holy part when we talk about Vietnamese family. The ancestor cult is an important obligation which the descending generation could never be allowed to abandon; that is why in the well-to-do families upward, one often deducts from the inheritance a part of estate which is called “cultural estate” or “anniversary land”. This land is entreated upon the head of the extended family or the head of the branch of the family; the latter keeps it in order to care for the ancestor's cult, performed in the cult home of the extended family and in that of the family branch. Often there is a book that records the rank, name, first name also the date of birth and decease of the ancestors; the book is called the family register. In the wealthy and honorable families, the register records often the work and deed of the ancestors; it amounts to the same thing as a history of the extended family. This kind of writing the family register is not unique in Vietnam. This recording book can be kept twenty or thirty, even one hundred generations. The ways to choose “lucky” names to give children and good life lessons are also presented in this kind of anal. One necessary thing in kowtowing to the memory of the

Vietnamese people's ancestors to be prepared is the altar, which is extremely significant to the Vietnamese family culture. The altar's size and decoration depend on the family size or finance of that family. Generally, it has 3 layers:

The outside is the layer with a plank-bed where members of the family can sit or stand to worship.

The second layer is the incense-table (placed in front of the altar) on which the prerequisite things such as an incense burner or a joss-stick bowl, three or five wax candle lights made of copper, an oil lamp are put.

The third layer is the real place to worship. It is a long table. There are ancestral tablets; a throne-shaped receptacle of tablets which is sometimes vermilioned and gilded and decorated with dragon symbols. Certainly, there are other kinds of decorations in the altar, for e.g., the parallel sentences (For example, “Never cast dust into that fountain of which you have sometimes drunk”) to teach children about the love and gratitude towards their ancestors, or a curtain.

3. The American family

3.1. American family definition

The American Home Economics Association has defined the family as “two or more persons who share resources, share responsibility for decisions, share values and goals, and have commitments to one another over a period of time.” We also have to consider the United States Bureau of the Census's definition of a household (all the people

living in a house". These definitions allows for many different forms of an American family.

3.2. Family structures

If Americans are asked to name the members of their families, family structure becomes clear. Married American adults will name their husband or wife and their children, if they have any, as their "immediate family". If they mention their father, mother, sisters, or brothers, they will define them as separate units, usually living in separate households. Aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents are considered "extended family". The structure of the American family has undergone enormous changes since 1950s. Traditionally, the American family has been a nuclear family, consisting of a husband, wife, and their children, living in a house or an apartment. Grandparents rarely live under the same roof with their married sons; and daughters, and uncles and aunts almost never do.

In the 1950s, 70 percent of American households were the "classic" American family- a husband, wife, and two children [3:1]. Claude S. Fischer and Michael Hout in "Century of Difference" write it, "Americans lived predominantly in two-parent nuclear families throughout the 20th century. They did so especially in the 1950s". The father was the "breadwinner" (the one who earned the money to support the family), the mother as a "homemaker" (the one who took care of the children and did not work outside the home), and they have two

children under the age of 18. If you say the word "family" to Americans, this is probably the picture that comes to our minds. Yet, in reality, in the 1990s, only 8 percent of American households consist of a working father, a stay-at-home mother, and two children under 18. An additional 18 percent of households consists of two parents who are both at work and one or more children under 18 living at home. That means that a total of only 26 percent of households in the United States consists of two parents and their children. The remaining households consist of the following: 30 percent are married couples without children; 8 percent are single parents and their children; 11 percent are unmarried couples and others living together. And, perhaps most startling, in 25 percent of the households, there is someone living alone. [3:1]

3.3. Family changes: the reasons and the results

There are great changes to the American family structures, for which the reasons dealt with can be the following:

One reason for which families have changed is due to the continuous increase in the number of divorces among Americans. The United States has the highest divorce rate in the world. The increased divorce rate is the result of several changes in the United States. Women have experienced all increase in financial and social independence; the deindustrialization of the United States has made the unemployment of women necessary and the public, legal, and

religious attitudes toward divorce have toward greater acceptance.

