

# **THE ACCULTURATION OF THANH**

## **A Viet Kieu Adapts to Life in the United States**

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The following is a factual account of my experiences with a Viet Kieu, a Vietnamese person living outside of Vietnam. Her real name and current residence have been changed for reasons that will become apparent.

### **BACKGROUND**

#### **My Interest in Vietnam**

I was in the process of writing "A Post-Apocalyptic View of Archaeology" and needed a visual component for my presentation at the Middle Atlantic Archaeological Conference in 2000. I decided that my anthropological perspective on being in the US Army in Vietnam for nearly 15 months would be of interest to the audience and illustrate my anthropological points as well.

Thus began an odyssey that is still taking me into ever more interesting and exciting realms. I added a Vietnam section to my web sites and began to learn to speak Vietnamese. As I became increasingly comfortable hearing and speaking the language, I wondered if my pronunciation and inflections were correct. I needed to find a native speaker. This is what I found.

### **THE INTRODUCTION**

#### **Finding a Viet Kieu**

I met a man in the local diner who worked in a factory with many Vietnamese. He was certain that at least one would be interested in meeting me. He arranged a meeting with two Vietnamese women. Because of ongoing construction, the building was difficult to find. My friend and I stepped out of his air conditioned truck into the 95° degree, 100% humidity, direct sun. The two sisters parked their car and walked toward us. They were wearing "ao dai", the traditional dress. I had a sudden, pleasant flashback of a Sunday afternoon street scene in Hue on the wide boulevards along the banks of the Perfume River.

Before I said anything in English, I asked in Vietnamese if they had gotten lost. I knew that I could not make a personal comment until we were introduced. I repeated the introduction in Vietnamese and then commented on how nice they looked.

Since I knew exactly how to act with two very traditional women, they were absolutely enchanted. As it turned out, they were not exactly traditional, but they appreciated someone who knew what to do. After 10 minutes they asked if I would go to Vietnam with them to visit their parents. It would have been very inappropriate to agree so soon, so I said that the trip would be very nice.

I am no where near fluent in long sentences, but I had no problem being understood in short sentences, phrases, and individual words. They are from Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City or HCM), and I am learning the Hanoi dialect, but except for a few words, I have the tones and cadence. Their English pronunciation was only fair because they are not exposed to enough correctly spoken English to learn properly. I mentioned the difficulty of understanding people from different parts of this country. The younger woman

said that the people in Saigon can understand the people in Hanoi, but the Hue accent is like listening to birds. I repeated the Vietnamese word for "bird" to be sure that I understood her. She then said some phrases in the Hue accent at a much higher pitch. It was like a canary singing.

I could recognize the individual words in Vietnamese even though I did not always understand what they meant. As I listened very closely, the difference in their education was noticeable. One is very precise and knows how the sounds are produced; the other, just speaks and the sounds run together. When I asked her to repeat certain words, she realized my problem.

They asked how long I had been practicing Vietnamese. I said, "One month". The younger sister corrected my pronunciation with the word for "one year". I repeated, "One month" and wrote the word. When they asked how this was possible, I told them about the tapes and interactive CD-ROM and showed them the phrase book.

I showed them my web site on Vietnam. They had never used the Internet. They were amazed and impressed that I knew enough Vietnamese to translate the newspapers every day into English! I tried to explain that the newspapers were on a server in Vietnam, but even knowing the words does not explain the concept.

I tried to explain that I have a Vietnamese word processing program to create the necessary tone marks and diacritical marks. They just write or type and add the marks afterwards, so the concept of typing it with the marks was lost.

The web sites I put together for English as a Second Language are well suited for her. She spotted the word SLANG on one, clicked, and the world will never be the same. She is starting with the "A"s: ACE, ACTION, AIRHEAD, ALL WET. She wants to know the literal meaning of every slang word. The people at work will be treated to the word(s) of the day, I am sure.

The first meeting lasted two hours and we made plans for a second meeting the following week. On the drive home my friend made many comments. He had never seen the women wear anything except jeans. They obviously approached this as a very special occasion. He could not believe that they were so animated. Even on breaks at work they seldom interacted with other Vietnamese and certainly not with Americans. He learned more about their backgrounds in one hour than he had known in a year of working with them. He asked how I got them to say so much. I knew a lot about the culture and attempted to speak their language. They were perfectly at ease.

## **THANH'S BACKGROUND**

### **Life in Vietnam and Coming to the US**

I asked her about life during the war.. Her father was a soldier who was on leave at home during the Tet Offensive. Her father heard the VC coming through the area killing soldiers spending time with their families. Her father hid with two friends in the jungle for days until they thought it was safe. The two friends bolted, got caught, and her father watched them being buried alive in a rice paddy. He was very careful to remember exactly where they were buried so he could tell their wives. The wives needed to come to get the bones for a proper burial with the ancestors.

I had to ask her several times to repeat this to be sure that I had heard it correctly in Vietnamese and English: She would rather have had the Americans stay in Vietnam even if it meant the war was still being

fought today. I said, "War for another 25 years (after 1975) is better than life without war?" She insisted that life was so much better with the Americans there. Regardless of the fighting, dying, and bombing. Life is just becoming bearable now. The people want the Americans back.

