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By TJ NARA Date 11/16/92

AS YOU ARE SEEN BY VN EMPLOYEES
SPEAKER TRAN DINH BINH

HOW TO BE LIKED IN VIETNAM

Was Kipling right when he said "East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet"? Or are the others correct who maintain that people are people the world over? I believe you will agree that both statements are extremes and that somewhere between lies the truth.

This is not to deny that all people have similar basic needs and drives. For example, we all wish to obtain happiness. But the routes we choose are not always the same. In choosing different routes, we vary our customs and practice. Actions considered perfectly correct in the East may be interpreted in the West as being in bad taste, or even as offensive. And the same is true of actions by Westerners in the East.

Before getting into specific customs and practices which cause trouble, it might be helpful to outline briefly a few basic contrasts between the East and the West.

The Westerner has a dynamic concept of life. He conceives of a life full of needs and desires which must be satisfied if one is to be happy. Consequently, he exerts effort to produce the kind of goods and services which satisfy his needs and desires. He will not hesitate to change his environment if he feels the need to do so. Frequently, the satisfying of a current need creates a new need which must also be satisfied. On and on goes the life of the Western man, ever broadening in scope, ever emphasizing speed.

The Easterner, on the other hand, views the physical world, the social order, and man's place and condition in both, as essentially preordained. He aims at a life free from desire, in which his inner self is in complete harmony with the outer world. He realizes that as a human being he has certain basic needs that must be fulfilled, but he regards all other needs and desires as secondary and he tries to subdue them. Rather than change the total environment to satisfy all his needs, he is inclined to adapt or reconcile himself to his situation. He views the business of creating new needs and habits as being very strange indeed.

A similar difference can be found in the Eastern and Western concepts of time and labor. In many Western countries we constantly hear: "Save time", "Time is precious", "Time is money." There are target dates, labor-saving devices, time and motion studies. A man takes the 5:03 train, not the eight o'clock train.

In contrast, the Asian as a rule is not pressed for time. He gives the impression that they have a whole eternity to spare. Patience is a key word. He has a great knack of letting things simmer until the propitious moment. Labor is ample and, in the East, need not be spared. The amount of time and effort that goes into a delicacy, by Western standards is out of all proportions. The Easterner strives more after perfection than getting a job done. If you ask an ordinary Vietnamese at what time such and such an event takes place, you would likely receive the following answer: "That happens when the sun is on the top of the bamboo tree". Few Vietnamese, even those who are city dwellers, care to check the exact time something occurs! Perhaps this contributes to the relatively low incidence of ulcers and nervous breakdowns in the East.

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FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

In the West, the term family is usually limited to the immediate living family, i.e., one's wife and children. If family ties clash with the individual spouse's human rights, the family, generally speaking, recedes in order to respect the rights of the individual.

Now, Easterners (Vietnamese included) also have a great respect for the individual. However, the family enjoys a preeminent position in every level of society and cannot be subordinate to the individual. The individual's physical body is not respected per se but rather as something he owes to his parents and ancestors and of which the individual is only a safekeeper.

A Vietnamese will speak to you of his family, but he is careful of exactly which family he means. He may mean his "Lesser family", consisting of himself, his wife and their children or his "Greater family" consisting of his wife, children, his parents, and his unmarried brothers and sisters, family ties are immeasurably stronger. The family is the center of the universe, much more so than the nation. Anything the Vietnamese does, he does out of family considerations rather than for his own self-as shown by the following saying: "A man becomes a Mandarin, and all his relatives will share his good fortune". The Easterner can not act freely, but in accord with his parents, with his distant relatives, and also with his fellow-villagers who feel proud of his good deeds and ashamed of his bad ones. Also, his concern is not limited to the living; ancestor worship (or veneration) prompts him to consider how the deceased would view a contemplated action.

Good social order as established by tradition demands that the ancestors are worshipped, the parents obeyed, the old respected, the woman protected and the children loved.

