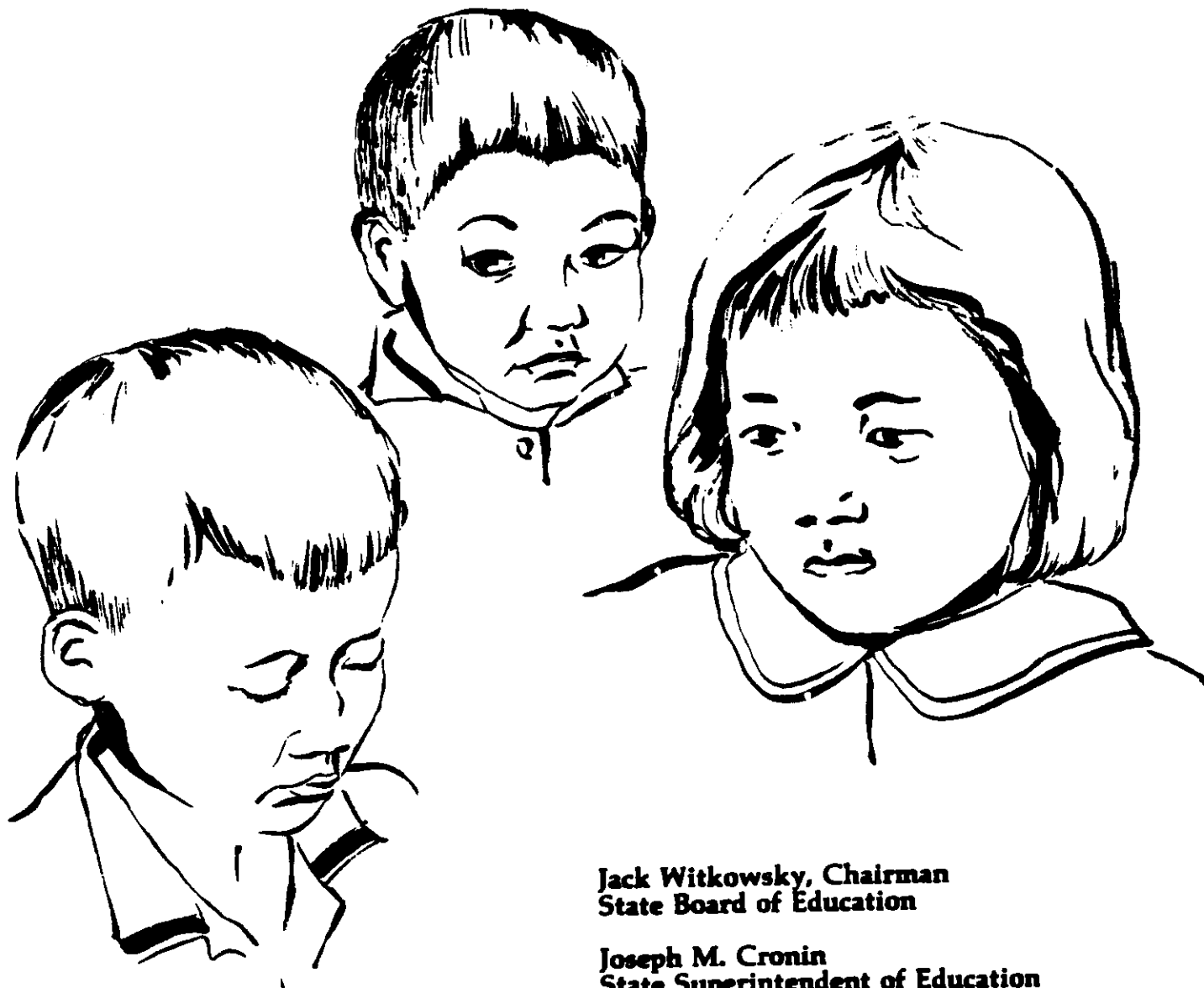


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A Handbook for Teachers of Vietnamese Refugee Students



**Jack Witkowsky, Chairman
State Board of Education**

**Joseph M. Cronin
State Superintendent of Education**

November 1977

Foreword

This Handbook for Teachers of Vietnamese Refugee Students is written with the hope of bringing some practical and useful answers to ease the task of the American teachers. During the last two years, many have been confronted with the challenge of teaching non-English speaking Vietnamese refugee students. This task is difficult because it is completely one which has often caught teacher and student unprepared for the experience.

Dr. Tam Thi Dang Wei considered two points of view in the preparation of this handbook. First, as a native-born Vietnamese, she tries to describe briefly the world of a Vietnamese child in Vietnam. Only relevant information relating to cultural and social background is included to provide some understanding of this background. Secondly, from a psychologist's point of view, the author attempts to bring out various emotional, cultural, and educational conflicts a Vietnamese refugee student might face in a new school situation in the United States. Possible reasons for such conflicts are discussed with the hope of bringing insight into the problem.

The third part of this Handbook deals with practical suggestions contributing to the educational needs of Vietnamese refugee students.

The goal of this handbook is simply a sharing of experiences, concerns, and ideas with the hope of assisting the American teachers and school administrators in their involvement in the education of Vietnamese refugee students.


Joseph M. Cronin
State Superintendent of Education

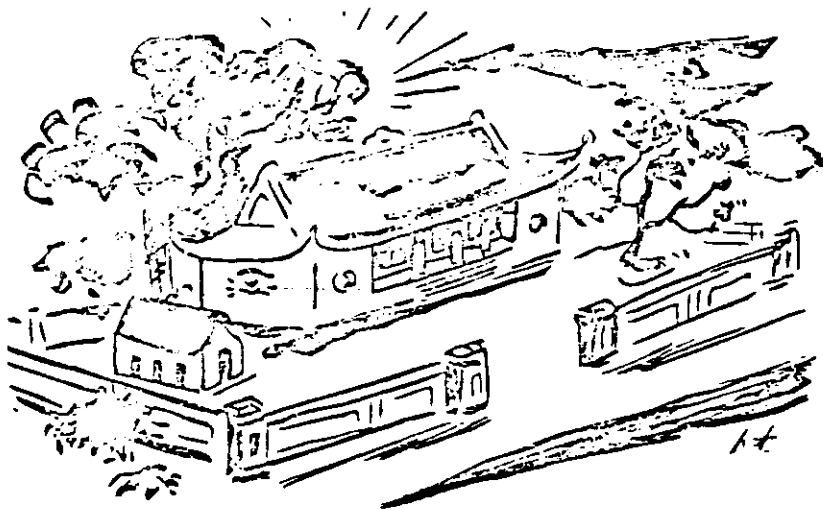
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Part I

The World of the Vietnamese Child

In Việt Nam.

- A. Cultural Heritage:
- 1. Religions
 - 2. Values
 - 3. Characteristics & Customs



I. THE WORLD OF THE VIETNAMESE CHILD IN VIETNAM

A. Cultural Heritage

1. Religions

A person's attitude and behaviors are deeply influenced by his or her cultural heritage. For the Vietnamese culture, religions and religious philosophies are the strongest influential factors leaving deep imprints in its culture, its social values, and in personal behaviors.

The following is a brief explanation of the three most predominant religions and religious philosophies in Vietnam and their influences on the Vietnamese:

- Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism.
- The cult of ancestors is also included since it is the most common practice in all Vietnamese households.
- Christianity is another popular religion; however, to some extent, it does not play a strong role in the Vietnamese cultural heritage.

1) Buddhism (563-483 B.C.)

The majority of Vietnamese are Buddhists. In its simplest form of explanation, Buddhism's teaching consists mainly in the perfection and improvement of one's self and the humanistic approach to life. Buddhism is not a religion in the western sense of the word. It is a moral system. Buddha, an Indian prince, sets the example of a life of "non-attachment" especially to physical and material things. Buddha formulated the Four Noble Truths as:

- a. Man is born to suffer;
- b. Suffering is caused by desire;
- c. Suffering can be extinguished by eliminating desire and non-attachment to all things;
- d. To achieve non-attachment, one must make the effort to improve oneself in following the eight paths of: right conduct, right intention, right effort, right vocation, right meditation, right thinking, right speech, right views.