Over a period of many weeks, Thanh told me the story of how she got to the US. April 30, 1975 Saigon fell, and the Communists assumed power. This was the dividing line. All stories about Vietnam are preceded with "Before 1975" or "After 1975". Everyone who was associated with the military was either killed or sent to a re-education camp. Thanh, a small, city girl from Saigon, was forced to work in the rice paddies. Life was very difficult. Family life was disrupted. She made a plan to escape and waited for the right time.

With a few friends she made it to the coast on a moonless night and drifted on the outgoing tide into the South China Sea on a tiny, motorless boat. The plan was that they would be met by a larger boat, which would take them to a freighter, which would take them to a refugee camp somewhere, anywhere. The first three attempts failed, they were captured by the Communists and returned. On the fourth attempt they made it beyond the patrols. They knew that they had to be picked up very quickly if they were to survive. Being adrift in the southern South China Sea made them easy prey for the Thai pirates. The pirates would steal everything they had, kill the men, and kidnap the women and children to be sold as sex slaves.

They were lucky. Their little boat was quickly swept offshore beyond the range of the patrols. The bigger boat picked them up after less than a day of drifting. They thought that the gods were being very good, until the typhoon struck. The people were so afraid that they would be tossed overboard into the churning sea that they lashed themselves together below decks. She described the heavy rain, the waves breaking over the boat, the rising water below decks, the people praying and screaming, and then nothing. Thanh thought she was dead, but the storm had passed. Within a few days they were picked up by a freighter and taken to a refugee camp in Malaysia.

She lived in a barracks in the refugee camp behind razor wire for seven years. Every week Canada, US, Australia, or another English-speaking country sent a representative with a list of names. That was the only way out to anywhere. They offered free admission (no quota) for one person at a time (no families). Her name was never called. One day the Malay police came into the compound, ordered everyone out of the barracks, and put them onto trucks. They were driven to the dock, loaded onto a freighter, and returned to Vietnam with no explanation and no time to pack. Thanh was scared out her mind. She was afraid that the Communists would punish everyone who had escaped. Instead this was a United Nations program to close the camps and give the people a chance to return to Vietnam. Those who did not want to return to Vietnam were offered asylum, but not necessarily where they wanted to go. By a complete accident, Thanh was sponsored by a group in the US and found her way to a small, very traditional Vietnamese community.

## **THE CULTURE GAME**

### **Gaining Trust and Learning the Rules**

Only Thanh came to the second meeting at the library. The other woman's husband did not want his wife associating too closely with Americans, so she could not join us. Knowing so much about the culture while trying to learn the language made for a very interesting experience on my part. My perception of her spoken English changed from the first meeting. Once she realized that I would take the time to listen

to her and would ask about certain words, she launched into complete sentences. After each sentence she asked if she had said them correctly. Her pronunciation needs a lot of work, but I found a great tape with clearly spoken English and the Vietnamese translation.

She opened up so much more than when we first met. She will answer any question and ask any one. We developed a very close bond. Vietnamese communicate a lot with body language. Words are stressed only because they are pronounced that way, not because you are calling attention to a certain part of the sentence. Body language can count more than the words.

It is never proper to touch a stranger of the opposite sex to get their attention or to make a point. You are a stranger until a bond of mutual interest and sharing is developed. It was three days before she touched my arm to call attention to something. This is a very deliberate act. The second point in bonding is asking a favor directly. This took five days and it happened over the phone.

Playing the cultural game is a lot of fun. Every time I know the correct thing to do, she comments. It is almost as though I am being tested in Vietnamese Culture 101. The real test of bonding came when she did not react negatively when I touched the palm of her hand or held her arm to keep her from falling. She accepted the help with a smile and slowly withdrew her hand. If she appreciated it as an act of friendship rather than a reaction to something, she would touch my arm, smile, and say something.

## **VIETNAMESE LANGUAGE**

I was very confused about the chronology of some of the events Thanh had discussed. She seemed to be confused when I attempted to explain what I was doing, when I was working, when I could meet with her, and where we might be going. I thought that I was using either English words in her vocabulary or the correct Vietnamese word. When I studied Vietnamese grammar, I realized the source of some of the problems.

Compared to English, French, German, and Latin, Vietnamese grammar is very simple. A plural subject does not change the ending of a verb. Verbs do not change to indicate past, present, future tenses. Tense is assumed from the context of the sentence, but can be re-enforced with a single helper verb to be absolutely certain. Certain adjectives are placed before a noun (e.g., how many of an item); others, after (e.g., color, size), but there is no change in form or ending to agree with a particular noun or part of speech. Word order in a sentence follows English very closely except for the adjectives. Pronouns can be used as nouns or adjectives without changing form. To be absolutely correct, nouns are used with the classifiers appropriate to their category (e.g., animals, particular shapes, fruit).

The same sequence of letters is always pronounced the same, unless there is a tone mark. There are six tones in the northern dialect, and five in the southern. Change the tone, and the meaning changes. Because nearly all words have from two to seven letters, the same word with the same tone mark might mean different things in different contexts.

