

**AN APPROACH TO BETTER
UNDERSTANDING OF VIETNAMESE SOCIETY
A PRIMER FOR AMERICANS**

**BY
NGUYEN VAN THUAN**

**MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY
VIETNAM ADVISORY GROUP**

SAIGON, VIETNAM

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INTRODUCTION

This booklet is written by a Vietnamese for his many American friends, known and unknown, for newcomers to Viet-nam and for veteran residents of this country. The author has witnessed many misunderstandings which divided his fellow countrymen from friends in the West but also many sentimental incidents which give hope for the rise of mutual respect, understanding and admiration between people of such divergent patterns of cultural and material life.

The author has often heard complaints by Western people that they have never succeeded in understanding the Vietnamese, and further that few Vietnamese possess a comprehensive knowledge of their own countrymen. This is due in part to the fact that, like other contemporary societies, today's Viet-Nam has a great variety of people among whom differences in geographical environment, education, social and economic status are too great to permit a portrait which is true in all cases.

If you go from sophisticated Saigon to some remote village in the south of the peninsula, or to the old

and quiet city of Hue, you will recognize that the variety in Vietnamese life is matched by variations in geography and recent historical and social changes.

Although we take it for granted that Viet-Nam has to face a changing world, that what was true twenty years ago cannot be regarded as true at the present, a very short account of Vietnamese history, including the last 80-year period, may be a means of introduction to the various people of Viet-Nam of the 1960's.

The remainder of this pamphlet will deal with a tentative explanation of some Vietnamese attitudes and differences, as well as some advice intended especially for newcomers to Viet-Nam who wish to avoid mistakes and win Oriental friends.

Part I

HISTORY OF VIET-NAM IN A NUTSHELL

Viet-Nam is a relatively recent name for an old, old country which existed in legend long before written records.

The remotest period, half legendary, was that of the kingdom of Van Lang, ruled over by the Hong Bang dynasty for about 26 centuries. At the end of this period, in 258 B.C., the country was annexed by a conqueror from the North, King Thuc, who founded the kingdom of Au Lac. Fifty years later, Au Lac was conquered by Chinese General Trieu Da, who later revolted against the ruling king of China and established himself as master of the kingdom, giving it the name Nam-Viet. This kingdom did not have a long existence; in 111 B.C. Chinese armies of the Han dynasty reconquered it. By that time the Vietnamese had already invented and adopted new farming techniques and implements and, as Joseph Buttinger wrote in The Smaller Dragon, "Chinese imperial expansion suddenly thrust the Vietnamese onto a higher level of civilization".

As early as the 12th century B.C., the Chinese had beautiful pottery, solid houses, skillfully cast weapons, domesticated animals, wheat and millet crops. The 7th, 6th, and 5th centuries B.C. saw the flowering of Chinese art and literature, followed by a period of "social sophistication, refined politeness, and aesthetic concepts."

After Nam-Viet became a Chinese protectorate--named Giao Chi province--it knew little or no political interference. However, burdensome tribute was paid to its protectors. Inhabitants became acquainted with Chinese culture and ethics, written language and customs, but the protectors failed to integrate their subjects into China's society. While absorbing Chinese culture and technical knowledge, the Vietnamese remained more aware than other inhabitants of eastern Asia of their identity as a separate people.

The first Vietnamese uprising against Chinese rule took place in 39 A.D. and was led by Trung Trac, wife of a feudal lord killed by the Chinese. After defeating

the Chinese forces, she and her sister, Trung Nhi, were proclaimed queens. Their reign lasted only a few years. Chinese General Ma Yuan reconquered the protectorate in 43 A.D. and his victory caused the Trung sisters to commit suicide by throwing themselves into a river.

A new order, with more control and subjugation, was set up accompanied by an intense Sinization which continued for about 900 years. At first, the Vietnamese were excluded from higher education and the civil service, but gradually participation by Chinese-educated Vietnamese increased in the administrative field.

Between 39 A.D. and 939 A.D., only relatively unimportant uprisings against the Chinese occurred but these kept alive in the Vietnamese heart a desire for independence, especially among the peasants who suffered much more than the upper classes.