Buddhism influences are reflected in the "heart versus mind," the self-negation, self-sacrifice, modesty, humility and self-effacement attitude of the Vietnamese people. Silent suffering is valued as courage and maturity.

2) Confucianism (551-479 B.C.)

Confucianism was a religious philosophy leaving its influence as a Social Code of Behavior in the Vietnamese culture and its people.

Confucius emphasized that a hierarchy is "a must for the maintenance of social and family order. In other words, rank within the family (in terms of age and relationship) should be strictly observed. Within the social hierarchy, one has to respect and obey the King (quân), teacher (sũ), and father (phũ) in that order of priority."¹

- Confucianism's influence on the Vietnamese is found in the respect for elders, for teachers, the high regard for education, the cult of ancestors, filial piety and loyalty to one's family.

3) Taoism (600-500 B.C.)

Taoism was founded by Lao Tsu, a famed Chinese philosopher.

"The principal teachings of Lao Tsu are charity, simplicity, patience, contentment and harmony between man and nature."² This concept of harmony is believed to have played a very important role in the development of the Vietnamese cultural personality and in its everyday application as a way of life. The Taoists seek the realization of self through the achievement of harmony in their emotions and the natural and harmonious development of all things. Taoist's belief is strength in weakness by pointing out that nothing is weaker than water but yet it can wear out a rock, the most solid of things.

Taoism's influences are noted in the "harmony oriented" attitude and value system of the Vietnamese where confrontation is avoided at all costs. It is reflected in such characterization used by Westerners of Vietnamese as "nondynamic, nonactive, and indirect types of responses."

In the school, children are called "passive" due to this same idea of not confronting the teacher with a negative answer. It is also the explanation of the "yes" meaning "no" in the Vietnamese's response.

4) Besides the above three main religions, "the Vietnamese do believe in the existence of spirits or animism. They are superstitious and are afraid of natural forces and of the spirits."³ Often on the top of a big old tree, there is an altar to worship a spirit. The kitchen also has a spirit, etc.

5) The Cult of Ancestors

Vietnamese do not follow one religion, but a mixture of religions and religious philosophies. A Vietnamese buddhist also follows Taoist and Confucian teachings. A Catholic might worship ancestors.

A practice which often has precedence to religions is the Cult of Ancestors. It is a very common practice by all Vietnamese, Buddhism or Catholic, rich or poor. Almost all Vietnamese homes have an ancestral altar (often combined with a buddhist altar) placed in the most prominent place in the main room of the house. Rites honoring the ancestors are performed on feast days and in the anniversary of the death of each ancestor.

Its influence on Vietnamese. Male dominance in Vietnamese society is influenced by the Cult of Ancestors' practice. The oldest son in the family is treated with respect because he will carry on the continuation of the family line and follow the footsteps of the ancestors. Heavy responsibility is placed on the oldest son. Conversely, a family

without a male descendant is considered to be unlucky. In older times, the oldest son might have been urged to remarry by his parents if his first wife did not have a son.

This "Cult of Ancestors" influence is indicated in the strong family tie in VietNam, where one member's action will affect the whole family and the extended family, the ancestors. Because of this great respect for ancestors, the Vietnamese have developed the sense of respect for the elderly. For the Vietnamese, age is wisdom and deserves respect and high esteem.

¹ Vuong Gia Thuy, "Getting to Know the Vietnamese and Their Culture,"
January 1976.

² Ibid., p. 6.

³ Ibid., p. 8.

(Bamboo Design)

2. Vietnamese values.

A: Cultural Heritage:

2. Vietnamese Values

It is believed that the Vietnamese value system is strongly influenced by four main factors: the strong attachment to one's family, the high respect for education, the humanism or "heart oriented" approach toward life, and the harmony-oriented concept in all personal interrelations.

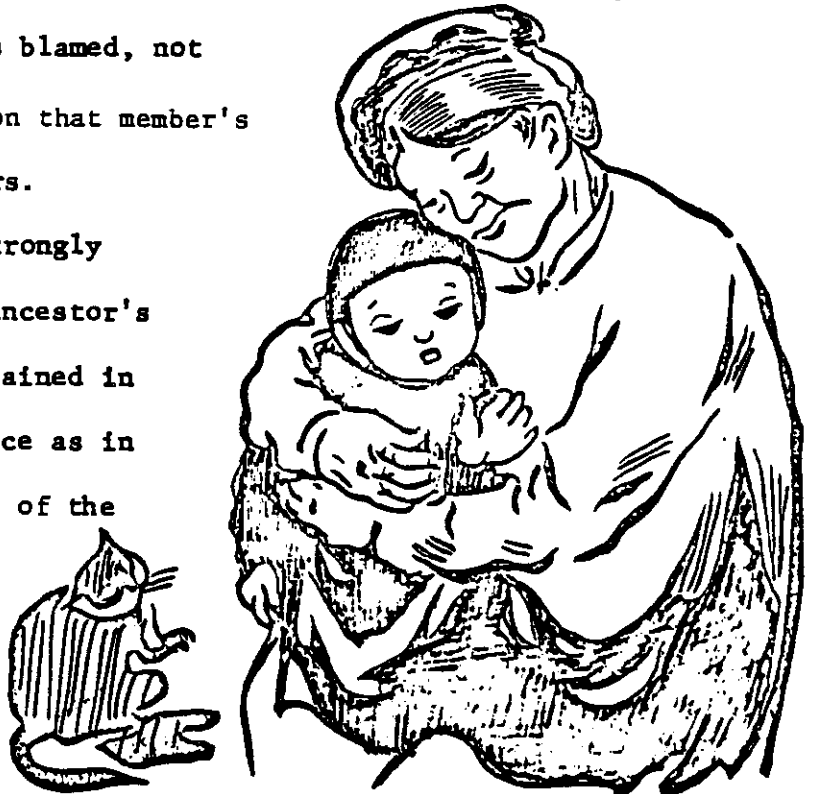
1) The Family

The family in VietNam is the center of one individual's life and the backbone of its society. It is the most important factor influencing the value system of a Vietnamese.

The Vietnamese are strongly attached to their family and are deeply concerned with their family's welfare, prestige, reputation, and pride. Filial piety "is the most highly regarded virtue in Vietnamese society. A Vietnamese thinks of his parents first, even at his own expense."⁴ Older parents are respected, loved, and cared for by their children. The consequence is there are no nursing homes for the elderly in VietNam.

Family loyalty puts strong pressure on each member of the family. A misconduct of a Vietnamese is blamed, not only on that member, but also on that member's family, relatives, and ancestors.

The Vietnamese are also strongly attached to their land, their ancestor's tombs. This attachment is explained in their desire to stay in one place as in contrast to the mobility spirit of the American people.



The Vietnamese family is an extended one with a household including, at least, the son's family, his parents, and his unmarried siblings. However, the family relationship might go on further to five or six generations more with everyone who is related either by blood or marriage. There is always a strong feeling of attachment between the members of the same family. A Vietnamese's proverb "A drop of blood is better than an ocean of water" explains the importance of this family's relationship.

Family's Influence on the Child

In the defined role of each member in the family, with father as "the head" and mother as "the heart," the child finds much security and protection.

The strong family tie could be a great source of identity and security, but at the same time it could set limits for individual freedom. A Vietnamese must be patient, because before each action one must consider not only one's own well being, but also that of the family and relatives, as well as ancestors and countrymen. This personal character trait of a Vietnamese differs with the dynamic personality of a Westerner who values independence and individual freedom in action.

This strong family tie could also affect a child's reaction toward changes. The child might be more hesitant to try something new or different simply because of the fear of offending parents or family.

