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MACOI-C

SUBJECT: Command Information Topic Number 5-65, Vietnamese TET.

TO: See Distribution

1. Reference MACV Directive 360-3, 13 July 1965.

2. The attached topic presents material on TET, the Vietnamese New Year observance which begins 21 January 1966. The material is presented to insure that all servicemen in Vietnam understand the meaning and customs of TET and are fully aware of the importance of proper conduct in their relationships with the Vietnamese people during this period.

3. This topic should be presented to military personnel by unit commanders within the framework of individual service training programs. It is desired that instruction on this topic be initiated prior to Christmas and continued with increasing emphasis until TET. Whenever possible unit commanders personally should conduct the discussion and explanation of this topic. After presentation, this pamphlet should be made available to personnel for further reading if desired.

FOR THE COMMANDER:

Howard D. Schulze
 HOWARD D. SCHULZE
 Captain, AGC
 Asst AG

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INTRODUCTION

Picture an ancient society, such as the one in Vietnam, with its many religious traditions. Put these people into a situation where they appear to the outsider as if the world were about to come to an end, for everything stops on the first day of TET. And just for good measure add merriment, gaudy colors and boisterous celebration.

The rites of TET which accompany its celebration have, during the ages, been subjected to successive changes. They have become more and more national, to such an extent that today an entirely false idea of TET would be created if it were merely compared to the Western New Year's Day.

For a primarily agricultural people such as the Vietnamese, the succession of the seasons is a phenomenon by which the life of the nation is regulated. The arrival of spring, therefore, is a signal for general enthusiasm. For such great common joy to be complete, even the dead are invited to share in the few days of gaiety. The transition from one year to another thus takes on a religious character. The day not only implies the forgetting of past mistakes but also the pardon of insults and offenses. When the New Year comes, one should no longer have any enemies. General joy of a people sharing the hope for better days is one of the aims of the festival. However, there is also a religious objective which gives the festival a more sober character.

That, in a nutshell, is what the Vietnamese holiday of TET will look like to you when it comes about on January 21, 1966.

How would you feel if a visitor to the United States did not understand the meaning of our holidays--such as New Year's or Independence Day--and did not know what was expected of him in keeping with the festive nature of those days? Well, the Vietnamese feel the same way about visitors in their country, but to an even greater extent since TET is the most important of all Vietnam's holidays.

Regardless of where you live and work--the Delta, the Highlands or along the coast--you have an opportunity to put to practical use much of the material contained in this brief discussion of TET. You may be invited into the home of a Vietnamese family to help them celebrate TET; you will most certainly deal with the Vietnamese people during this important time.

During TET, you will want to avoid doing certain things which would offend your Vietnamese friends. This pamphlet will help give you a better understanding of what TET is, what it means to the Vietnamese people, how they celebrate it, and what conduct is expected of you during this festive holiday season.

HISTORY AND OBSERVANCE*
OF
TET NGUYEN DAN or TAN XUAN

What Is TET?

Many attempts to define TET have failed because, whatever else it is, TET is a complex holiday, with its origins in antiquity and with so many legends associated with it that any attempt at definition succeeds in capturing only a few of its characteristics.

It is a combination of All Souls Day, a family celebration, a spring festival, a national holiday and an over-all manifestation of a way of life. By observing TET and understanding its essence, we can gain a deeper appreciation of Vietnamese culture and history.

TET symbolizes the coming of the new year and the ending of the old, and in this respect compares with our New Year's Day. TET, however, lasts seven days instead of one. It does not fall on a precise day of our Gregorian calendar every year as our New Year's Day does, but starts on the first day of the lunar calendar.

As with most Oriental holidays, Vietnam's TET is based on the lunar calendar, which begins with the year 2637 B. C. It has six months with 29 days and six months with 30 days. Every three years an extra month is inserted between the third and fourth months to bring the lunar calendar into closer agreement with the normal Western solar calendar.

As the name implies, the lunar calendar is built around the phases of the moon, and is designed so that on the 15th of each month, the moon is in its full phase.

TET begins on the day of the new moon which falls some time between the winter solstice and the spring equinox. This always occurs during late January or early February; in 1966, which is the lunar year 4602, TET falls on January 21st. In the same way as the Christian Easter, the time of TET is fixed by the moon; TET is the beginning of the lunar year.

Instead of centuries of 100 years each, the Vietnamese calendar is divided into 60-year periods. Each year in a period is designated by one of the five major elements--wood, fire, earth, metal or water--and one of 12 animals--rat, buffalo, tiger, cat, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, chicken, dog, or pig.