In 939, after a bloody battle in the Red River valley, the Chinese armies were defeated by Ngo Quyen and Chinese rule in Viet-Nam ended.

For the ensuing nine centuries, despite occasional

attempts at reconquest in the 10th, 11th and 13th centuries, the independence of Viet-Nam was disrupted only by the re-establishment of Chinese rule for about 25 years beginning in 1407 A.D.

From 940 A.D. to 1400 A.D., Viet-Nam suffered a few internal crises but was under a relatively stable and efficient government, strong enough to repel aggression from China and incursions from the Champa kingdom and Cambodia (1128-1216). Its frontiers were roughly the same as they were under Chinese domination. Bordering the Red River valley, the country was made up of a mountainous area and a narrow coastal strip which spread beyond the 17th parallel. Before the middle of the 15th century, the Vietnamese began their "march to the South." This marked the beginning of internal troubles, including many political divisions. The first lasted some 50 years, the second about 150 years. It was only after 1802 that the country knew real territorial unity following a long and exhausting civil war won by the South.

With the arrival of the French, the country was

divided into three parts for political and administrative purposes: Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina.

Following is a brief record of the principal dynasties which ruled during the 900-year period of almost uninterrupted independence.

Successively, after the departure of the Chinese in 939 A.D., came the dynasties of Ngo, Dinh and the Early Le, all filled with many crises and struggles for survival; the Ly (215 years), Tran and the Later Le, considered "great" for their work in consolidating central authority, in national defense, economic development, and military and administrative organization.

In the Tran dynasty, under the leadership of General Tran Hung Dao, the Vietnamese succeeded in twice beating mongol invaders, once in 1284 when 500,000 of them invaded the country and again in 1287 when 300,000 mongols came.

These are considered among the greatest military achievements recorded in the history of the country.

The Later Le started its rule after the Chinese

had been driven out in 1427, and although every Vietnamese emperor from then until the end of the 18th century belonged to the Later Le, the country was actually in the hands of two feudal families: the Trinh in the North and the Nguyen in the South.

The first ruler of the Later Le dynasty was Le Thai To (Le Loi), an aristocratic landowner who vanquished the Chinese, ascended the throne and assigned himself the task of land reform. His successor, Le Thanh Tong, encouraged the southward emigration. Although for the next four centuries the country did not suffer from any Chinese occupation, it was torn apart once in the first half of the 16th century by Mac Dang Dung who ceded to China six Vietnamese districts and ruled over the remaining territory. In 1592, Viet-Nam was reunified nominally by the Trinh who proclaimed themselves with the Le, to be the rulers of the country. Actually, it was Nguyen Kim who led the move to overthrow the Mac and for this reason, his descendants and followers succeeded in consolidating their position in

the South and ruling it independently from the war-torn North.

An uneasy truce existed between the Trinh and the Nguyens, but by 1774 a number of local rebellions had occurred in both parts of the country. One, led by the Tay Son, became so widespread that it turned into a national revolution, followed by the masses and financially supported by a small class of merchants. The Nguyen fell in 1777, the Trinh were driven out in 1786, and the Le monarchy was abolished one year later. Nguyen Hue, one of the three Tay Son brothers, proclaimed himself Emperor Quang Trung at the end of 1789 and routed the Le and their Chinese protectors. Many improvements in the fields of national defense, economy and education were made under Quang Trung.

Nguyen Anh, the former ruler of the South who was defeated in 1784, decided many years later to take advantage of the weakening situation of the Tay Son regime. He occupied Gia Dinh and with the help of Pigneau de Behaine, a French priest, he defeated the Tay Son and

proclaimed himself Emperor Gia Long in 1802, reunifying the country after a long and exhausting war.

The name of the country was then officially changed from Annam to Viet-Nam. Gia Long was succeeded by Minh Mang, Thieu Tri and Tu Duc. Under these kings many changes occurred in the fields of economy, finance, administration and especially education with its emphasis on Confucian ethics. But the changes were too timid and inadequate to meet the needs of the emerging age of discovery.

The economic condition of the population went from bad to worse and, under Emperors Minh Mang and Tu Duc, led to political troubles in 1826, 1833 and 1854, and opened the country's gate to foreign invaders.