2) Education

Respect for education and love for learning are of primordial importance in the value system of the Vietnamese.

Education is valued, especially by parents, because it represents the essential stepping stones to the social ladder and to job opportunities.

An individual's education determines the individual's social class as well as his or her self-esteem. A very rich person, without a good education, is not highly regarded in the Vietnamese society.

There is a difference in opinion concerning this "love of learning" between Vietnamese and American cultures.

For Vietnamese, "the strong veneration of book study," the "almost subconscious respect for the learned and their learning" influenced by Confucian teachings, reflect in the "passive" acceptance of knowledge.

For Westerners, there is a more dynamic approach to the pursuit of knowledge with more emphasis in the searching, the active participation, and the ever-questioning of this knowledge.

Influence of the Importance of Education on the Vietnamese Child

There are positive as well as negative aspects to this deep respect for learning. This high value placed on learning tends to make a Vietnamese student a hard working one and the high regard for the learned tends to make the student place the teacher on a higher level of respect than the American student. However, this type of "book learning" is often too theoretical and lacks the practical application part to be of practical use in the real work life situation.

This respect for learning also reflects in the learning style of a Vietnamese child where the child tends to be, in the learning process, a more "passive" than "active" participant. The child has been reported to rely more on listening, watching, and imitating rather than on experimenting, trying things out, and generally discovering things. This is perhaps a reason for Westerners to observe the "short of sense of innovation" in Vietnamese.

If this cultural trait of "love and respect for learning" is presented by the refugees in their new life in America, it is reasonable to expect a very positive attitude on the part of the refugee parents regarding the education of their children. And as has been reportedly the case of the Chinese-Americans, a good proportion of the Vietnamese refugee children can be expected, in time, to find their way into American universities and colleges, propelled there by, among other things, this special "love of learning" which their parents brought with them to America as part of their cultural "baggage."

3) Humanism

From Buddhist teaching, the value based on humanism is more stressed than on materialism. Vietnamese culture is often called "heart-oriented culture" by Westerners, because the Vietnamese are more interested in how people feel, react, and transact with one another than how nature functions and how things in the physical environment operate. Thinking is directed towards morals and ethics and the formulation of rules of conduct for society rather than towards the physical environment and the discovery of laws and principles that govern the operation of nature.

This "heart based culture" is also translated in the concept of authority and law.

Since the arrival of Vietnamese refugees in the United States, the story is told of a Vietnamese refugee who deliberately ran a red light: when asked why by his American friend, he replied, "The street is deserted." This might explain to some extent why many non-Vietnamese observers have described the Vietnamese Concept of Authority as being "personalized" rather than "depersonalized" or institutionalized.

The do-it-yourself concept of income tax computation and payment in the United States, which involves no tax collector carrying a collection bag, is an example of depersonalized, faceless law that a person-oriented Vietnamese refugee might find easy to understand but difficult to handle in the proper way. For a Vietnamese, authority is more readily recognized when it has a human face, and the law is understood better when it is represented by a person.

"The high value the Vietnamese place on heart or feeling sentiments is most obvious in the interpersonal relations of their

everyday life."⁷ A gift is seldom opened in front of the giver because the thought involved is more important than the content and "what" is given is not as important as "how" it is given.

"Sensitive observers of the Vietnamese character, like Douglas R. Beane of the Church World Service, feel that this preoccupation with 'heart' to the detriment of 'mind' as represented by reason and logic is probably the most important factor to remember when one seeks to understand Vietnamese behavior patterns."⁸

Influence of This Concept of "Humanism" on the Vietnamese

Vietnamese place high value in their hospitality and often go out of their way to make their guests comfortable.

It also explains the greater complexity and intensity found in Vietnamese interpersonal relationships, the depth and durability of Vietnamese friendships, and the resiliency of the Vietnamese extended family which has withstood the onslaughts of both modernization and war.

4) Harmony and the Pluralistic Approach to Lifemanship⁹

American social scientist Abraham M. Hirsh, expert in cross-cultural communication, thinks that the Vietnamese use a "pluralistic approach to lifemanship" with a strong inclination for eclectic adaptations.

Taoist concept of harmony plays an important role in the Vietnamese system of values.

Abraham Hirsch says that while Americans use a "monistic" approach to life, adopting only one in every type, class, and category, the Vietnamese use a "pluralistic" approach and are comfortable only with a combination, an assortment. Americans seek out the one, the only and give it respect, loyalty, and devotion; the Vietnamese search for the alternatives, the other possibilities that will prove workable or satisfactory for their needs. Hirsh points out that an American has only one god, is married to one wife, drinks one brand of beer, reads one newspaper, and follows one favorite ball team. A Vietnamese may do all that but never to the exclusion of the other choices.

This Vietnamese search for the other alternatives can, in individual cases, take a form which to an American would seem unscrupulous, unethical and reprehensible. A Vietnamese refugee standing near the end of a very long chow line in a refugee camp was once observed going to the head of the line to give his meal card to a friend and ask him to get dinner for him ahead of others who were in line before him.

Westerners would have a strong tendency to make a "two-fold judgment on principle." Judgments are based on fixed and impersonal principles which are clear-cut "good or bad."

Vietnamese judgment differs in that although there is

also dualism in their value system, they do not rank them as absolute. There seems to be more willingness to accept relative norms and a higher degree of tolerance for both terms of a dualism.

The dualism of good and evil is viewed by Vietnamese the same ambiguous way. The presence of both good and evil is recognized in the mainstream of life which is a blend of both, and "lifemanship consists in successfully existing and surviving, as best one can, in that mainstream."

This concept of harmony originated from Taoism and is believed to have played a very important role in the development of the Vietnamese cultural personality.

Seen in the light of value orientation, Taoism avoids conflicts and rejects confrontation. It is reflected in Vietnamese behaviors termed by Westerners as "flexible, nondynamic, nonactive, indirect, etc...."

Influence of this Concept on Harmony in Vietnamese Children's Behavior and Reactions

Vietnamese refugee children have often reported to refrain from asking questions of their American teachers because they do not want to confront the teacher with the unpleasant fact of not understanding a point being made in class.

This attitude is also observed in the indirect type of response. A "yes" may not relate to a positive answer but it could be only a polite reply to avoid confrontation and conflicts or to hurt the feelings of the other.

Concluding Notes

It is not possible to describe a complex and "old" culture within the framework of this handbook. The author is grateful for the available resources and excellent materials written on this subject. For the reader's information, the two newly printed books are referred for added information.

Manual for Indochinese Refugee Education, 1976-1977, prepared by the staff of the National Indochinese Clearinghouse (Center for Applied Linguistics, 1611 North Kent Street, Arlington, Va. 22209) -

Getting to Know the Vietnamese and Their Culture, by Dr. Vuong G. Thuy, Language and Culture Consultants (Office of Bilingual Education, Board of Education of the City of New York, January 1976).

⁴Vuong Gia Thuy, p. 14.

^{5,6,7,8,9}Manual for Indochinese Refugee Education, 1976-1977, p. 115-126.

(Bamboo Design)

A. Cultural Heritage:

3. Vietnamese Characteristics &
Customs
- Tết' Celebration -

3. Vietnamese Characteristics and Customs

A. Personal Characteristics: From a value system based on a combined influence of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism, the following are some typical personal characteristics of the Vietnamese which might be conflicting in their life in America.

1) In general, Vietnamese are polite and sensitive people who prize good manners in all social contact and make all effort to avoid hurting or embarrassing others.

The American approach is more direct and straightforward. This could result in misunderstanding of personal relationships. An American friend of mine asked me one day: "How can we know if a "yes" is a "yes" and a "no" is a "no" while talking with a Vietnamese. My reply was to ask at least three times; if the answer is the same then it might be the way that he/she means.

Vietnamese children in American schools are often too polite toward their teachers. This could lead to embarrassing situations at times for the child.