The current Vietnamese language, spelling, and grammar was established by the French about 150 years ago using a basic English alphabet adding a few letters and deleting a few others. This would make it the easiest of all Asian languages for Americans to learn except for the fact that very few words are at all similar to ones in French or English. Correct pronunciation takes much practice and careful listening since some sequences of letters are not found in English or are pronounced differently than in English depending on their placement at the start, middle, or end of a word.

She practiced reading aloud in English, and I read in Vietnamese. Then we corrected each other. She said that I spoke with a North Vietnamese accent, which is actually considered proper. In the next sentence I changed to the South Vietnamese accent. I have to really concentrate to make the switch. It would only be useful in parts of Vietnam where people are offended by Northerners. She warned me of a few words on the tape that are completely wrong. They are Northern slang.

Her mother sent her English phrase books from Saigon. They started with paragraphs about a cruise ship, a murder mystery narrative, and heavy English grammar. This is where her excellent grammar comes from, but it is also why she does not know the common phrases.

We practice reading even if we do not know what it means. In Vietnamese the same sequence of letters with tone marks is always pronounced the same, so I have an easier job than she does. But, if I have not heard a word many times, I see the letters and the tone mark, but miss adjacent

vowels (creating a diphthong) that change the meaning. The words for 10, mosquito, and nose are very similar as are man, year, five, south, southern, and mushroom. Sentence content and adjacent words help and hinder the process.

After spending more than a month with her, I began to experiment with Vietnamese/English puns and word games. "The year of five male southern mushrooms" does not mean anything, but it is the same word repeated five times with different tone marks. "I am new here" is an English phrase one might say when he or she acts inappropriately. In Vietnamese there are two words that sound like "new". One means sleepy; the other stupid. The first time I said it, she did not understand. When I explained the English idiom and substituted the Vietnamese pronunciations for "new", she thought it was hilarious.

She says that if I read a sentence, it will be perfectly understandable to any educated person in Vietnam. Regional dialect words are a different matter, but I have the tones and cadence. Now I have to work on vocabulary and understanding what I hear.

## **AMERICAN FOOD IS NOT ALWAYS WHAT IT APPEARS TO BE**

She had a severe cultural shock with food. I got a picture book with food, animals, scenes in restaurants, post office, and other settings with the Vietnamese word and the English word. She saw the picture of Jello and said, "Jello". I asked what she put into Jello because I was not sure that she actually ate it. She said all the right things: different kinds of fruit and marshmallows. Since the list of foods she liked were mostly vegetables and fruits, I then asked if she was a vegetarian. She said that she does not like to eat very much meat and will never touch meat, fish, or eggs during certain times of the year. I asked if she knew what was in Jello. She said the Vietnamese words for sugar, water, colors, and something to make it harden. When I told her what gelatin was, she lost her expression completely. In her culture it is known as a wooden face; if you are very shocked by someone or something or extremely angry. She explained that she carefully translated every word and nothing said, "Meat." and it does not taste like meat. She is not going to trust anything out of a can or a box for a long time.

The Vietnamese phrase for vegetarian does not necessarily refer to someone who does not eat parts of an animal. In certain contexts she referred to meat as the flesh of the animal, but excluded skin, feet, neck, wing, and/or internal organs. In a traditional setting men eat the flesh, and women get the other parts if all the flesh has been consumed. Thanh's comfort food is steamed duck feet.

In the beginning she was not at all confident about her English and avoided non-Vietnamese people. We went to a small snack place. She looked at the menu board and recognized almost nothing because they had abbreviated so much. The place was full of bored mothers, yelling children, and teens just hanging out. When I started translating the menu into Vietnamese aloud, the place became quiet. She thought that the people were very polite to be quiet while I was speaking!!

I explained the likely ingredients in each menu item, and she thought that a hamburger with mushrooms and onions would be good. When it came, it had melted cheese on it. She stared at the cheese and asked why that was not on the list of ingredients. I said that I would take it back, but she did not want to make a scene. She tried the cheese, but did not like it. I suspected that she was lactose intolerant. She tried each ingredient separately, ate half of the hamburger, and part of the roll. I sensed that something was very wrong. Except for the cheese, she knew what to expect.

After eating, she asked if I had ever had Vietnamese food. I told her of my food experiences in Vietnam and in three restaurants in the states. She just smiled. The next time we met, she brought me a Vietnamese sandwich and a can of ice cold soy milk. The sandwich had pate, two kinds of sliced meat, shredded greens, finely chopped scallions, and diced green and red chilis on a hard roll. It was the hottest sandwich I had ever eaten, but the taste was incredible.

I had never realized how disgusted she must have been with American food until I ate a typical sandwich. American meals are presented as bland piles of meat, starch, and vegetables possibly held together with a milk product. As I was to learn in much greater detail later, Vietnamese foods have far more ingredients, a greater variety of condiments, and a subtler taste.

The next (and last) time we went to an American restaurant was for fresh seafood: boiled lobster, steamed clams, deep fried shrimp and squid, breaded scallops, broiled halibut, steamed broccoli and carrots, and cole slaw. The quantity astounded her, but the diversity and flavors were much more to her liking. Afterwards she asked why they did not serve anything spicy.