Instead of strengthening the national spirit and solidarity against the invading French, the ruling powers surrendered and signed the treaty of 1862, thereby hoping to gain enough soldiers and other military assistance to put down internal revolts. Unfortunately, with this treaty, Viet-Nam gradually turned into a

French colony, despite resistance movements initiated and conducted by intellectuals, students and other groups. The most prominent figures of these movements were Truong Dinh, Nguyen Trung Truc, Nguyen Huu Huan, Phan Dinh Phung, Hoang Hoa Tham, Phan Chau Trinh, Phan Boi Chau and Cuong De. Among the more recent nationalist groups one may cite the League for the Restoration of Viet-Nam (Viet Nam Phuc Quoc Dong Minh Hoi), the Association for Restoring Viet Nam (Viet Nam Quang Phuc Hoi), the Vietnamese Nationalist Party (Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang), the Nationalist Socialist Party (Quoc Xa), the Neo Nationalist Party, the Socialist Party, the Socialist Progressivist Party and the Communist Party.

When World War II broke out, the French in Indochina were unprepared, having only 13,000 soldiers scattered over an area about one-and-a-half times the size of France.

When France fell in June, 1940, Japan began its occupation of the Indochinese peninsula; on the very eve of the French surrender the Japanese formed a government. Tran Trong Kim, a scholar and educator, was invited to

become Prime Minister under Bao Dai. In spite of enthusiastic efforts this government remained ineffective for many reasons; among them the presence of the Japanese army and the lack of communication facilities, financial resources and a police force.

With the fall of the Japanese in August, 1945, the Communists made their first public appearance as the Army of Liberation. They set up a "Committee for the Liberation of the Vietnamese People," organized general uprisings and set up administrative control of North Viet-Nam.

The Viet Minh leaders then set up the provisional government headed by Ho Chi Minh who proclaimed independence and establishment of a Democratic Republic.

In their efforts to regain the North, the French had to negotiate with the Ho Chi Minh administration, implying recognition of it. When the French began to expel the Viet Minh, the latter decided to fight and were joined by many other nationalists in the anti-colonialist battle.

In the South, French troops arrived with the British forces assigned here in connection with disarmament of the Japanese army. In a few days, all administrative agencies and strategic points in Saigon and Viet-Nam had gone back under French control.

With the agreement of March 6, 1946, signed by Jean Sainteny, the French Commissioner of Northern Indochina, Ho Chi Minh, and Vu Hong Khanh, the latter representing the Vietnamese Nationalist Party, France recognized the Democratic Republic of Viet-Nam as a free state having its own government, parliament, army and treasury, and belonging to the Indochinese Federation and the French Union.

Using this Agreement, the Viet Minh began to eliminate the genuine nationalist parties from the arena. Chinese officers in charge of the disarmament of Japanese troops in North Viet-Nam, for example, were bribed with gold and girls to take action against the Vietnamese nationalists.

Thus, the undeclared war between France and the

Vietnamese "Resistance," was led by the Viet Minh Front. It started on the 19th of December, 1946, and ended in June, 1954.

From 1946 until the signing of the Geneva Agreement in 1954, many French-sponsored governments were set up, such as that organized by Tran Van Huu on April 27, 1950. Great Britain, the United States and Belgium were the first to recognize all these governments.

The partition of the country at the 17th parallel, proposed by the Communists in the 1954 Agreement and accepted by the colonialists, went into effect against the general will of the Vietnamese people.

PART II

GENERAL DIVISIONS OF MODERN VIETNAMESE SOCIETY

Whenever one thinks about present day Vietnamese society one should bear in mind the existence of many clearly distinct groups. While it is neither an exhaustive listing nor one showing clearcut divisions, the author would like to present a general classification of Vietnamese society, based mostly on cultural and socio-economic characteristics, and then briefly consider each category.