This year--1965--was the Year of the Snake, and 1966 will be the Year of the Horse. This is the way in which the year is referred to, using just the name of the animal.

* Researched and written by Sp4 Daniel G. Shafer, HQ, MACV-IO, 20 Nov 65.

To the Vietnamese, TET is the most important, most solemn and most festive holiday of the year. It is a time for being very careful about conduct and attitude, a time for festive celebration, for paying homage to ancestors, for visiting family and friends and for observing certain traditional taboos.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of TET is the historical and religious tradition on which it is based. For it is from these ancient traditions and legends that TET derives much of its color and significance.

The Origins of TET

As with any ancient celebration, tracing the history of TET is an arduous task. Conflicting stories, lack of documented information and the fact that much of the tradition of TET has been handed down by word-of-mouth from generation to generation makes it virtually impossible to trace the history of TET in Vietnam.

Apparently TET was introduced into Vietnam some time during the first millenium of the Christian era, although its method of introduction and the identity of its introducers remain somewhat clouded and vague because of the lack of historical records.

A reference to TET as an important holiday is found in the writings of Confucius, but even this reference is fleeting and indicates nothing of the methods of introduction into Vietnam. Perhaps it developed spontaneously as a religious rite associated with the renaissance of the world during Spring.

Whatever its origins, it is certain that TET is of prime importance to the Vietnamese people. Any event which happens to a person during the period is seen as an omen for the coming year.

Legends of TET

To develop a real understanding of the customs of TET, one must understand the spirit-world legends which give rise to many of these customs. As in our own country, many of the beginnings of customs are lost in antiquity. For instance, try to trace the development of Halloween, many aspects of which have changed from generation to generation.

TET is a mixture of religion and paganism, with variations practiced from village to village throughout Vietnam. So what is depicted herein may vary from the observances you see in Da Nang, Hue, Qui Nhon, Cam Ranh Bay, Saigon or Can Tho.

Legend has it that before TET begins the good spirits report to the Heavenly Emperor of Jade and give him an account of the past year. At the same time, Ong Tao, the Spirit of the Hearth (which each family has) also reports to the Emperor of Jade all that he has observed during the year. This, of course, means that all the good spirits are absent from their jobs as protectors of the family.

This also includes the protectors of cities, rivers, mountains and all the protecting spirits, thus leaving man and nature without defense against the evil spirits.

At the same time, the evil spirits, who have been living in Hell throughout the year, are released on the last day of the old year. Their period of release lasts until the seventh day of the new year, when they have to return to their old abode. Many of the customs of TET arise from the necessity to find some means of protection from the evil spirits during the time the good spirits are making their annual report.

The Bamboo Pole or "Cay Neu"

Among the most ancient of the symbols of TET is the "cay neu," a bamboo pole about thirty feet long that is set up in front of each house on the eve of TET to ward off the evil spirits who are at that time freed from Hell. The bamboo pole is stripped of its leaves except for a small tuft at the end.

Many items are attached to the top of the pole, some of which are offerings to good spirits, while others serve to ward off the evil spirits. A small basket containing betel and areca nuts is attached as a gift to the good spirits. Above the basket usually is placed a small square of woven bamboo, to act as a symbolic barrier to bar the evil spirits.

The pole is also decorated with brightly colored ribbons, bird feathers, and brightly colored pieces of glass which make a melodious sound when moved by the breeze. In some areas, the cay neu is decorated with a talisman of straw, some rice and a container of water.

Pasted to the top of the pole is a piece of red paper bearing an eight-sign inscription, which serves as an amulet and has the power to keep away demons and evil spirits. Some of the primary spirits warded off by the cay neu are the Celestial Dog, Na Ong and Na Ba. These last two are male and female evil spirits who hate people and roam during the dark.

The Circle of Life

Certain evil genies are not stopped by the cay neu, so other measures must be adopted. One of these consists of scattering lime-powder around outside the house and drawing a bow and arrow of lime in front of the

entrance. This measure is said to be particularly effective against the plague.

The beginning of this tradition goes back to Emperor Dinh-Tien-Hoang. The Emperor had just united the country after subduing the feudal lords when the plague struck. When the Emperor called for help from Heaven, a genie appeared and advised the Emperor to have lime-powder scattered around all the houses and to draw a bow and arrow with lime-powder in front of each house. The Emperor did as the genie ordered and the plague was stopped.

Because the remedy was so effective, this also became a part of TET's ceremonies in protecting the household from the freed evil spirits.

The Apricot Tree

Another symbol of protection is the apricot tree, the branches of which strike fear in the hearts of evil spirits.