We ate at a Japanese restaurant/sushi place. She looked at the waiters and waitresses and said, "Looks like me, but Japanese and maybe one Korean." The menu was completely foreign to her. I translated some of the vegetarian selections. When the waiter came, he asked if we wanted anything to drink. She had no clue what the choices were, so I translated. She would have known the words if they had been written, but could not understand the waiter's accent. The vegetarian platter was huge. She said that three people would not eat that much at a single meal. When I asked for chopsticks, a giant question mark appeared on her face. I asked if she knew how to use them. She actually laughed out loud. Any outburst or loud talking is a sign of being impolite, but I know how to bring this out in her.

One night at work someone sent out for hot, spicy chicken wings. She thought they were absolutely wonderful and ate many of them (she thought three was a lot). But she was very confused. The few American men on her shift ate them as well. Traditionally wings are women's food, and men eat the larger pieces of flesh. She had had encounters with gay men and was wondering if these men were announcing they were gay by eating women's food.

## **SOCIAL CONCERNS**

Thanh is a radical feminist, who happens to like men. At 30 she is considered too old to marry for the first time. Because she is very determined and extremely smart, she has two more strikes against her. She

wants to help women become educated. She said that Vietnamese men work hard at their jobs, but do not want to learn English, socialize, or travel outside of the community, or have their wives leave the house. At the same time, the wives must learn English because they have to deal with the friends and teachers of their English-speaking children. Without knowing the jargon or the theory, she has an excellent insight into cultural turmoil.

One day the place we wanted to visit was closed for the summer. I asked if she would like to come to my house. She agreed. It was 90° with a wind blowing like a blast furnace. I was wearing a Darth Vader T-shirt, and we stopped at a market to get some fruit. Nothing was ripe for eating immediately. She was very upset that the mangoes were like stones. She knew they would have no flavor. Once we got to my house, she said that I should not wear a T-shirt in public. I must be dressed better. A T-shirt is too informal. Her Buddhist side came out with a look of horror and fear at a Iroquois false face mask I have on the wall. Darth Vader was bad, but the false face had to be put away.

I asked if she would consider an American boyfriend. She said that was impossible because the people in the Vietnamese community here would look down on her. She also said that her father told her and her sisters to marry a foreigner. I asked why she was not dating a Vietnamese man now. She said that she is very afraid to be alone with any man. At this point we are sitting in my living room with no one else around. I asked why she trusted me. I am so much bigger than she is. I was completely shocked by her answer: I look like her father!!! The Vietnamese equivalent of "Look like" includes physical similarities as well as interests, background, attitudes, etc. She meant the whole package.

She is very afraid to go anywhere alone. I asked if she would be more comfortable learning English with an American woman. Several of my female friends would like to do this, since I am having such a great time. I was not ready for Shock #2. She does not want to spend time with American women, because they will corrupt her.

She has three jobs: two in factories and one in a nail salon. She sees only Vietnamese in the factory. She must think all American women are like the ones she works on in the nail salon. Her list of reasons for thinking that American women would corrupt her is a long one.

I asked what she thought it would be like to be married to a Vietnamese man and to live here. She knows all their bad habits, which can be tolerated in moderation. She knows English pronouns very well and uses them correctly. In a long discourse on her reactions to his bad habits, their mutual goals, the children they would have, and what would cause a break-up, she made her determination and priorities very clear. "Our" and "my" appeared very noticeably. Her first priority will be her children; the second is her support for her children.

We reached an agreement. Since I know how to act towards Vietnamese women, am quite familiar with Vietnamese culture, political situation, and problems and she trusts me absolutely, I will be her uncle (chu'). With this kinship role, it is appropriate for me to go with her when she meets Vietnamese men. It is also appropriate for Vietnamese women to meet with me with her present. Fictive kinship assigns a status to an otherwise outsider. She can ask any favor, and I can suggest what she should do. I am her uncle and her father's brother.

**4<sup>th</sup> OF JULY**

I had spent a long time describing a typical 4th of July family picnic experience to Thanh: screaming children, barbecued flesh, beer, American women, and fireworks. I checked the dictionary for very specific terms in Vietnamese. She is very afraid of people and nearly a vegetarian, but wants to add to her list of experiences. I told her that we could leave at any time she felt uncomfortable. I am very protective of her, but she has to see the world around her. She wanted to experience it, so we did. She talked about it for the next two hours, mostly what she could say to whom. A whole new vocabulary emerged.

We started the day with a visit to a friend's shop. They had visited Vietnam and want to return. They were very nice to her, but she had difficulty understanding their English. She interacts with so few Americans that it took her a month to recognize her supervisor at work. "All white people look alike". I had to repeat many phrases in Vietnamese or English. She has focused on the sound of my voice, and I know her vocabulary. She had never seen African art, but she understood the symbolism and could translate the abstract images into reality. I was astounded.