- a. Persons educated in the American manner.
- b. Persons educated in the French or European manner.
- c. The highly sophisticated of urban areas.
- d. The timidly sophisticated of urban and rural areas.
- e. The apostles of Confucian and traditional cultures.
- f. The humble and sometimes simple peasants.

a. The first group comprises the relatively small number of people who have recently emerged from the other strata after a more or less prolonged stay in some American educational institution as grantees

or participants. They now work mostly in governmental or United States agencies, hold fairly privileged positions in the urban society and have the most frequent contact with the American community in Viet Nam. It is not the purpose of this essay to determine their social integration but it is essential to know that in many respects some of them are aliens, both to the environment in which they acquired their education and their original culture.

Western people who have social contact with this group will certainly enjoy more than mere acceptance of their (the Westerners) mode of life and parlance. This does not mean that all these Vietnamese have blind admiration for the American pattern of life but misinterpretation of behavior and subsequent shocks are less frequent than with other groups.

b. Those educated in the French or European style are much more numerous than the American educated and include an overwhelming majority of the urban middle-aged professionals, government officials and employees and employees of private agencies. Generally speaking, their familiarity with American life and civilization

is rather limited and their experience with American people depends usually on opportunities available to them to meet Americans living in Viet Nam and upon American motion pictures which often produce a rather distorted picture of the Yankees.

It should be added that although many of the European educated have acquired a thorough knowledge of the French language, their understanding of Western life and civilization may be somewhat vague or confused; only a few are fully imbued with the European spirit or have adopted the European way of life.

It seems that the second group and the "apostles of the traditional culture and ethics" are the population segments most critical of American culture and behavior. It also seems advisable for Americans in Viet Nam to be very tactful in their contacts with these particular groups since generally their members are opinion leaders.

c. In the third category one finds the highly sophisticated extremists who appear to adopt whatever they think is most progressive or up to date: Western languages and manners, customs and habits. They dream

of metamorphosing themselves and their children; many have acquired French citizenship, and live relatively isolated from their fellow countrymen. It is safe to assume that few blunders occur in social contacts between Americans and these people, with the possible exception of the language barrier and the rather subjective or prejudicial opinions held by the average American.

The behavior of individuals in this group does not differ much from that of people coming from other parts of the Western world and Americans should have little trouble adapting themselves to their Westernized pattern, except perhaps for a lesser degree of behavior compartmentalization (for example, Americans tend to behave differently toward superiors in social gatherings than in their offices), a higher degree of sensitivity, a slower tempo of life.

d. The timidly sophisticated of the urban and rural areas seem to be, along with the fervent adherents to the traditional ethics and culture, the most delicate people with whom to deal. Many of them are not yet fully conversant with Western customs and practices and possess only a vague picture of American life and institutions.

In this group is the average civil servant, the office worker, the teacher, the skilled worker, the shopkeeper, the businessman; people whose economic status is not propitious or whose cultural ties are too strong to discover and easily accept traits of American life and civilization. This group is generally less predisposed than others to understanding cultural differences. Incomplete knowledge is the major cause for unvoiced frictions and prejudices which tend to keep members of this group and Americans from developing sympathetic cooperation and real friendship.

e. Apostles of Confucian ethics and traditional culture form a group which is unduly ignored by the Western--French and American--residents of Viet Nam. It is mistakenly believed that people of traditional culture and education have almost disappeared, or at least have no longer an influential role to play in contemporary Viet Nam. It should be recognized that although they have been retired somewhat from the forefront of recent events, they are still held in considerable prestige by any cross section of the population and continue to play a role of silent leadership in rural areas.

Many individuals of this category still nourish a sort of self-glorification, attributing to the Confucian ethic and old Vietnamese manners and ways a multitude of excellent qualities and very few bad ones. Their opinions of Western civilization may sometimes be detracting and tendentious. Extremists of this group charge people of other continents with an excess of materialism, symptomatic of a decaying civilization.

All this may sound ridiculous but should not surprise anyone interested in human and cultural differences. Have we not heard of similar conceit by many British and Americans who overrate the superiority of "Anglo-Saxon civilization"?

Naturally there exists among this group a significant number of more thoughtful and mature individuals, who admire Western methods and techniques, and consequently, are more friendly to Western people.