2) Being modest and humble is another characteristic of the Vietnamese as contrasted to the more aggressive and direct approach of Westerners.

A Vietnamese often declines to accept praise because of modesty. It is not in the Vietnamese custom to demonstrate knowledge, skills, and possessions without being asked to do so.

In the competitive life in the United States, this personal trait of modesty and humility is a great handicap for a Vietnamese in "job hunting."

In the school situation, the Vietnamese child tends to remain quiet and not participate in class activity unless called upon.

3) Vietnamese are loyal to their employer. In Vietnam, often a Vietnamese would work for the same firm or same employer for all of his or her life. He or she becomes a part of "the family." In the United States this tendency is reflected in the reluctance to change jobs and to move ahead.

4) Manual jobs are looked down upon and are usually reserved for less educated people.

This concept has caused much depression and frustration for Vietnamese refugees who are forced to work in jobs much different from their background and training.

5) Vietnamese are generous in helping individuals but do not volunteer their services for group activities. Public assistance was unknown in VietNam because needy individuals are usually taken care of by their family and friends.

In the United States, the Vietnamese refugees find the concept of group participation, such as in an active PTA group, or in the many voluntary services, as "strange."

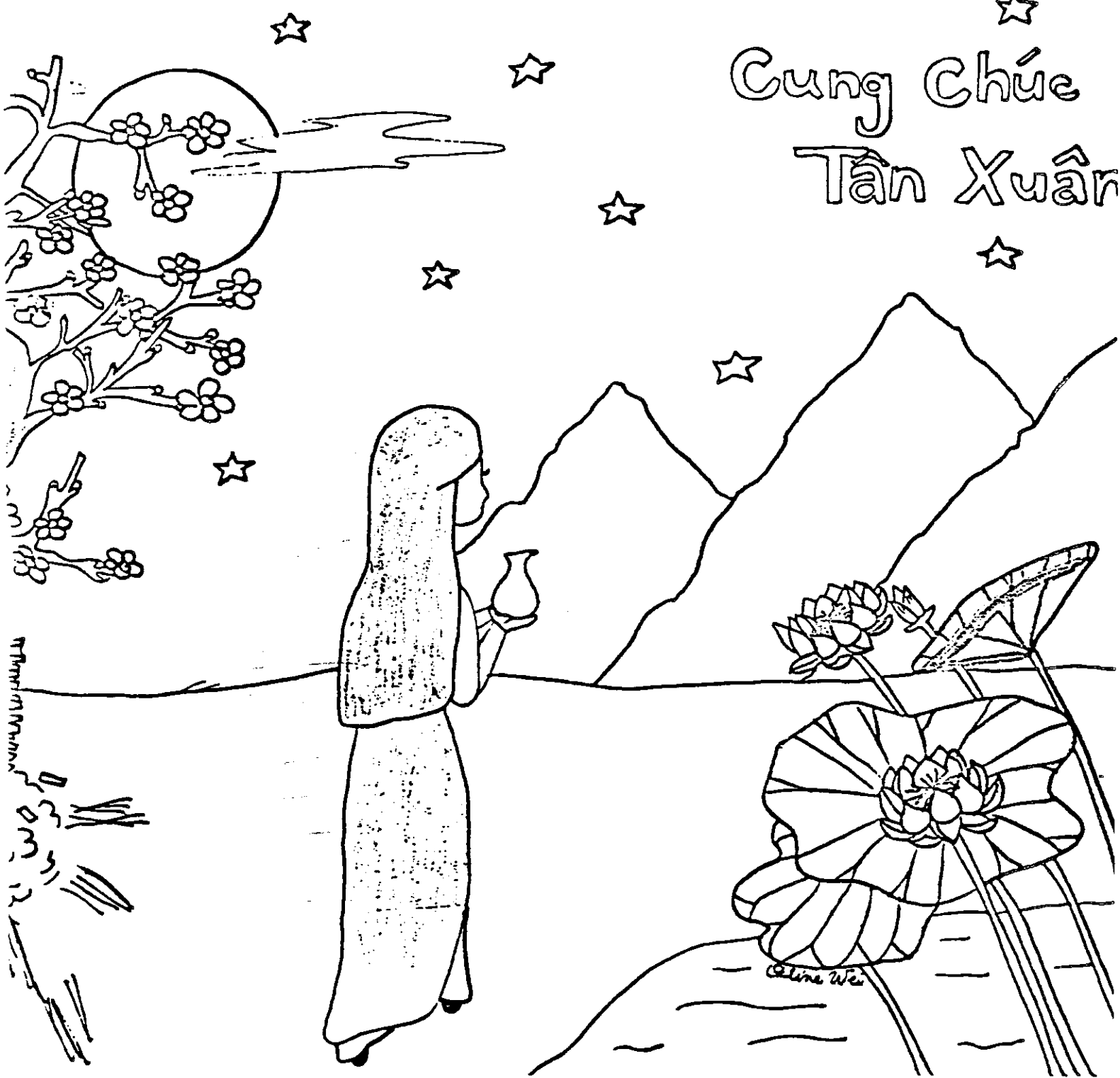
6) Putting up a good front, or face saving, and with it the concept shame are very important characteristics of Vietnamese. This precludes expression of weakness or the revelation of problems to outsiders and leads to the holding in of any troubled feelings and problems. Exposure of problems leads to shame, not only for the individual, but also for the entire family, even the nation.

This characteristic has led to much confusion and misunderstanding in Vietnamese refugees and their sponsors. An example is a sponsoring church group asking a Vietnamese family to let them know when they do need something, money or food, etc. and the Vietnamese family would never ask.

THE CELEBRATION OF "TẾT"

or LUNAR NEW YEAR

★
Cung Chúc
Tân Xuân
★



Đông
Đông
Đông

Olivia Wei

B. Customs

1) Celebration of Tet or Lunar New Year.

Many Americans friends have asked us about the customs of the Tet's celebration. Dr. Vuong Gia Thuy in his book "Getting to Know the Vietnamese" has an excellent description of the Tet as follows:

"For every Vietnamese, regardless of his religion and social class, Tet is the most important holiday day which lasts for a minimum of 3 days. During this period, all stores are closed and business interrupted. Tet is not a religious holiday but is colored by all sorts of religious and superstitious practices. Catholic masses are conducted in churches on New Year's Eve and on New Year's Day. Buddhists, Confucianists go to temples to pray for health, prosperity, longevity, and happiness.

At home, the head of the family sets up a family altar with food and fruit in the open air. At midnight of the New Year's Eve firecrackers begin to explode; he starts to perform religious rituals in front of the altar to pray for the new year. Children are allowed to stay up past midnight, anxiously waiting for the traditional money gifts given by their parents or elders.

The Vietnamese believe that whatever happens or is said on this first day of the year will repeat itself and influence their lives throughout the new year. Bad things should be strictly avoided.

The first person who comes and visits the family on New Year's Day will bring them good or bad luck for the year, depending on her/his moral conduct and wealth. Since they strongly believe in this, the Vietnamese usually select very carefully, and in advance, the person whom they know is a good person and successful in life.

Children of the family usually expect money gifts from visitors to their home during the first three days of the year.

This is the most appropriate occasion for friends to visit friends, for relatives to get together and for business people to treat each other. The most important persons are visited on the first day, the second most important ones on the following day, etc. These Tet visits are taken very seriously.

Pre-Tet is the time for decorating the house, polishing altar brassware, and cleaning up. Flowers such as chrysanthemums, cherry blossoms, and narcissus are chosen with care to be sure they will blossom on New Year's Day. It is the time for paying off all debts and returning all loaned things. It is time to evaluate achievements, failures, and mistakes of the passing year, to re-establish peace and reconcile with adversaries. It is time for a shopping spree on food, clothing, presents. It is time for enjoyment and forgetting all worries and for putting on the best and newest clothes. It is time for children and adults to indulge in gambling and playing favorite games of cards for money. It is also time for enjoying traditional food especially prepared for Tet. The preparation of food might require days before Tet and its consumption lasts throughout the holiday. It is a very colorful, festive day indeed!