Part 2 was a near disaster, but turned into a wonderful experience. A friend told me that his family was going to be at the nearby park all day. We drove in, had to park a half-mile from the beach, walked around for two hours to every barbecue pit, every beach blanket, every car in the lot, and never found him. She is a city girl, and likes the forest only when viewed from a paved road or sidewalk. She had been forced to work in the rice paddies soon after the Communists took over. She said she was weak, and the outdoor experience is very tiring. This day she was strong and walked me right into the ground.

Part 3 was at my friend's house. His wife had decided that it looked like rain (could have, but didn't), and they kept the experience at home. When I introduced her, each person in turn grabbed her hand to shake it. This is considered a very familiar action from a female, and a threat from a male. I watched for her reaction, but she hid it behind a smile. I described the contents of the dishes in Vietnamese, and she reached for a slice of pork. I said that is was pork meat, and she looked at the clock. I would not have confused meat with time, but she said it was duoc (OK). She does not eat meat products between certain hours. She tasted it, and asked what kind of meat. I said, "Pork". She asked again because it did not taste like pork. It had been marinated in fruit, garlic, and onion for 24 hours. She wanted the recipe.

People chattered all through the meal, and she just smiled and ate. I kept repeating interesting parts of their conversations. I thought she was on the verge of closing down, until my friend brought out his new rifle. She could not stop talking about. She wanted to know everything and with diagrams. Once she understood this rifle, she was ready to shoot.

My friend has an outdoor firing range. He selected a smaller rifle for her to shoot. He set up a paper target 15 feet away for her to become accustomed to the aim and the recoil. When she fired, he could see where it hit on the target. He said, "Too high". She looked very confused and stared at him. I told her in Vietnamese, "Lower". After the next shot, he again said, "Too high". Again she looked confused and stared at him. Before I could say, "Lower" again, I burst out laughing. I realized why she was confused. "Thu hai" in Vietnamese is pronounced exactly the same as "too high" in English, but means "Monday". When I explained this in English and Vietnamese, the three of us laughed.

It took her five shots to feel comfortable with a .22 lever action. On the sixth shot she hit a skeet at 120 feet, and it blew up. She was very pleased, and asked, "Is that good?". When it was my turn with the .22, I broke four in rapid succession at various distances and said, "Now, that is good!"

She asked if I would shoot the Beretta 9mm that I always carried in shoulder holster. After several shots, I asked if she wanted to try it. The recoil was too much for her. Later she said that it was the same gun that local police carried. She wanted to know what it sounded like and how powerful it was. When my friend got out the big gun (a Sharps 45/120), she backed off 30 feet. She knew it would be much more powerful than the .22 and the Beretta, and it was.

I asked about her experiences with guns. She brushed off the question with a Vietnamese phrase that indicates, maybe yes, maybe no, but I cannot talk about it right now. She made me promise to never tell other Vietnamese about her shooting. They would not approve.

During dessert, she asked if it would be OK if she sat inside with three women to talk, and I could go outside. I got back 20 minutes later and she was full of words for me to explain. I used a lot of Vietnamese, but she wanted to know the English words. She kept a vocabulary list from each day's experiences. As we got ready to leave, each person gave her a big hug. She said that it was OK. She could not stop talking about these wonderful people. Until I introduced her to American women in their own setting, she refused to spend time with American women because they might corrupt her. She felt comfortable with these women. This even surprised her.

## **CULTURAL DILEMMAS**

The biggest problem is that I am willing to show her anything she wants, but she said that she has become too dependent on me. She has always been the strong one and never had to depend on anyone else. She gained a lot of confidence in our first three weeks together, but is too compulsive to go blindly into new experiences. We talk about things in great detail, but if something unexpected comes up, she gets worried.

She asked how to invite a person to dinner in a restaurant and make certain that the person would know that she was going to pay. We talked about this for an hour. I was there when she invited the person, her only other American friend and the person who had introduced us. She did it perfectly. We got to the restaurant, had a great meal, she did everything perfectly, but he grabbed the check. She insisted, but he got up and went to the cashier to settle the matter. It took 15 minutes to get her to leave the restaurant. We talked about this for 15 minutes in the parking lot and another hour in the car.

A major topic of discussion is how she has become too American to fit in in the Vietnamese community in Connecticut. She wants others to break out of the rut and learn English, make American friends, and move freely in American culture. This is meeting with great resistance and is a major cause of friction at work and among her Vietnamese neighbors. They are very curious where she goes when she spends time with me, but she cannot tell them too much. At the same time, she wants to experience so much more.

She is torn between two cultures in two different worlds. She could go back to Vietnam, but she would never find a Vietnamese husband. She could stay here, have a greater chance of finding an Americanized Vietnamese husband, but the Vietnamese people would not accept her. She is drifting toward an American husband who appreciates Vietnamese culture, but her children must experience Vietnamese culture. Her best female friends in the US have American husbands who speak Vietnamese, but they are not part of a Viet Kieu community. A change will occur in the next generation, but she cannot wait for that. She cannot get everything, so she needs to assess her priorities.

I had thought that her Vietnamese friends would be curious and want to experience what she has. I thought that we could visit them when my Vietnamese improved. Wrong!! She is losing friends just by talking about what she has seen. I would have a greater chance of acceptance in Vietnam.