It is the personal opinion of the author of this paper that efforts should be made by all newcomers to Viet Nam, who are working for better understanding and friendship among peoples and nations, to avoid friction with this "traditional" group.

f. The humble and sometimes simple peasants are said to have been, for the past decade, very unresponsive to foreigners, especially Westerners. This has proved to be a manifestly erroneous opinion. Leaving aside a small minority who live in remote villages or slums and who have been prey to tendentious propaganda, it is fair to say that Vietnamese peasants have been recently acquiring a consciousness of themselves working for more liberty and a better life, willing to be guided toward democracy. But who and how many people have come to them and helped them sincerely and effectively? Among the peasants, there has been a great curiosity about people and events outside their clustered villages and slums; among them are fewer made-up minds and preconceived notions than in any of the other groups. The absence of accurate information and adequate guidance often has caused indifferent or suspicious attitudes toward everything which intrudes or changes the present order. But, generally speaking, these patient people are not so critical and surly as many think, rather they are very receptive and grateful to all sincere benefactors.

PART III

WHAT CAN BE DONE FOR BETTER UNDERSTANDING
OF AMERICANS BY EDUCATED VIETNAMESE?

Why is American culture still seriously misunderstood abroad and looked upon by some extremists as backward and materialistic?

One reason for it may be that most Vietnamese continue to get information through out of date textbooks written by French or other European authors. These sources of (mis)information are still used in Vietnamese institutions of higher education and present quite an inaccurate picture of American social and economic life.

Another reason may be that Americans living abroad are rarely willing or able to explain their country to the Vietnamese.

The third perhaps is that the study programs for participants or grantees are not adequately designed. Evidence of this is the fact that most students or participants who go to the United States for a one or two year period, return with the same prejudices they had before or they come back with admiration for the material welfare and abundance in America but only a vague idea of culture and economic system.

Many educated people in Viet Nam, strongly anti-collectivists and students of both the traditional and western schools, continue to interpret American capitalism in terms of crisis, instability, unemployment and war. Some of them conceive of capitalism as a simple monopoly, a system of cartels or a government-regulated economy of advantage to big businessmen and financiers only.

They often attribute the welfare and prosperity of the American people solely to the vast natural resources of the United States and ignore the efforts necessary to use resources. Little or no mention is made of Americans' willingness to take risks, endure hardship and work hard, nor of their ingenuity and cooperation.

These critics regard the American economy as an inefficient and wasteful system and ignore that its low production costs and high wages are obtained from the efficiency of its machinery, its systems of production and the skill of its workers.

They talk about America's instability and lack of individual security. Many people are still obsessed by the 1929 economic crisis and mistake minor ups and downs

as symptoms of imminent depression. They don't care to admit that although crisis may be one of the laws of nature, man often can correct some of nature's harmful effects.

The United States is often referred to by outsiders as the country of large fortunes, a plutocracy, a monopolistic capitalistic system to which Americans attempt or feign to give the appearance of democracy. It should be desirable for Americans to explain that differences between major socio-economic groups are, in fact, less in the United States than in any other country.

Free enterprise to many people, including those who deal with economics and economic theories, means unregulated, uncontrolled and irresponsible activity, the selfish right of one group to exploit another. They do not realize that entrepreneurs have to use their property and to compete within limits fixed by laws and legislations which aim at checking tendencies toward monopoly, instability, unemployment and excessive differentiation of income.

In brief, a better conception of American economic and social life along with a less "subjective" interpretation of behavior by both parties would be very

contributive to better understanding of American culture and more sympathy and cordial friendship between Americans and Vietnamese. The following section is an attempt to describe and explain Vietnamese manners and suggest behavior which may soothe feelings and promote wholehearted cooperation.

PART IV
VIETNAMESE MANNERS AND CIVILITIES;
SOME WORDS OF ADVICE

Forms of Greeting

The Vietnamese no longer bow deeply when they meet one another, they merely uncover their heads and nod silently or speak the equivalent of an English, "how are you". Men, however, have acquired the practice of shaking hands frequently with new and old friends, both as greeting and farewell, sometimes on a daily basis. Women in the timidly sophisticated (d), the traditional (e), and peasants (f) categories described in Part II do not follow this custom and are still reluctant to shake hands with men, more reluctant with their countrymen than with foreigners. Therefore, do not offer to shake hands with unsophisticated women until they make the first move to do so.