VietNam has a number of secular and religious holidays, but none can be compared to Tet."

2) Vietnamese Customs

1. Hospitality. Vietnamese take pride in their hospitality.

No appointment is necessary for casual visits and the guest is always welcome in the home to share what is available on the table.

As a personal note, this author never remembered a day in her childhood that the family's meal was without an extra guest. In the Vietnamese way of eating, an extra pair of chopsticks, an extra bowl of rice are all that is needed for the extra guest.

2. Dutch treat is not a Vietnamese custom, unless sharing the costs was made clear at the moment of the invitation.

3. Time Concept of a Vietnamese is different from the Westerner. In VietNam, being prompt to a dinner invitation might be interpreted as being too "greedy," too enthusiastic and is usually avoided.

Visits to a friend usually last much longer. It seems appropriate to quote an American observer who commented that "The Vietnamese cultural clock walks; the American cultural clock runs."

4. Touching. Much controversy has been said on the subject of "touching the head" of a Vietnamese child as taboo. As a personal opinion, I would like to say that you should use your common sense and your heart. If a child needs a reassuring touch, please give it to him/her on the head or anywhere.

Hugging and greeting kisses are not used in the Vietnamese customs, however, this seems to apply more to the adult world than to children's world.

Holding hands is a common gesture of close friendship generally used by unmarried youngsters.

5. The Smile. The Vietnamese smile is a puzzle to many Americans. It is not always a sign of happiness or agreement but also a cover for many other feelings. A smile can be an expression of friendliness or serves to make others feel comfortable. It can also serve as a polite way to avoid a certain answer or action, to hide disappointment, worries, etc.

It is not easy to explain the meaning of the "smile" to a Westerner, however a Vietnamese usually understands the feeling behind the smile of another Vietnamese. It is again the combined effects of so many influences such as the deep roots in religious background and the cultural effects on the personal traits of the Vietnamese.*

*For further reference, please refer to Appendix B for information relating to Vietnamese History, Culture, Literature.



Part I

B. The Vietnamese Child

In Viet-Nam.

1. Expectations & Behaviors.

- a. At home
- b. In School

2. Education in Viet-Nam



B. THE VIETNAMESE CHILD
IN VIETNAM

1. Expectations - Behavior

Generally speaking, Vietnamese children are polite and well behaved at home and in school.

a. At Home

Usually Vietnamese children are:

- 1) Well protected and loved. It is not unusual to find parents sacrificing their own needs for their children's welfare and education.
- 2) Secure because of the defined role of each member of the family and of society: father is the "head" and the authoritarian figure in the family; mother is the "heart" of the family. Parents are supposed to have absolute authority. The extended family circle, and family identity are also sources of great security for the child.
- 3) Obedient and respectful to elders. Disobedience is regarded as a serious violation of the moral code. Interference or interruption by small children in a conversation between older people is considered to be impolite.
- 4) Passive because they are afraid to offend older people.
- 5) Shy especially the girls.

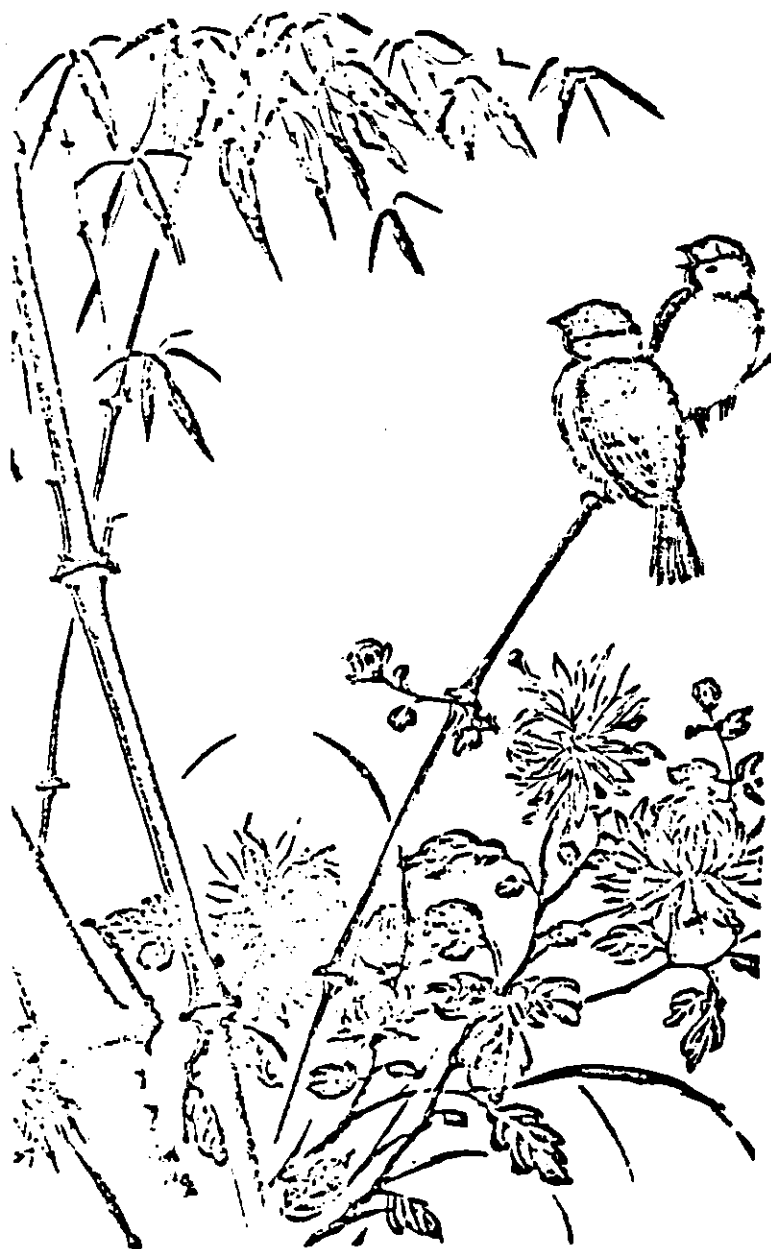
- 6) Loyal to the family and assume responsibility toward their parents, siblings, relatives.
- 7) Modest - humble and self-effacing. Bragging and aggressiveness are "taboo" in a Vietnamese culture, and self-control is valued.
- 8) Expected to help their parents take care of younger siblings or aging grandparents.
- 9) Expected to do well in school and to study.
- 10) Faced with the difference in parental expectations, based on the sex of the child. As a rule, academic pressure is placed more on boys than on girls, while girls are expected to do more household work.

b. At School

Vietnamese students are used to formal, highly structured classroom situations in which the teacher is recognized as an authority figure. The following are some of their typical and expected behaviors in the school situation.

- 1) Well behaved, polite. Discipline is strictly observed and any violation will result in severe punishment.
- 2) Respectful to teachers. Teacher holds a position of honor and respect and is often considered as "spiritual father." The traditional social order: King-teacher-father.
- 3) Quiet. Teacher is the absolute authority. Student is not supposed to talk or to ask unless allowed. It is also a cultural expectation of self-control.
- 4) Low voice especially for girls. Raised voice is considered undesirable and impolite.
- 5) Wait for his/her turn to be called because of politeness and modesty.
- 6) Passive and never asks questions. Teacher's knowledge is unquestionable. The student is said to learn by listening, watching, and imitating.