Chart 1 CATCHING UP
Divorce per 100 marriages 25 years ago and at last report:

	1970	latest
UNITED STATES	42.3	54.8
SWEDEN	23.4	44.1
DENMARK	25.1	44.0
ENGLAND, WALES	16.2	41.7
CANADA	18.6	38.3
FRANCE	12.0	31.5
HUNGARY	25.0	31.0
NEVERTHELANDS	11.0	28.1
GREECE	5.0	12.0
ITALY	5.0	8.0

USN&WR Basic Data- The Population Council, June 1995

Another reason that the traditional idea of the family has changed to consider is due to the trend toward independent living for both the younger and older generations. More and more adults are remaining single, living together without getting married, waiting longer to get married, delaying having children, or not having children at all. This attitude toward marriage and the fact that more women are seeking further education and career opportunities has resulted in more couples than ever before deciding not to have children at all.

One last reason for the change away from the traditional family is the economic situation of families and the whole country. Although some women have chosen to work, the continual, increase in the cost of living and the rise in costs of higher education have made

working outside the home a necessity rather than a choice.

These changes lead to more different family structures (blended families, adoptive families, foster families, interracial families, married couples without children, homosexual families ...). The most common types of families in America include single-parent, childless, and, finally, two-worker families. [3:23]

In short, the increase in the proportions of single, unmarried couples, and single-parent households has forced a change in the traditional perception of the nuclear family. The family is still one of the most idealized institutions in America, and the changes that have occurred, especially during the second half of this century, are under constant scrutiny because of the disruption that some of these changes have seemed to cause. However, it does seem that Americans are moving away from emphasizing one specific type of family and have begun to accept many different types.

3.4. Family customs

3.4.1. The emphasis on Individual Freedom

Americans view the family as a group whose primary purpose is to advance the happiness of individual members. The result is that the needs of each individual take priority in the life of the family. In contrast to that of many other cultures, the primary responsibility of the American family member is not to advance the family as a group, either

socially or economically, nor is it to bring honor to the family name. This is partly because the United States is not an aristocratic society. Americans traditionally have held independence and a closely related value, individualism, in high esteem. Parents try to instill these prevailing values in their children. American English expresses these values preferences: children should “cut the umbilical cord”, and are encouraged not to be “tied to their mothers’ apron strings”. In the process of their socialization children learn to “stand on their own two feet”. Receiving a weekly allowance at an early age teaches children to budget their money, preparing them for future financial independence. Children can “leave the nest” at an early age and live an independent life. This independence from parents is not an indication that parents and children do not love each other. Strong love between parents and children is universal and there is no exception in the American family. Co-existing with such love in the American family are cultural values of self-reliance and independence. The American desire for freedom from outside control clearly extends to the family. Americans do not like to have controls placed on them by other family members.

3.4.2. *Equality in the family*

Along with the American emphasis on individual freedom, the belief in equality has had a strong effect on the family. In the United States, however, the democratic idea of equality destroys

much of the father's status as ruler of the family and lessens the emotional distance between father and children [3:5]. Since the 1960s, there has been a significant decline in parental authority and children's respect for their parents. This is particularly true for teenagers. Some parents seem to have little control or no control over the behavior of their teenage children.

3.4.3. *Family values*

In *Values and Public Policy*, Daniel Yankelovich reports on surveys done on family values. There are 11 points that a majority of Americans agree are “family values”. Yankelovich classifies six of them as “clearly traditional”: respecting one's parents, being responsible for one's actions; having faith in God, respecting authority, married to the same person for life, leaving the world in better shape. The other five are “a blend of traditional and newer, more expressive values.”: giving emotional support to other members of the family, respecting people for themselves, developing greater skill in communicating one's feelings, respecting one's children, living up to one's potential as an individual.

In short, the American attitude toward the family contains many contradictions. For example, Americans will tolerate a good deal of instability in their families, including divorce in order to protect such values as freedom and equality. On the other hand, they are strongly attached to the idea of the family as the best of all lifestyles. Studies show consistently that more than 90 percent of

Americans believe that family life is an important value.