Eastern people never put their feet up on a chair or sofa or sit on a desk or table while talking with strangers, acquaintances or where questions of rank are concerned. Be careful not to do so in dealing with people of categories (d), (e) and (f) until you get to know one another.

Some people don't look directly at those whom they are speaking to; this only reflects Eastern timidity or politeness and should not be thought strange.

Introducing One's Self

Few Vietnamese, especially those of groups (d) (e) and (f), are in the habit of introducing themselves when they come into an office, a private home, a social gathering or when making a phone call. They only mention their name, title and occupation when it is necessary or when they are requested to do so.

This should not always be interpreted as lack of courtesy or tact or whatever Westerners may think, but should be accepted as a matter of habit--or a congenital shyness mixed with a touch of modesty. If you want to know a person's name and identity, it is by no means unseemly to ask him.

On the other hand, there has never been objection or misinterpretation of any kind regarding self-introductions by foreigners who may wish to give their names and occupations or professions and state the purpose of their calls.

Calling Out to People

In calling out to someone, it is clearly undesirable to wave your hands. This easily may be misunderstood as a slighting gesture by those unfamiliar with Western manners. It is customary in Viet Nam to call people by their names preceded by Mr., Mrs., Miss, or nothing at all in cases of people with whom you have established close relationships.

Waving the arm and hand is common in informal circumstances and reflects a friendly familiarity.

Names

Except in extremely rare cases of people held in great reverence, first (family) names are not used in Viet Nam either formally or informally. Last names are usually preceded by such appellations as Ong X, Ba Y, Co Z (Mr. X, Mrs. Y, Miss Z). People who know each other intimately say merely X, Y, or Z instead of Anh X, Chi Y, Co Z, which mean Brother X, Sister Y, Miss Z. Therefore, it is desirable that foreigners use such appellations as Mr., Mrs., and Miss with new friends, especially in the presence of a third party who might interpret the dropping of an appellation as a slight. Dropping of appellations has unambiguous significance in Viet Nam: it may express intimacy or friendliness

but it may also mean arrogant treatment by a superior.

It is customary to call most Vietnamese professionals, government officials, high civil servants, and military officers by their titles, e.g., Mr. Director, Mr. Assemblyman, Mr. Chairman, Mr. Engineer, Mr. Doctor, Mr. Lieutenant and so on. This should not be a matter of concern to Westerners but it is desirable that interpreters and tactful speakers of Vietnamese observe this burdensome practice so long as it is still in use in this changing society.

Speak Vietnamese and French

It is desirable that Western residents of Viet Nam know at least some rudiments of the Vietnamese and/or French language and use it to warm the atmosphere at social gatherings or when meeting people. However, one should be careful to avoid doubtful expressions and slang which one may acquire from friends who use them in jest. Be careful also not to use American slang. Most English-speaking Vietnamese have learned English in schools where the written and more or less formal spoken language is taught and they are not conversant

with slang and colloquial expressions. In conversations with new friends, a too informal use of Vietnamese or French may cause misunderstandings regarding one's morals and character.

A few Vietnamese or French words, properly used, may be very helpful in making contacts more enjoyable, both for Vietnamese and Americans.

The Direct Approach

When a Westerner wants to express an opinion or idea, he usually approaches the central point directly, sometimes abruptly. The Vietnamese people in (d), (e) and (f) categories (Part II) might interpret this directness as excessive frankness, argumentativeness or lack of delicacy.

Directness is not always a serious impediment to good communication, as many Easterners are now familiar with it or at least tolerant of it, but it is desirable to show tact and reserve by use of indirect or more elaborate statements and questions. Such efforts, if fully understood, whether made by the person himself or through a skillful interpreter, are much appreciated

and contribute greatly to gaining friends and admirers, especially among the categories of people mentioned above.

One more warning: noisy and heated discussions are comparatively rare in Viet Nam, especially among the so called well-bred people, and it is clearly advisable for foreigners to keep their tempers mild and conduct conversations and debates quietly.