- 7) Formal attitude. Teachers and administrators are respected elders and are expected to be treated with reverence.
- 8) Not looking in the eye of teacher while talking because it is a sign of disrespect.
- 9) Hard working (book study) and never play. Education is highly regarded as the most valuable stepping stone in the social ladder; play is not important.
- 10) Good handwriting - agile and good manual dexterity. This might be because of the smaller build and/or the quick reflex in most Vietnamese youngsters. There is an economic factor involved. Vietnamese children do not have the surplus of ready-made toys as in the United States. They will need to rely on their imagination and improvisation to make toys and games.
- 11) Reserved attitude between boys and girls. Courting and dating is never encouraged by parents. Casual friendship between boys and girls does exist but on reserved basis. Although coeducation exists in the school, often girls and boys are seated in separate benches or separate sections.



Part I:

B. The Vietnamese Child -

2. Education in Viet. Nam

1. Some Ideas and Comments on the Education System in VietNam

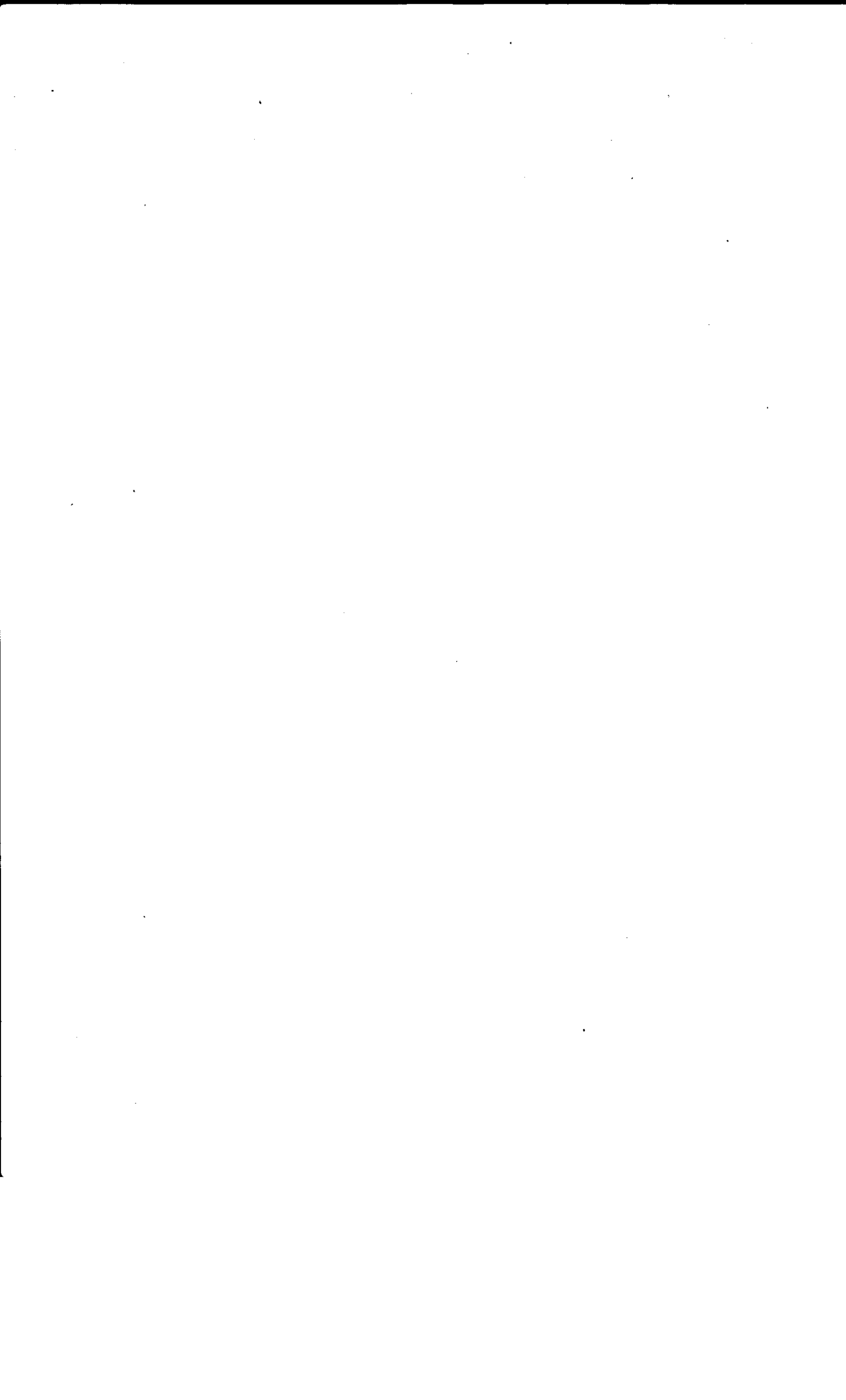
There are quite a few materials written on "Education in VietNam."¹⁰ The following are only some of the most relevant points brought out with the purpose to use as reference in the comparison with the educational system in the United States.

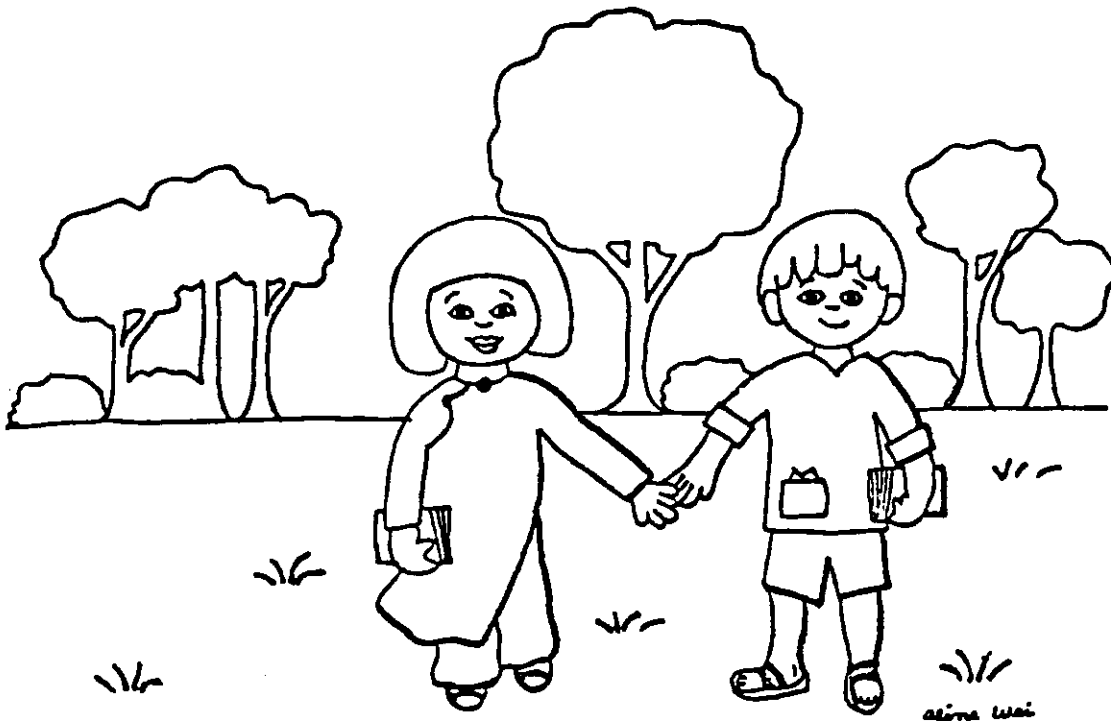
- 1) Education in VietNam is centralized under the Department of National Education.
- 2) The curriculum is uniform for the whole country.
 - a. Elementary level: 5 years starting at 5-6; 6 days a week for 4 hours each day. Subject matters taught are: Vietnamese language, moral education and civics, history, geography, math, drawing, science, P.E., home economics, childcare.
 - b. Secondary level: 7 years, 4 junior high, 3 senior high, starting at 10-11 years. Subject matter is: 1) junior high - Vietnamese, a modern language, history, geography, civics, math, experimental science, physics, chemistry, music, P.E., handicrafts (boys), home economics (girls). A student can go to a vocational or technical school if he/she wishes; 2) high school - 4 programs of specialized study:
 - Modern literature, classical literature, math, and experimental sciences.
 - Student is to choose 1 of 4 programs and a second foreign language.
 - The last year of senior high school all students have to study philosophy.
 - All prescribed courses for each program are required. There are no elective courses offered.