4. Vietnamese family vs. American family

4.1. The family image and ideal

Both the Vietnamese and the American have an ideal image about families. “The family” evokes a visual impression and a mental picture of adults and children living together comfortably as they go about their lives in mutually satisfying, mutually enhancing, and in a harmonious way. It also evokes warmth and physical and psychological nurturance in a setting apart from the troubled world. They hope that family is heaven, a place of love and protection, in which the relationships between husbands and wives and between parents and children are especially idealized in the family image. However, the nuclear family image of the American family is of a family unit consisting, most of the time, of a married couple and two or more children, uncles or aunts do normally not live together. In Vietnam, the traditional family, most of the time, is an extended family with 3 or 4 generations living under the same roof. The relationship between members in the family, namely parents and children, grandparents and grandsons are somehow different from the American family and that of Vietnam. Vietnamese parents have a close relationship with their children. Close contact is always maintained between family members. They have the sense of community, consensus, and the generation gap is not as large as in the

America. The American people often move to different parts for work so that many children have little contact with their members in the same family, except at family reunions, (for e.g., at Christmas.)

4.2. The myth of an undifferentiated family experience

In America, people use family in various ways and for various purposes: to find jobs, to build labor union, to wage community struggles ... they are acting not only as family members but also as women and as men. In Vietnam, the family is a sacred symbol. Whenever a Vietnamese goes, he or she will certainly want to go back home. That is the place of love and protection and security.

4.3. The family education and independence of the children

D.Zim, MB and Etizen, DS [14:38] put it, “In America, religion training is grim and constant. Children are required to learn the Bible chapter by chapter”. They are taught to be independent at the early age (16 to go out and live on their own), the self-confidence to start their own company, to think of new ways to split atoms. Children are responsible for their own lives. Self-discovery is also emphasized in the American family. There is an increasing decline of parental influence over children's behavior. To take an example, courtship and mate selection are not under control of parents. That is their personal choice. Children in America are given more privacy and freedom. The Vietnamese children are not as independent as their counterparts

in the USA. Few secrets of the children are expected to be kept from parents. The Vietnamese children are taught about the duties in the family, which is emphasized in Vietnamese culture: (children should love their parents, children should fear their parents, children should reverence and honor their parents, children should give diligent heed, to the wholesome instructions and counsels of their parents, children should patiently grow better by the needful chastisements and corrections their parents give them, etc.) [1:295]. The relationship with the elderly in the family needs to be considered. In America, there are centers for the elderly to be taken care of. Most often they don't live with their children. In Vietnam, it is the children's duties to look after their parents, including their parents-in-law. If he or she doesn't take care of his parents, he or she will be supposed not to fulfill his or her duties and is considered to do the bad things. In America: most parents pursue demanding careers and work at jobs with long hours, little time and energy spent on their children. The family was blamed for inhibiting human development. Family life takes a back seat. Voluntary childlessness and delayed childbearing happen in this country. Their career goals

may demand their undivided attention. They may value the freedom that a childless relationship enhances. They may choose this option because of the positive financial consequences of childlessness. The divorce rate in the families in the two cultures is something to consider. As mentioned in part 2 about the divorce rate in the American family (chart 1), the divorce rate in America is the highest in the world. If the couple is not happy, the individuals may choose to get a divorce. Most states have a so-called "no-fault" divorce. Divorce is now so common that it is no longer socially unacceptable, and children are so embarrassed to say that their parents are divorced. However, sociologists are still studying the long-term psychological consequences of divorce. In Vietnam, there are 30.000 cases of divorces. However in Vietnam, the family honor is quite important. Vietnamese culture requires people to save face and preserve the family happiness. A woman who has divorced her husband or vice versa will get some bad rumor. Vietnamese people appreciate and think highly of "love" (tình) and "righteousness" (nghĩa) between husbands and wives. They think highly of their loyalty to each other.

^{1, 2, 3} Vũ Ngọc Khánh, "The Vietnamese family culture", *The history of the Vietnamese family*, The National Culture Publisher, 1998, pp. 11-13.

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