She was playing a tape of a Vietnamese song, and I asked what the words meant. She sang the song in segments, translated it, and explained why she likes it. A girl falls in love, but knows that she will have to distance herself from her friends and family to stay with the boy. She decides to end the relationship while they are still happy. I sense a message. Although we are very close, we cannot get any closer.

Because the Vietnamese language does not stress words in a sentence to indicate anger, hesitancy, whining, or other emotions (this could easily change the meaning into something totally different), the speaker's facial expression must change. She does this instinctively in Vietnamese and English which makes her feelings very easy to read. She is being tormented by the paradox of the two cultures. She cannot rationalize a decision that will close access to one or the other. However, she has gone too far to turn back, but she will not admit it.

Thanh asked me tell her if she should marry a Vietnamese man here or an American (non-Asian). She is receiving marriage proposals from both!! After a four hour discussion, she is convinced that marrying an American is the way to go.

Add "traditional Vietnamese Buddhist women" to the list of endangered species that mate for life. Mate dies or leaves, then they have just the memories. Three years of mourning for Buddhists is considered appropriate before even considering another marriage. It is culturally acceptable to remarry if there are small children and the husband's family cannot support the widow and her children. It is still ok if the new future husband was a relative of the deceased husband. Consider the model of strict patrilineality. Keep everything in the family. Relationships with rich men to support the woman's family are not acceptable. It is even worse if the woman does it selfishly for her own gains.

She is talking more and more about Viet Kieu who are not fitting in. One woman married an American; another had a baby, divorced her husband, and cannot find another Vietnamese boyfriend. Both are literally trapped at home with no friends. They care for their children and can do little else. Another woman divorced her husband and was shunned. She had to move to a larger city with a much larger Viet Kieu community.

Children are essential to her master plan. Buddhists are very serious about the continuity of life. Connections to the ancestors and descendants are crucial. A woman must live long enough to properly raise her children (especially to have girls) and to see her own grandchildren. Her biological clock effectively stops about age 37. With a life expectancy under 65 years, she is cutting it very close. She must get married very soon, must have a daughter for her, a son for him, and get them married with their own families.

She fully expects her parents to be dead within 10 years (less than 70 years old). Her math is based on Vietnamese standards. She has not discussed consequences for failing to give it the old college try.

She is very expressive and loves to talk about her plans for the future. She does not want to choose between the two cultures, but wants the best of both. Her explanations of how she is being treated on the Vietnamese side are increasingly negative. I asked if she wanted to visit any of her female friends who have married Americans and who do not live in a Viet Kieu community. I asked if they were happy. That was on Saturday. On the following Monday she called and asked if I could get her a map to "Bessinger,

New York." She has a best friend there. I went nuts looking up variations on this including Vietnamese pronunciations of American consonants and vowels. She was so excited about the visit that she could not give me the details even in Vietnamese.

I called her supervisor at work to ask if he knew anything about this. He said that her friends lived in Pennsylvania and she wanted to visit her sponsor who had helped her and other Vietnamese get settled and acculturated. I suggested that she take the train and avoid the Jersey Shore traffic. She had no fear about getting into her car, taking a series of maps I had obtained from the Internet, and driving to visit the woman. She had said that no Vietnamese here would drive alone very far even in Connecticut.

She gave me the address of her friend near Philadelphia. I got her the map and she drove there with her sister and came back by way of Atlantic City (she won \$160 in quarters at the slot machines). She was confused at one point, stopped on the shoulder next to the Interstate, and a cop almost immediately appeared. He asked her in Vietnamese if she was lost. She was not only shocked that an American spoke Vietnamese, but that he recognized her as Vietnamese, and that she knew him!!! It was the husband on another friend of hers.

The people she visited were no help. She was so excited to tell them about me and what she had been doing. She thought that they would be very pleased that she was fitting in so quickly. Wrong!!! They would not let her talk about me. She still enjoyed the visit, but remarked that her friends did not know as much about American culture as she had learned in a month with me.

Learning to speak Vietnamese and spending long days with a Vietnamese woman is changing and reinforcing many of my ideas about the country, the war, and the aftermath. We will never be a couple even though I am her best and closest friend. She introduced me to a store clerk as her English teacher and uncle. She cannot tell anyone about most of the things that we do even though it is all in public among other people. I made the mistake of taking her to one mall where other Vietnamese shop. She would not go inside for fear of being seen with me.

## **SHOPPING MUST BE TAUGHT**

I spent 35 hours over three days taking her shopping for jeans. She is 30 years old and has never successfully shopped for casual clothing in the US outside of Chinatown in New York. She has been living here for 2 years and has worn mostly clothes that other Vietnamese women found for her. She has money, but little time to shop, and has no clues from Vietnamese women about more than a few local stores. The major breakthrough came when we realized that she will never find casual clothing in the adult section of traditional stores. She is built like a young, teenage girl, but does not want flowers, frayed ends, or colored studs on her jeans. Clothing sizes mean nothing, and two identically labelled jeans will fit differently. Not knowing how to describe things to clerks is another problem. So many do not speak English that she can understand. That is changing very quickly. She is shy, but determined. The determination is winning over the shyness. Now she thinks she could bring her friends shopping to the same stores. The friends speak almost no English and refuse to travel far (40 miles) from home for shopping. This will change.