FURTHER CONTRASTS

Further contrasts between the mentality of the East and the West may be generalized in the comparisons:

Active vs. passive

Material vs. spiritual

Logical vs. mystical

Before launching into specifics, a word of qualification. While, as you will appreciate, it is necessary to resort to generalities in speaking of any people, there are differences and exceptions in any society. Rural people usually vary from their urban counterparts in some respects-frequently it is only a matter of degree. When I use the term Vietnamese, I refer to the general urban population. I specifically exclude or hold reservation concerning Vietnamese who have been abroad, and your Vietnamese employees who work for you daily. The latter group will undoubtedly make greater allowances for your action than will the general urban population.

WESTERN PRACTICES THAT ARE TABOO

Westerners are prone to make comparisons, to argue the pros and cons of a subject, the weakness and strength of a proposition. Neighbors experience no embarrassment in bragging about the relative merits of their cars. There is little hesitation in pointing out to one's neighbor that he should be more progressive, keep up with the times.

This practice, if carried to the East, is fraught with danger even though no offense is intended. In the first place such practices-arguments, comparisons, boasting - are more conducive to controversy than to harmony.

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The Easterner prefers to avoid expressions of disagreement. Secondly, the Easterner is proud of his heritage, his culture, his way of life, and to him international comparisons are particularly odious. He regards those who indulge in them as being arrogant and belittling. And here we have a key point: humility is a cardinal virtue in the East. If you would be loved by Easterners, be careful not to convey a pronounced air of self-importance or arrogance.

Westerners favor the direct approach in conversation, they don't like to "beat around the bush". The Easterner indulges in more subtleties and insinuations. A direct question is considered impolite and usually is not given a straight answer. You will make more progress by avoiding a brash frontal approach in conversation. Let's look at this more closely:

A direct request to an individual is in poor taste. You will do much better by hinting around the favor desired and let the listener offer what you want. A direct request may be considered as under-estimating the listener's intelligence, take a boy-meets-girl example. A typical village Vietnamese will attempt to gain a girl's attention by singing a question:

"At this chance meeting, Plum would like to ask Peach,

Whether anybody has entered the Rose Garden"

In case she does not want to start the conversation or she is already married, she will keep quiet, other wise, she may reply as follows:

"Now that Peach asks, Plum would like to answer:

The Rose Garden has an entrance, but nobody has been admitted"

Fortunately, Vietnamese do not expect foreigners to go to such an extent. But I suggest you remember that you have better odds if you avoid blunt questions and requests for favor. An experienced foreigner will not launch immediately into the business at hand. He will inquire of the children or mention some subject of mutual interest.

Americans, particularly, like to get on a first name basis quickly. Such a practice is very effective in America: "The sweetest term in the language is the man's first name". But in Vietnam, this is interpreted frequently as undesirable familiarity. The people of the East, like many Europeans, are more reserved and prefer a warming-up or courting period. You won't lose anything by keeping things on a Mr. or Mrs. basis. Let your Vietnamese acquaintance advance to the first-name level when he is ready. While on the subject of names; The full name of the addressee should be spelled out in correspondence. For example: TRAN VAN DONG, not Mr. T.V. DONG. In addition to the etiquette aspect, there is considerable possibility for error if you resort to initials.

Similar remarks apply to the question of introducing yourself to strangers. The American is not shy about introducing himself. It is different in Vietnam. A man in a respected position will be more favorably disposed if you arrange to have a mutual acquaintance effect an introduction. Frequently, the arranger will attempt to make it appear as though it is a chance meeting, but this still does not lessen the fact that self-introductions, normally, are not favored.

A wise man in any country refrains from giving advice too freely and too frequently. He subtly lets the idea or the benefit to be derived from the idea spring from the listener. This is particularly true in Vietnam. To overcome a natural skepticism among Vietnamese towards untried ideas, a Westerner should not push his listener into a new venture too rapidly. The Vietnamese, like the Missourian, needs a bit of showing by concrete example or demonstration.

A Westerner in Vietnam does well to shy from discussing local politics in company-~~Confidentially~~, don't discuss local politics with a Vietnamese

until you know him quite well, and only then if he is responsive. At cocktail parties, it is better to limit your conversation to pleasantries. The terms Asiatic, Annamite, Native, Indochina and French Indo-China should be avoided today. Local national - a more proper term would be Vietnamese.

From early youth the East Asian is impressed with need for self-control. Angry comments, "letting off steam", public display of affections are considered unmannerly and extremely coarse. So: let's keep our voices down and avoid too great a display of emotions-both parties are likely to lose face.