The beginning of this custom is lost in the dim past but it is said that two good spirits, Tra and Uat Luy, were instrumental in bringing it about.

Tra and Uat Luy lived just east of Soc Son mountain and protected all the surrounding neighborhood. They vigorously expelled demons and soon evil spirits dreaded the sight of this pair. Nearby was a very old apricot tree which was quite large and its shade covered much of the ground. Tra and Uat Luy chose this as their home and soon the evil spirits knew that when they saw the apricot tree they were in the territory of powerful good spirits and were filled with fear.

But with the coming of TET, the good spirits had to leave to report to the Emperor of Jade and the population was left without protection. The people, however, realized that the evil spirits associated the apricot tree with the powerful good spirits and that a branch of this tree placed in front of their homes might protect them. They also hung a good-luck charm on the branch to increase its protective power.

Gradually the tradition changed. Those families who could not obtain apricot branches used pictures of the two powerful good spirits. Slowly, this too changed and the pictures were replaced by drawings made by artists for the children of the house. Ideograms expressing wishes for longevity, happiness and prosperity were also posted on the door.

Some of the older Vietnamese are so skilled in trimming apricot branches that they can ensure blossoming on the day the new year begins.

The Narcissus

Unlike the apricot branch, the narcissus still plays an important mystical role at TET. When these flowers, with their snow-white petals and subtle fragrance, bloom on the morning of the New Year's first day, they bring a promise of happiness. The narcissus gained its meaning from an old legend and it is still a symbol of success and prosperity.

The legend is that a rich man, who was about to die, called his four sons and made them promise to divide his fortune into four equal parts after his death. When he died, however, the three older sons took all of the land except one poor plot, which was left to the youngest son.

As the youngest stood bemoaning his fate, a good spirit appeared and told him that a valuable flower was hidden under the seemingly useless soil and that he would sell the blooms and make his fortune.

When Spring came, the field was covered with a beautiful white flower of delicate fragrance. All of the rich people desired to purchase the flower and paid fantastic sums of money for it. The young man soon became richer than his brothers and in memory of the good spirit, the young man called the flower Thuy Tien (water fairy).

Superstitions of TET

In addition to the many symbols and legends which find a place in the celebration of TET today, TET also involves many superstitions and taboos. Just as many Americans refuse to venture from their homes on a Friday the 13th or refuse to walk under a ladder, so many Vietnamese people observe taboos during TET. A failure to observe them is thought to lead to dire consequences.

Some of these superstitions are:

1. One should clean the house thoroughly before TET because it should not be cleaned during TET lest one be stricken with poverty. Legend tells of a merchant who met a beautiful girl and made her his concubine. From the time he met her, his fortune began to grow. Once, on the first day of TET, the girl dropped one of the merchant's curios and broke it. The merchant scolded and beat her and she ran away and hid in a pile of refuse. He ordered his men to throw the dirt into the yard and the girl disappeared. From that time on, he lost his fortune. Such is the origin of the belief that one should not sweep out dirt on the first day of TET but should sweep it into a corner and throw it out on the third or fourth day. This, of course, also gives the spirit of the broom a three-day holiday.

2. Housewives are instructed to keep a fire going through TET and not to ask a neighbor for fire during the holiday. This goes back to the times when it was necessary to borrow live coals from a neighbor if your fire went out in order to rekindle your own hearth. Fire is viewed

as a symbol of warmth and understanding, things which can only be provided by a happy home life. Borrowing fire during the holiday is seen as a symbol of a lack of faith in the family's ability to provide the warmth necessary to a happy life.

3. Do not insult anyone, since insults start a chain of ill fortune and one will run into trouble during the coming year.

4. Keep your grief to yourself and look cheerful.

5. Avoid breaking plates or saucers, as this is also seen as a sign of future misfortune.

6. If you are going out of the house to visit, make sure you are going in a direction which is consistent with the lunar calendar. If you are going out just to wander and enjoy the beauties of nature, this taboo does not apply. But if you are going visiting, be sure to consult the almanac and determine in what direction you should go.

How is TET Celebrated Today?

On the twenty-third day of the twelfth month of the lunar calendar, the first of the major days of celebration gets under way. In peaceful times, the sound of firecrackers would resound through the streets, but these are banned due to the present military situation, so gongs and symbols are used to frighten away the evil spirits with their noise.

This day marks the festival of the Kitchen Gods (Ong Tao), the first of a series of rites to which a large part of the population is still very much devoted. Tradition has it that these gods of the hearth are sent by the Emperor of Jade to observe the events in the household during the year and then report back to him.