I have given Thanh a lot of confidence by explaining everything in great detail (in English and Vietnamese); taking her to many different kinds of places; letting her decide what she wants; letting her explain it to me; and then she will explain it to the clerks in the stores. If they do not understand, it is

usually not her fault. She is learning how to move in American society and that is a huge step in learning the language appropriate to specific places. I am always there to listen to her practice speaking English. She made huge strides in a few months.

I cannot believe my tolerance for shopping with her. She tried on clothes in the same store for two hours, but actually found something. When she said she would take three of the same, they told her she was holding the only one. Finding shorts and tops was easier than jeans. The first pair of shoes took only 3 hours, but she really lucked out: regular stores have only 6 and above. She is a 5 3/4, but this pair had a strap that could be tightened to make it a snug fit. Teen styles are not appropriate.

I had to find a gift for a baby shower. The mother-to-be had registered at Toys R US. I knew Thanh would find this exciting, so I took her with me. As we walked up to the store, she spotted a huge poster with three babies; obviously Caucasian, Black, and Asian with a caption "July Baby Sale". Translating the words, but knowing that babies are not sold at toy stores, she was very confused. I went to the customer service desk and asked, "How much for an Asian baby, about 3 months old, look just like her?" The clerk said they were not selling babies. I pointed to the poster and asked again, "How much are those babies?" After repeated bantering back and forth, the customer service clerk never told me what they were selling. Thanh thought this was very funny, but I wanted to make the point to her, that the clerks are not always very smart. If they do not understand her, it is probably because they are stupid.

## **WEDDING TRADITIONS**

She was shopping for clothes to wear to a wedding. One mall had a bridal display with many booths. I spent an hour listing the various parts of the wedding. I knew she would not be comfortable going without knowing everything that will be happening. She was amazed at how many things could go into a wedding: photography, video taping, birds, balloons, flowers, music, foods. She was intently looking at a huge photo album, but suddenly stopped, put on the wooden face, and walked away. I saw the page she was looking at and immediately realized why. She asked why would the bride associate death with happiness. She understood honoring the ancestors, but why is it part of the happy celebration? She had seen a huge floral arrangement that included hundreds of tiny white blossoms. This is very similar to an arrangement suitable for Buddhist funerals or mourning. She could understand a white dress (a traditional color for mourning, but also associated with purity), but the tiny white flowers triggered very sad images. She just could not go back.

Another part of the wedding tradition is the bachelor party. She was invited to a barbecue in the late summer hosted by her former supervisor at work. He told her to have me bring her at a certain time. In my earlier conversations with him, I knew that the plan was to have the best man take the groomsmen and groom in a limo to the casino one night, then for golf the morning, and back to his place where the bride and bridesmaids would meet for the barbecue. But I would not know the time to arrive. The day before this whole thing was to happen, I get an urgent message to call him. The plans have changed. Do not bring Thanh to the barbecue. The maid of honor had arranged for a bachelorette party to take all the women from the barbecue. Hearing about these plans, one of the groomsmen had arranged for a stripper to appear at the barbecue. Thanh simply would not appreciate this aspect of the culture.

When she called to tell me the time for the barbecue, I told her that we could not go. The plans had changed. She was very confused and upset. It is extremely bad manners to uninvite anyone. She insisted

that it was ok to go. I said not it was not good and I would explain in detail when I saw her. I had to find the correct Vietnamese words to explain this. When we met in person, I told her that the plans had changed. She asked why I told her instead of the person who had invited her. I said he was *nhieu boi roi* (very embarrassed). He trusted me to explain in detail that he did not change the plan, he did not want her to be *nhieu boi roi*, and he was very sorry. When I told her about the stripper, she nodded in agreement. She would be very embarrassed.

Then things turned very bad. She demanded to know if this was the culture. Do all men about to be married want to see a woman take her clothes off? What else do they do? How does the stripper come to the party? Is she married, have a boy friend? If the stripper has a man, then why does this man allow her to do this? What will the children (her own, nieces, nephews, etc) say if they learn she takes her clothes off for men? Two hours of questions and explanations just upset her even more. The only thing that ended the conversation was when I said that a bachelorette party might have a man come who will take his clothes off. She knew men were like that, but American women too? This was too much to comprehend.

To see the contradiction in Vietnamese culture regarding this, one needs to put it into perspective. In a traditional setting a woman will leave her husband to spend the last three months of her pregnancy with her mother. Her mother will care for her, and especially for her daughter's first child, will teach her basic parenting and care. After the birth, the new mother may spend another 3 months or longer with her mother and abstain from sex a full year. During all this time, her husband is not expected to be celibate. He can "pay the money" (visit a prostitute) as long as it is just for sex. It would be inappropriate to have a girl friend, but sex without love is ok.