Comparisons

As in every country, some Vietnamese people have a somewhat glorified view of their ancient culture and civilization. They may have in mind the long history of their nation and identify themselves as heirs of spiritually and culturally advanced and independent ancestors.

This thinking often makes them reluctant to accept social and cultural change and to consider their countrymen who advocate change as uprooted elements. Such a state of mind sometimes degenerates into an unspoken but definite dislike of foreigners.

Therefore, to avoid wrong interpretations, one should try not to make objective comparisons between Western and Eastern patterns of culture in casual talk

with newly made friends or with people who have no interest in sociology. Naturally, one is free to ask questions and discuss problems on sociology with students and other open minded friends who usually welcome this as an opportunity to learn and to become acquainted with foreigners. In any case, the way to handling these matters must be determined by the reaction and attitude of the people with whom one speaks. It pays here too, to be sincere and openminded.

"Generic" Modesty

Despite what has been said about the glorified views of some conservative elements in contemporary society, the most common characteristic of social behavior in Viet Nam is a generic modesty, shown especially by people in categories (d), (e) and (f) (Part II). This quality is sometimes a great obstacle, both to foreigners and non-foreigners, in studying the economic status, knowledge and experience, morality and other material and spiritual values of the Vietnamese people. Often, patient and time consuming observations, deductions, and close personal contact with the concerned individuals are necessary to gain the desired information.

Modesty often prevents a person from revealing his achievements, his level of education and his life experiences. This also causes some difficulty in distinguishing the generically modest from the deceptively modest who throng the emerging mercantile group. As there is no handy device to discriminate between them, the only suggestion is to proceed with caution.

Yes and No.

When one meets a Vietnamese whose speech closely reflects traditional patterns of thought--people of rural areas or those trained in the old educational and ethical system--one often hears a "yes" as the invariable first and spontaneous reply to all questions and statements, affirmative, and negative. This may be confusing to you, whether you are speaking in English or Vietnamese or using the services of an interpreter.

The reason for the "yes" is that in the language of certain learned, polite and courteous people, the abrupt "no" and other unpleasant negative replies are avoided as much as possible and only delicate, indirect expressions of discontent or of denial are used.

This complication rarely arises in conversations with those Vietnamese who have had frequent contact with Western people.

One suggestion: be patient and try to make yourself clear; it is never so difficult as you think.

The Oriental Smile

You have no doubt heard of the mysterious Oriental smile. Unlike other Eastern countries where it may mean embarrassment, sorrow or worry, here it may indicate a polite but skeptical reaction, tolerance of a blunder or misinterpretation, or sometimes, submission to a wrong or unfair judgment, especially when the one making the judgment is clearly at a superior level and has lost his temper.

This smile should only be regarded as expressing a generic politeness, a generous tolerance or patience towards guests or superiors. It should induce the foreigner to be more delicate in his opinions, more tolerant and less obstinate.

Invitations

When one invites a man to dinner or a social gathering, it is quite permissible to also request the

company of his wife. But it is common for wives in categories (d), (e) and (f) (Part II) to be very reluctant to join their husbands in accepting these invitations. This should not cause you to worry about their attitude. Most of the time they are very appreciative of your kindness and courtesy, but secular tradition still discourages them from attending non-familial entertainments. Even men in the categories listed above are still inclined to avoid gatherings which are attended by many different types of people; these affairs, however, are enjoyed by the Westernized or more sophisticated individuals.

Therefore, foreigners should note that invitations always seem to be appreciated and that refusals do not necessarily mean an unfriendly attitude.

It is customary for Westerners to ask their guests what beverage or food they would like: coffee, tea, a cold drink? To such questions many Westernized Vietnamese are inclined to give a sincere response, but those with Oriental manners usually are evasive. With the latter it is advisable to offer them something specific, either what is most convenient for you or suitable to

the circumstances: tea or coffee to a woman, beer or whisky to a man. In more formal circumstances, Easterners regard refreshments merely as necessary tokens of courtesy rather than food or drink meant to be enjoyed.