The people, anxious that the Ong Tao should make a favorable report to the Emperor, try to obtain the good will of the spirits by offering him a good meal, money for his trip, boots, caps with dragonfly wings and a carp to carry him on his way to the Emperor's court.

As this day goes on, activities increase throughout the countryside. Markets become even more crowded and boisterous. Pretty flower girls appear with their wares--bouquets and pots of real and artificial plum blossoms, chrysanthemums, orchids and narcissus bulbs. Professional scribes sell beautiful scrolls with messages for the TET season--"Greeting for the New Spring", "Happiness, Prosperity, Longevity", "Hearts in Harmony with the four seasons", and "Five joys under one and the same roof" are typical of these greetings.

Dealers in popular art works also sell symbolic drawings with inscriptions containing words of wisdom and formulas for chasing away the evil spirits. Tension, excitement and noise grow more and more intense until, on TET eve, it reaches a fever pitch when it seems that the whole countryside will burst.

Then, almost as suddenly as it began, the merriment stops. Taxis stop working, shops close and life comes to a silent halt. TET is about to begin.

It is important for a family to be home at the altar of their ancestors before the TET period itself actually starts. Also, during the day preceding TET, the mother, being a meticulous housekeeper, sweeps out the house and gets everything in order for the holidays. This is particularly important, since as we have noted cleaning the house during TET will bring bad luck during the coming year.

TET actually begins with the transition from one year to the other. It is during this time that the family, in an ancient ritual ceremony, bids farewell to the genie of the hearth who has been guarding their home for the past year and thanks him for the job he has done.

During the night preceding TET, the family holds a ceremony asking their ancestors to come back for a feast and on the first morning of TET, they prepare the first dishes for these returned relatives. This ritual meal preparation will be repeated every meal for three days, until the ancestors must go back to their heavenly abode.

As in America during holidays, the Vietnamese family dresses up in new clothing and visits friends and relatives who have invited them. But here, the dress is particularly important. For according to tradition, one who goes out on the first day of the New Year with old clothing is admitting the basest form of poverty--a thing which no person will do voluntarily.

Of prime importance is the identity of the first visitor on TET. The Vietnamese people place such tremendous importance on this that the first visitor is planned in advance to insure a happy, prosperous year. The attitude and demeanor of the first person to cross our typical family's threshold on the morning of TET will determine what their whole year is going to be like. It is for this reason that the happiest, most prosperous and educated member of a family will be asked to come to the house as early as possible on TET.

While TET technically lasts for seven days, the first three are the main days of celebration. After the first three days of TET, things gradually go back to normal and by the seventh day the year will be well under way.

During these first three days, there is a great deal of feasting, celebration, noise, visiting and general merriment. This is symbolic of the entire meaning of TET.

Since it has ancient pagan roots in the rites of spring, and since it symbolizes the coming of a new year, the TET holiday provides a time to throw off all worries, rancors and hates of the past year. Everyone is jovial during this time, for to be otherwise would be wishing ill upon oneself.

Particularly important is the payment of all debts prior to the beginning of TET, for it is felt that debtors and creditors cannot feel kindly towards each other.

Perhaps you'll even see the Unicorn Dance. A papier mache unicorn will dance down a business street and fortunate is the family who has suspended paper money from their windows or from the cay neu for the unicorn to eat.

Presents also play an important part in the celebration of TET, and children are especially fond of receiving small red envelopes--the envelopes must be red in the tradition of bright colors--with sums of money.

Food takes on a special importance during the festive holiday season, and the Vietnamese enjoy many dishes during this time which they would not prepare during the rest of the year.

Among the most popular TET dishes are banh chung or banh TET, as it is known in the South of Vietnam (square, glutinous rice cakes), and dua hau (watermelon).

The banh TET contains a filling of sticky rice, green beans and pork or sausage, wrapped in banana leaves or the leaves of the dong plant. The usual rice cake is seven inches square and about two inches high. Rice cakes are particularly popular because once prepared they can be served throughout TET. This releases the wife from the labor of the kitchen during this period when the Spirit of the Hearth is absent.

Eating rice cakes is traditional, and the cake represents the earth in the time of spring. Like the earth, the cake has four cardinal points and is filled with nutritious and tasty foods. After the cake is wrapped in the leaf, the wife ties it with bamboo string, and boils it for 12 hours. Proper preparation of rice cakes is extremely important to the housewife and skill in this is handed down from mother to daughter.