The use of slang, and especially American slang, within a homogeneous group is quite acceptable but would lead to misinterpretation and a possible inferiority complex when there are Vietnamese present whose mastery of the foreign language is still far from good.

If you want to summon someone, please do so with a soft voice and not by waving your index finger. If you beckon someone by your finger, your gesture will be interpreted as a display of authority on your part and an indication of lack of esteem for your subordinate, whose assigned work will probably suffer by being done half-heartedly.

Whatever you do, be careful on how you use your hand in motioning someone toward you. You're sure to get a dirty look or worse if you hold your palm up and wriggle your fingers in signalling to someone. The sign is ordinarily used in Vietnam to attract the attention of dogs and children. However, if you make the same sign but hold your hand palm down nobody will take offense.

Never tap anyone on the head. Undoubtedly, it will be taken as a personal injury to the individual's human dignity, and possibly as a blow to his ancestors as well. Reserve any friendly pats on the back for intimate friends who have long been exposed to foreigners. Better still, keep hands off if you don't want to offend a Vietnamese.

You may be asked to a Vietnamese friend's house. When you enter, you may show your respect to his parents and wife by a silent nod. Don't offer to shake hands with a woman. Of course, if the woman takes the initiative, then promptly and lightly shake her hands (no crushing or pumping, please).

You may notice an ancestral shrine. It is perfectly all right to look at it and even to get close to it, but under no circumstances touch any part of the shrine. One further comment - if you sit down and cross your legs, be sure neither foot is pointed towards the shrine. Similarly, a foot pointed at an individual may be offensive.

If you are invited to eat at a friend's home, let the older people start to eat before you commence. Locally, this honor is given to the seniors rather than the guests.

The common plate from which you take food to your personal plate should always have one or two things left and under no circumstances should you take the last bit of food from it. If you clean the common plate the hostess might feel embarrassed because she had not prepared enough food for her guests. However, once you take the food to your personal plate, it is expected that you clear your plate to show that you appreciate the hostess's good cooking and that you know what you want when you take the food.

It is bad taste to inquire about the cost or the purchase place of household articles. It is also considered bad taste in Vietnam to put one's feet on a desk, chair or table. This is considered haughty behavior.

If you want to return a friend's courtesy by inviting him out to a restaurant, be careful to select a fairly expensive restaurant even though the food may not be as good as at a cheaper restaurant. If you take him to a cheap restaurant, even to one serving good food, he may feel slighted.

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On a chance meeting, if you are the senior, you are expected to pick up the tab. The practice of "Dutch treat" in which each one pays for himself is not in vogue in Vietnam.

If you feel like sending a gift to a household, it is better to send something for the children rather than to the wife. An odd number of gifts is not well received. It is better to send two presents to a child even though the combined cost of the two presents is less than one. This aversion to odd numbers is particularly true for wedding gifts. If you send one present to a wedding couple, it might be interpreted as a prognostic that this marriage will not last.

With Vietnamese, there is still a sharp distinction between manual labor and intellectual work. A man who styles himself an intellectual would rather do some clerical work at lower pay than work with his hands. So cafeterias, gaseterias and other notions of self-service and do-it-yourself are still very foreign to Vietnamese life. A Vietnamese of means and dignity pays servants to work for him. He does not move a heavy object and does not help his wife with the cooking. If you like to wash your car yourself, or to help around the house it would be prudent to let your servants know that you do not mean to be a miser or to take work away from a laborer, but that you enjoy doing those things for physical exercise.

If you have picked up Vietnamese phrases from servants, it is wise to check them with a close friend before using them indiscriminately. In this connection it would be very profitable for you to learn at least the rudiments of the Vietnamese Language and a few common expressions. Vietnamese is admittedly a difficult language. However, you will receive considerable esteem and satisfaction from knowing and using the basic expressions of Vietnamese.

I hope I haven't alarmed you. I believe you will find, if you haven't done so already, that Vietnamese are less sensitive than many people and that they are fairly tolerant. In your dealings with them, sincerity counts a great deal. However, we are only human and consequently it is best for you to know what customs and practices might cause offense. Through a frank and friendly sharing of knowledge, such as this, the people of the East and West will get to know each other, to respect each other and to live in peace and harmony together.