- At the end of the senior high school, all students have to pass an exam (Tu Tai) in order to register at a college or university.
 - This national exam is often difficult, lasts for many days and many students fail each year. Exams are administered by the Department of Education, and given on the same date throughout the country.
- 3) Subject matter content is academically oriented with the goal of the passing of the final exam.
 - 4) There is no elective subject system and no accumulation of credits.
 - 5) Counseling service is nonexistent.
 - 6) Teaching is the lecture method with the teacher reading his/her notes to the students and expecting them to take the notes home and memorize them.
 - 7) Teachers make decisions on all classroom situations.
 - 8) The learning style is passive, where students are taught by listening, and taking notes depending heavily on note learning and memorization.
 - 9) Library facilities are very limited for extra reading assignments. Student relies heavily on the teacher's notes and often no textbook is available.
 - 10) Classroom procedure. At high school level where different subjects are taught, teachers move from one classroom to another and students remain in their classroom. Students stand up and keep silent to greet the teacher and to show respect. They sit down only at the teacher's signal.
 - 11) Students are expected to remain quiet throughout the class. Talking and moving around are not allowed.

- 12) Sex education is nonexistent in Vietnamese schools. Traditionally, sex matters were either handled by the parents or left entirely to the young people to find out themselves.
- 13) Coeducation Usually, coeducation exists in grade school levels and separate schooling for boys and girls in the high school level, then coeducation at college level. When coeducation exists, boys and girls are separated, with girls usually in front rows and boys in the back. Boys and girls do not share the same bench, nor become involved in the same school project activities.
- 14) Parents rarely are involved in the school affairs. They do not participate in school activities and cannot make any contributions to the decision making or functioning of the school. There are Parent Association groups often not active.
- 15) Grading. Numeric grades from 0 to 20 points are used with the passing grade at 10.
- 16) Measurement and weight. Metric system and centigrade temperature scale are used in VietNam.

¹⁰For more complete information on education system in VietNam, refer to "A Manual for Indochinese Refugee Education 1976-1977, Appendix B, p. 137-226.





Part II: THE WORLD OF THE VIETNAMESE CHILD IN THE U.S

1. Adjustment and Conflicts

- 1) Emotional
- 2) Social/Cultural
- 3) Educational

2. Case Studies

II. THE WORLD OF THE VIETNAMESE CHILD IN U.S.

1. Adjustment and Conflicts.

In May 1975, nearly 50,000 Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees, under 17 years of age, arrived in the U.S. This sudden and massive influx of these refugees in the American schools is the cause for great concern for teachers who have to teach them. It is also the source of anxiety and fear for the children who are facing totally new school and life environments.

A Vietnamese child, recently transplanted in a totally new situation, is faced with many adjustment problems. She has to learn the English language to be able to communicate with her teachers and her peers. He must learn new ways of behaving, thinking, and learning; he must compare, sort out and eventually decide what part of his cultural heritage to retain, what parts to modify and to replace in order to be able to function effectively in the new society.

There are three broad categories of possible conflict and adjustment problems that a Vietnamese child may encounter in this adjustment process. They are: 1) emotional, 2) cultural-social, and 3) educational types of problems.

1. Emotional Conflicts

For a Vietnamese refugee child, the emotional part is the hardest and the strongest conflict to deal with since he or she is totally unprepared for the situation.

The following are some of the reasons which might have a strong effect on the emotional state of mind of a Vietnamese child.

1) The war experience.

Vietnamese children were born in war, witnessing many brutal scenes of war. An American reporter talks of his adopted nine-year-old Vietnamese orphan as "not a boy, but a little old man."

This remark seems to explain the seriousness and the "too old for his age" expression on the faces of many Vietnamese refugee children. The war effect often leaves its imprint in the form of an introverted personality, unstable behavior, and/or unfriendly or untrusting attitudes held by some of these children.

2) The traumatic experience of evacuation.

During the evacuation process, refugee children were faced with many real dangers of death, separation, and deprivation. Many were separated from their parents, their siblings, and their relatives. Many have been through tragic experiences and all of them were faced with the fear and the anxiety of an unknown future.

These experiences are very traumatic; the depth of their imprint on the child is hard to measure, however, it is certain that they are sources for many nightmares and fear.

3) The changing role of parental authority.

In VietNam, the child was very secure in the family circle with the defined role expected of its members in the family.

Once in the U.S., these roles have changed. The father is no longer the authoritarian "head" of the family. He is often unemployed or underemployed. He is no longer the sole support for his family. This changing role of a person whom the child respects the most is a confusing factor causing emotional conflicts and insecurity.

It is possible that many refugee parents cannot provide the moral support to their children as in VietNam because they are also faced with many difficulties in their own adjustments.

4) Faced with a sudden change in their life style, Vietnamese refugees often feel lonely, homesick, and isolated in their new

environment. These are also causes for depression in adults and loss of motivation for learning in children.

Physical differences, and inability to communicate and to express one's feelings are the added reasons for anxiety and frustration.

5) A positive note.

These adjustment difficulties are quite real, however, they are not completely unsurmountable obstacles. It has been observed that many Vietnamese refugee students are making good adjustment and good progress in many schools in America. When a Vietnamese child has a strong moral support from the home, and understanding support from teachers and school administrators, she or he has a very good chance to adjust quickly and adequately to a new life and new school situations.

2. Cultural and Social Conflicts

Conflicts arise when cultural and social expectations differ. Vietnamese refugee children experience conflicts when they wish to live up to the expectations of both their parents and teachers.

If he or she wants to conform to parents' expectations, a Vietnamese child must work hard, be a high achiever in school, and be respectful and obedient to elders and to authority. This will require him or her to ignore or reject certain Western values of independence and individualism because they are incompatible with the parental and cultural expectations.

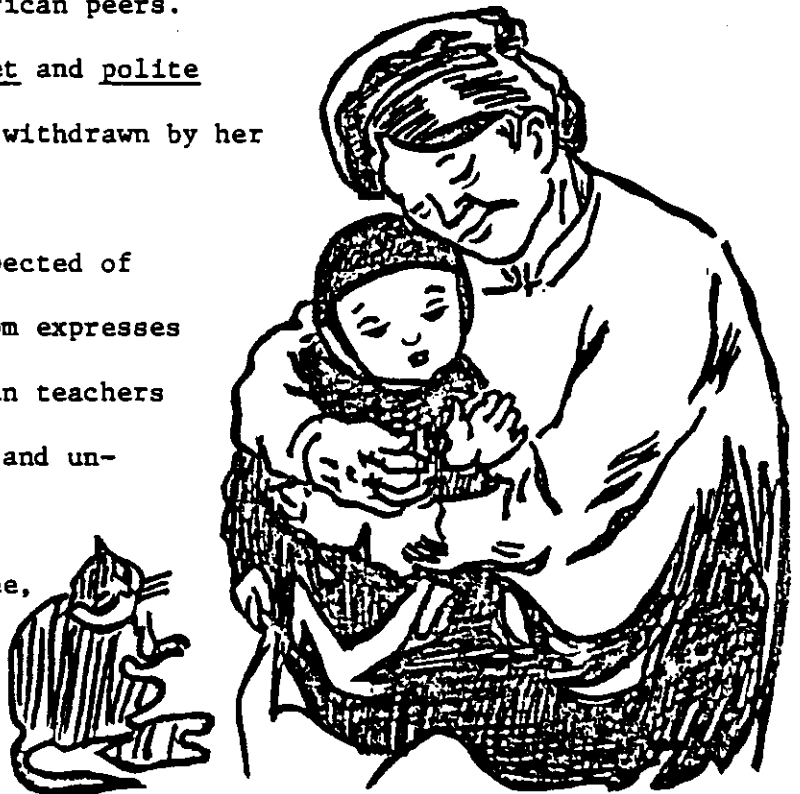
Respect for age. A Vietnamese child who has been taught to respect and obey elders and persons in authority is often confused and bewildered by the direct, spontaneous behaviors of his or her American peers toward adults and teachers. She or he would think of their "free" behaviors as disrespectful.

