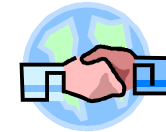


Cultures of the World - Vietnam



By: Prem Deep

In 1998, Anh Dam and I were colleagues at IMMA (Intercultural Mutual Assistance Association). He is from Vietnam.

He told me, "I came to the USA in 1993 with my family."

I asked him, "What was your vocation before your move?"

He replied, "I had a government job. Later I joined the army and held a position of an officer."

I said, "I know that Vietnam resembles the letter 'S.' What part of 'S' did you belong to?"

With a smile he replied, "The South – Saigon."

Vietnam is located in Southeast Asia with its neighbors China in the North and Laos and Cambodia in the West. It covers an area of 127,243 square miles, equaling the size of Iowa and Missouri combined.

Anh said, "This long narrow country is home to more than 50 different ethnic groups. Before 1976, Vietnam was divided into the upper and the lower half. Saigon was the capital of the South and Hanoi of the North. In 1975 when both the halves were officially united and came to be known as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, north and south had only one capital – Hanoi."

After years of political isolation, Vietnam gradually opened the doors to the international community in 1990. As a result there was an influx of people from China, Laos, Cambodia and the West. There is evidence that hundreds of years ago, many traders from India traveled to Cambodia, Vietnam and the neighboring countries that influenced the culture of



Vietnam. Buddhism had a great impact on the society. But there is one special trend in Vietnam. A movement called *CAO DAI*. It was started in 1926. It teaches that all religions have the same origin and the followers worship God. They devote themselves to works of service to the community and believe in personal purification."

Besides Vietnamese as main language, other languages are Chinese, English, French and Khmer (of Cambodia). Education for the Vietnamese is very important.

He said, "There is a great emphasis on education. 90% of the people can read and write and go to college for higher education. But education facilities in the rural areas are inadequate as there is a shortage of teachers."

About Vietnamese culture, he said, "Basically, ethnic Vietnamese culture was developed in the Red River Delta four to five thousand years ago. Later it was influenced by the Chinese culture, art and architecture. Dragons, tigers, and unicorns are symbols of important virtues such as wisdom and perseverance. Ancient bronze art dates back to 300 BC. Painting on silk stretched on a wooden frame is a specialty. Also, a special kind of embroidery called 'Mother-of-pearl-inlay' is a thousand-year-old style. Colorful pottery is unique in designs."

Regarding family values, he said, "Vietnamese life revolves around the family. In spite of the Western influence, a joint family system is still very popular. Family structure is mainly hierarchical. Families help relatives and contribute money if anybody has some financial problem. Not only that, they like to help others also."

"For 9/11 and Katrina victims, the Vietnamese community organized a series of music shows around 50 states to raise funds."

In Vietnam, elders are respected, and people believe in dignity and politeness. Although their culture emphasizes the submissive role of women as daughters and wives yet women play a prominent role in the family. They have equal rights and occupy a high position in managing the domestic policies.

Anh said, "So far city as life is concerned, villagers migrated to the cities in search of jobs and higher standard of living. Urban development has not kept pace with the immigrants. As a result, cities are densely packed. That has created serious housing serious

housing problems. Sometimes, two to three generations of a family share a one room apartment. For transportation, instead of cars, people mostly use bicycles."

Since 1975, September 2 is their independence day. The 15th day of the 7th lunar month is called the *Wandering Souls Day*. Dead are remembered on this day. The 15th day of the 8th lunar month falls in the mid-September.



Harvest Season

Harvest moon is at its fullest. This is a favorite time for the children. New clothes, toys, cakes, visits to the temples, dragon dances and colorful lanterns symbolize 'Light'. 'TET' is their New Year and it falls in late January and early February and lasts for 15 days. It is a time of exchanging gifts, visiting family and friends, decoration of the houses and a bamboo pole for the protection of the family from evil spirits.

In sport and foods he said, "Swimming, badminton, volleyball, bowling, soccer and martial arts are popular. As far as foods, Chinese, Thai, Indonesian and French foods are favorites of most of the people. Rice is important in all the meals."

Ao Dai in Vietnamese means 'long gown.' It is a silk tunic with long sleeves worn over loose trousers. These are worn with high necklaces. They are designed for Vietnam's hot and humid weather. Like Cambodia, in Vietnam also, water puppetry is a favorite entertainment of the people. The troupe traveled and performed in Japan, France, Australia, Spain, Mexico and the USA. Vietnam is a land of great natural beauty and is famous for the wildlife havens. The rivers help in irrigation, transportation and serve as floating shops called 'SAMPANS.'

"It has a beauty of its own." That's what Anh told me. (I believe it!)



Anh with his Family