After a big meal of rice cake, a slice of watermelon is most appreciated in the intense heat of the tropics. Watermelon can substitute during TET for any drink except liquor, which is also a traditional part of the TET celebration.

If you know a Vietnamese family very well, you may ask to visit their home on the second or third day of TET. The Vietnamese will not take offense at this request and will probably appreciate it.

An absolute must, in view of the Vietnamese feelings about new clothing for the New Year, is that you wear a coat and tie whenever you visit a family or friend during the first three days of TET. This is the only proper dress during this period for an American visiting with his friends.

If you plan to send greeting cards for TET, they should be sent in time to arrive prior to the first day of TET. One received after this time might very well be viewed as insincere.

An appropriate gift for TET would be a bouquet of red flowers for the wife in the family, but you really do not need to give gifts to adults.

It is a good idea to supply yourself with small gifts for children during TET, and in addition to whatever you may have in the candy line, there is one gift that has a very special significance at this season. That is money, but a small sum--one piastre is plenty; five piastres is generous--and it must be presented in a small red envelope. The right kind of red envelope is readily available at many shops. If you want to make a real impression, write on it, "CUN CHUC TAN XUYAN", which means something like "Many wishes for the New Spring". These envelopes and money gifts are for children up to 14 or 15 years old.

One reservation! Do not give any gifts which are taboo for this period. Some of these are medicines and vitamins, anything sharp or anything that has been used.

When greeting your friends during TET, the use of such phrases as "Happy TET" is meaningless. To a man, the proper greeting would be something like "I wish you a happy and prosperous new year." In greeting a married woman, it is proper and flattering to say "I hope that next year you will have another boy", "or a boy", if she doesn't have one.

People who have worked for you for a long while should be paid a bonus during the TET holidays, whether they work or not. If they do work, their normal salary for the period should be greater, although the amount varies with the type of work and should be worked out with the employee.

Normally, an extra month's pay as a TET bonus is given to employees--in some instances a month's pay for each year you've been associated with the employee. Again, this can vary with the individual and no hard, fast rules can be set down.

During TET, tips are increased slightly in order to reward the individual for working during the time that all Vietnam is on a holiday.

If you are able to find a taxi or other form of public transportation during TET, rates are going to be higher. Here, again, the question of how much higher will depend upon the circumstances and the individual doing the driving. But in the Saigon area, as well as in other metropolitan areas of Vietnam, taxi and pedi-cyclo rates can be expected to double during the holiday period.

What should an American do during TET?

As Americans, we are, of course, guests of the Vietnamese people. As such, we have an obligation to conduct ourselves properly during TET and this consists in knowing what not to do as well as what to do.

It is never proper to show any violent emotions in Vietnam--this earns disrespect almost immediately. During TET, this takes on an even greater importance since the way one acts on this festive occasion is taken as an omen of what a person's life will be like for the coming year.

Particularly to be avoided during TET is insulting anyone or indulging in arguments. An insult during TET is an extremely serious thing and the Vietnamese people go to great lengths to avoid such unfortunate occurrences. For example, they avoid discussing any subject which is controversial or might become so.

So, the first rule for an American during TET is to be on his best behavior. Be extremely careful--even more so than you are during the rest of the year.

Visits, which play an important part of the Vietnamese celebration of TET, are not properly made by an American unless he has been invited. This is particularly true on the first day of TET and even then, if you should be invited to a Vietnamese home on the first day of TET, you should go only in the afternoon. Remember that first visitor importance.

When visiting, the Vietnamese may offer you gifts or hospitality. If they do, by all means accept. If you are offered something to eat or drink, eat it or drink it without hesitation. It will probably be rice cake or a delicacy of rice and pork wrapped in a leaf and tea. It would be unpardonably rude to refuse it.

On entering a Vietnamese home during TET, you will see the family altar adorned with gifts. To be polite, you should greet the honored dead before your living hosts. Face the altar, put your palms together in front of your chest, and incline your head several times--three to five times--in a kind of restrained, respectful bow. Now you may greet your living hosts. They, and their ancestors, will already be impressed by your good manners.

In summary, TET is a time for fulfilling social obligations of the past year and settling affairs so one can start the new year with a clean slate. It is also a time for boisterous merriment and feasting--a truly festive period.

Much of the enjoyment you will receive from this holiday will depend on your understanding of the traditions and meaning of TET. Respect for the beliefs of other peoples is fundamental to the American way of life. How better can you illustrate this by observing and respecting the TET holiday and joining in the celebration with the proper spirit? Observe the rules of conduct which apply throughout the year but even more during TET. For, to the Vietnamese, your actions during TET forecast your actions for the rest of the year.