On the other hand, "too polite" and "too formal" behaviors, such as bowing down the head to the teacher, handing papers to the teacher with both hands, are often laughed at by American peers.

The expected behavior of being quiet and polite could be misjudged as uncooperative and withdrawn by her or his American teacher or peer mates.

Being "modest" and "humble," as expected of in the Vietnamese culture, a child seldom expresses his or her wishes and opinions. American teachers might see him or her as an "unmotivated and uncooperative" student.

This humbleness, to a certain degree, could be viewed by a Westerner as a self-degrading and self-defeating



attitude when the Vietnamese feels uncomfortable to display knowledge or to accept compliments.

The polite response of "not looking in the eye" while talking could be interpreted as a response of an insecure, even emotionally disturbed, person.

There are many social etiquettes which may mean different things in different cultures. One example is in the time concept. "On time" to a dinner invitation may mean "too greedy" or "too eager" for a Vietnamese, while accuracy is highly stressed in the Western world. Vietnamese visits are usually lengthy and often unannounced, while the reverse is true for Americans.

There are many traditional Vietnamese beliefs that might seem strange to a Westerner. The Vietnamese believe in numerous types of spirits and unseen forces which dictate behaviors in many situations. They believe in fortune telling and horoscope reading. People spend a great deal of money for a "specialist" to look for a good place for their ancestors' tombs. If placed in a perfectly balanced area, it will bring good fortune to the family.

In marriage, the parents often ask the fortune teller if the ages between the two partners are compatible for each other. Important dates are also decided by astrological signs, etc.

There are also other things such as food and eating habits, clothing, weather change, etc. which are disturbing for a Vietnamese child. A teacher had told me once of her concern for a little girl who did not eat any lunch at school for a long time. It was found that she was afraid of being laughed at because she is not accustomed to eating with a fork and knife. Another one refused to drink milk because it gave him a stomachache. Vietnamese children were not used to fresh milk in VietNam. Their digestive system could not yet tolerate the milk.

The cold weather is often cause for frequent colds; the "overdressed" or "underdressed" clothing could prevent the children from being comfortable enough for working.

A little Vietnamese boy in a kindergarten class cannot run or jump because, "he is afraid to lose his new boots."

These are just a few of the many cross-cultural problems a Vietnamese child will experience in a new society in America.

The main idea is that the typical American school environment is not always an extension of the home for all children.

The Vietnamese refugee child is the subject of opposition between the two forces - home and school - which often result in bewilderment, frustration, and confusion.



3. Educational Conflicts

Besides the emotional and cultural social differences which reflect their attitudes and behaviors, Vietnamese children are faced with differences between the two educational systems, in U.S., and VietNam, which are causing frustration and conflicts with:

1) Learning style

Vietnamese students tend to learn the passive way by listening, watching, and imitating. The open discussion type of classroom in American schools is often confusing, disorganized, and strange for them.

Vietnamese students were used to the lecture-teaching method. The American discussion type and team teaching are very new for most, thus active participation is very unlikely.

Not knowing the limit of the new freedom he or she finds in the American classroom the Vietnamese child is often susceptible to becoming a disciplinary problem.

This aspect of "not knowing the limit," both on the playground and in the classroom activities, are reasons for many misconducts or misbehaviors for Vietnamese students. He or she might be too quiet and be forgotten or labelled as uncooperative, or he or she might be too loud and talk out of place, and be judged as a discipline problem.

The problem is becoming more complicated and aggravated by the language barrier where communication is not possible.



2) Student-teacher relationship

The Vietnamese students, who had been taught to respect and obey the teachers, often find the American teacher's friendliness and informality a lack of authority, disappointing and hard to accept. The directness and the informality of their peers toward teachers are shocking for them.

The absence of honorific terms in the English language makes Vietnamese students feel uneasy and uncomfortable when talking to their teachers.

They are reluctant to ask questions in class because it seems to be too aggressive and disrespectful to the teachers; but to their surprise, this attitude is often rewarded by their teachers.

They do not volunteer answers unless asked because it was expected of them to be modest and not to show off.

They are not accustomed to talking in front of the class, thus resulting in extreme shyness and discomfort when they are asked to do so in the American classroom.

The concept of face saving and silent suffering from their culture often prevents them from revealing their weaknesses in class or even their physical illnesses to their teachers.

3) Classroom activities

Vietnamese students are used to the lecture type of teaching, with the teacher standing in front of the class lecturing. Group activities and class discussion are new to them. They would not know how to react, resulting in either overacting or underacting responses.

Coeducation was not common in VietNam. Girls tend to be uncomfortable to work in groups with boys.

Library use, and research studies are often unfamiliar to Vietnamese students and should be guided with patience.

Gym facilities (group showers, gym uniforms) are unfamiliar and often frightening for Vietnamese girls who were taught to be modest on their physical appearance.

Sex education is a subject which was not taught in VietNam. Uncomfortable feelings and shame could result from the open discussion on the topic.

4) Language barrier

Besides all of the above, the lack of English knowledge to communicate is a strong handicap for Vietnamese students. The problem is most acute and damaging in isolated cases where there is only one or very few Vietnamese students in a school.

A small misunderstanding could grow into big emotional or discipline problems when there is neither communication nor understanding between the child and the school authority. Small frustrations can be built up into a big explosion when it cannot be dealt with from the start. I remember a principal who asked me if a little boy in a kindergarten class knew "Kung Fu" because of his uncontrolled strength at times. It was found that he was frustrated to the extreme limit and reacted violently to the situation. Being the only Vietnamese in the school, he was totally confused and bewildered with no one and no where to turn for explanation. His tension was built up to the explosive limit. This same boy was a changed person when explanation was provided to him in Vietnamese.

A language barrier sets limits to social contact with peers. A teacher in a high school was concerned with the changed attitude in a

Vietnamese boy from friendly and cooperative to antisocial. A talk with the boy revealed that he did not know enough English to communicate with his peers, resulting in slow withdrawal from them. For example, when he was asked by his peers to join an activity, he could answer only by a "yes" or "no" and not an alternative reply such as "maybe later" or "not at this time." This seemingly rude answer tends to discourage social interactions.

Specific language difficulties will be presented in more detail in Section III of this handbook. Attention is called to the fact that it is not always easy to determine the extent of English knowledge in a Vietnamese child.

His or her silent attitude and non-responding behavior could be from either the lack of English knowledge or a cultural trait.

On the other hand, it is also easy to be misled by the good pronunciation of English as a good knowledge of English. A child might have the correct answer simply by imitating others, by might not fully understand the meaning of it.

The added observation note is on the amount of verbal direction and explanations used in a regular American classroom. It is not unusual to find that all the teachers' directions are verbal. You can imagine the tremendous amount of self-control and self-discipline for any non-English speaking child simply to remain quiet and not disturb others. He or she can rely on some visual cues to follow some class activities; however, these visual cues are not always reliable and whatever he or she does, he or she is always doing it one step after the others. This results in his or her often "out of place" reactions and behaviors.

Concluding Notes

This section has dealt with the possible conflicts that a Vietnamese refugee might encounter while entering into a new society and a new school situation. These conflicts are focused simply as an attempt to bring some insight into the problem, and should not be interpreted as an implication, generalization nor stereotype of the whole population. Individual differences, as well as individual circumstances, still are the most important consideration in any case -- Vietnamese or American.