## **COUNTRY FAIR**

In the fall, I took Thanh to a small town country fair with singing, exotic animals, juggling, craft exhibits, farm animals, rides, games of chance, and food. She thought it was absolutely wonderful. She looked at every craft item, flower, vegetable, and animal. The animals were the most exciting exhibits. She had to know the names of the males, the females, and the babies. Looking at the chickens and ducks, she asked if they would be sold. I said, "For show, not for food". She saw a rooster standing on one foot. She couldn't see a second leg and asked if this was special chicken. Birds sometimes stand on one leg, so we waited and waited for the second leg to appear. After a few minutes, I said, "Oh, I understand. He knows you are a smart Vietnamese lady who eats chicken feet. But you would never kill a bird who had only one foot." As soon as she laughed, the second leg appeared.

Walking out of the barn, she stopped and asked what a certain smell was. At a country fair, the smell could be anything, but I knew she recognized this distinctive smell. I used the Vietnamese word for elephant. She thought a live elephant in Connecticut outside of a zoo was impossible. I repeated the word as we walked along. I touched her hand, she turned, and came face to face with an elephant. She had to ride it. I had to take pictures. This meant very good luck.

She had no interest in cotton candy, candied apples, or popcorn. We watched the jugglers, oxen pull, and pedal tractor pull eating deep fried vegetables, apple fritters, and smoked pork sandwiches. Great, greasy food put her in the mood for the ferris wheel. She cried, screamed, and would not open her eyes the whole time. But she thought it was a good experience (?) After this, it was time for the games of chance. She watched each one very carefully and declared the ring toss over the neck of the soda bottle to be the one

most likely to be winnable. On the third ring she got it and won a giant stuffed dog taller and wider than she is. It was almost too big to fit into my car. She said riding the elephant gave her luck.

## **PARKS**

One day we had eaten lunch at a Vietnamese restaurant and went to an Asian market for dessert. Rather than sit in the car, I suggested a nearby park. We found a picnic table in the shade and sat down. This counts as being in the woods, so I had to reassure her that the birds and animals she could see and hear were friendly. Things were going along well until I spotted a small dog running toward us, but not barking. I could not think of the correct word for "small dog", so I used the word for "Rat". She jumped up and turned around just as the dog was ready to jump toward her. Having lost the element of surprise, the dog changed direction. Thanh asked why I said, "Rat". I told her I wanted her to react before the dog jumped on her and it was small dog anyway. After that, she would refer to a small animal as a rat just to tease me.

This park had a large greenhouse and truly remarkable plantings. Without selling it too much, I told her we should take a walk. She was very tired, but decided to humor me. As we came around the corner of a building and she saw the first flower bed, she got excited and had to see them all. As we walked some more, she spotted a far larger planting. As we approached 12 cars with streamers, beeping horns, blaring music, and flashing lights came into the park. She stood in awe as a wedding party emerged in tuxedos and gowns for bridal pictures. She thought that I knew this going to happen and planned it to surprise her. We circled the gardens while the pictures were being taken so she could see everything and everyone.

As we turned another corner, she spotted the biggest display of all: a huge rose garden with arbors, and a gazebo covered with branches. From a distance she thought that these were just vines. As we got closer, she saw a few blossoms. Even closer she saw where the blossoms had been before they dropped. She asked when they were in full bloom. I told her June. She slapped my shoulder, pouted, and said, "Hey, I knew you in June. Why didn't we come to see this?" I told her that it would not have been appropriate. I had only met her. I could not be that forward. Culturally she understood, but she was still very disappointed. Wait until next year, I said.

We later returned to the park with her friend. She did the same thing I did. Start at the picnic tables and slowly move to the gardens. Her friend had the same reaction, but this time we had a camera and three rolls of film.

## **DINOSAUR STATE PARK**

In Rocky Hill, Connecticut is the world's largest covered dinosaur trackway. I tried to explain about dinosaurs and how long ago they lived, but I failed. The exhibit is excellent and really required no extra explanation. She watched them casting footprints, walked in the woods (without any visible fear), and spent hours on the exhibit looking at every little thing. She does like museums of all kinds, but this one was her absolute favorite. She could not explain why it intrigued her so much.

## **VIETNAMESE FOODS AND RESTAURANTS**

Thanh introduced me to a Vietnamese restaurant and supermarket close to her home. The food is great, but the experience was just not the same without her. I was ignored when I was with Thanh, and ignored on my own. Even though I ordered in Vietnamese, the waiter repeated everything in English.

I have been back to the Vietnamese restaurant without Thanh several times. They are beginning to accept me. I am becoming more comfortable shopping alone in the market. I am beginning to know what I like and do not have to read the labels. The freshly prepared foods are just amazing, and you will see canned and dried items you could not imagine.

## **AFTERMATH**

I saw Thanh for Tet 2001. She asked if I wanted to return to Vietnam with her next year for Tet to visit her parents and friends. I want to be there, see the sights, and watch her in her native culture. The cultural dilemma is churning inside of me. I cannot remove a woman from her culture. We might find each other fascinating, but she will want to return to her roots at some point. That option must always be available to her whether it is for a day, a week, or a month. I feel very comfortable with the Asian culture, environment, and food. I never wanted to come home from Vietnam, because I felt at home there. Time will tell.

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[Return to Vietnam Menu](#)