It is interesting to note that few Vietnamese households fail to serve a small cup of tea, sometimes very weak, sometimes very strong, and visitors are expected to merely sip it and not regard it as a refreshment. If circumstances permit, one is perfectly free to request more tea, coffee, a soft drink or something similar; this reflects one's sincerity and friendliness and a host is always appreciative of it. Before actually starting to drink or eat, Vietnamese hosts always put forth an invitation, then wait for the person who is oldest or the highest in familial rank or social position to begin. Both host and guests extend mutual invitations many times during a visit.

Vietnamese hosts are expected to ask their guests once or twice to stay on for a moment, several minutes, a quarter of an hour more when the latter begin to take leave at the end of a call, a social entertainment or a formal or informal lunch or dinner. Here, this means

the same as the "call again" often spoken to guests in Western countries.

When leaving, Vietnamese guests just say "thank you very much" or "very very much" and never add "for the beer", "for the tea", or whatever the refreshment may have been. This would embarrass the hosts who usually consider their offering too scanty.

Moral Values and Social Intercourses

Many Vietnamese are extremely sensitive to differences in moral character and values and are inclined to keep away from people not of the same moral or social standing. They tend to dislike or feel uneasy at social gatherings which are very heterogenous.

If for one reason or another, close and frequent contacts are desired with individuals disliked by a foreigner's other Vietnamese friends, it is best to make these contacts in the absence of the latter. Otherwise one may be easily misunderstood and thought to be of the same moral pattern or sharing the concept of ethics of these individuals and thus risk being virtually cut off from the rest of the community.

The acceptance of the idea expressed in the saying, "birds of a feather flock together", has made social intercourse something delicate to deal with, more so among Vietnamese than among foreigners, but this should by no means be regarded as indicative of an anti-social attitude.

Political and Religious Discussions

Matters of politics and religion are considered delicate subjects, to be avoided at cocktail parties and other social gatherings. It is very rare to find people publicly disclosing their political views or religious beliefs in a sincere manner. Probably, exchanges of ideas on these subjects are possible only among close friends with mutual trust and a large degree of tolerance. There are many reasons contributing to this general attitude: the unpropitious and chaotic political climate, the existence of too many mercenary elements in the political arena, the immaturity of many so-called politicians and religious leaders.

So, to avoid misunderstanding by new acquaintances, the best thing for foreigners to do is to keep away from these topics and to accept evasive answers or reactions to incidental questions.

Gifts

It seems advisable that Western people should avoid embarrassing their Eastern friends by presenting them with expensive gifts. This may cause the latter, especially the financially underprivileged, some worry about returning the courtesy.

Gifts intended for bride and bridegroom preferably should consist of a pair of items, especially if things are given which can be used by both of them, e.g., a pair of pillow cases, a pair of blankets and so on.

At a Restaurant

If one happens to meet a friend accidentally at a restaurant and is invited to join him, let him either pay the whole bill or none of it. Going Dutch is an extremely rare practice here, and may even be considered bad conduct by many people who have never been abroad. When sitting at the same table with one's close friends or acquaintances, one does not pay for his share alone, especially on unexpected occasions.

Tips and Gratuities

As a rule, tips are not left by Vietnamese of low socio-economic status in small restaurants or given to cyclo and taxi drivers. But in fashionable restaurants, bars, hotels and other places of entertainment, guests rarely fail to tip the waiters or attendants. A tip may be from 5 to 20 per cent of the bill but it is not an obligation, because a service charge is included on hotel and restaurant bills.

It is commonly expected and thus advisable, however, that foreigners leave a tip, even a very small one, when leaving a restaurant, tea room, hotel or bar.

One warning: You may give a gratuity to your office messenger, to your servant or driver, but never offer one to your office clerk or interpreter; he may misinterpret your act, and mistake your generosity for an insult.

Good Luck

If we think that differences in the world lead mankind toward a better future, we probably will be less concerned with the relations between individuals and with group psychology and culture. Variety will appear to us an inspiration rather than a curse.

It is hoped that in the area of human culture there is plenty of room to accommodate the unusual individual and the many different national patterns, that there is no reason to rate one superior and another inferior. By learning to know different peoples, we may be inspired to understand, respect and admire them all. The problem of how to behave then appears as a simple matter of courtesy which should never seriously trouble any sincere man or woman.