

# Culturescope Resources: Social and Cultural Continuity and Change

**'New Spirits Fear Old Ones': Change in the Vietnamese Family**  
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## **Historical overview:**

" ... we should link the development of the Vietnamese with that of the Vietnamese nation and society. The immanent demands of the Vietnamese society and Vietnamese themselves at each historical period are valued scientifically as foundation for understanding and analysing the Vietnamese family.

"Changes to the family, which is the cell or basic unit of society cannot be separated from those of the nation and the country"  
Le Thi, *The role of the family in the formation of the Vietnamese personality*

## **Family within Vietnamese civilisation:**

There are two main periods of 'civilisation' in Vietnamese history

- Agricultural
- Industrial & Post industrial

## **Agricultural**

During this period the family has a number of characteristics

- Marriages imposed by parents
- Individuals interest must submit to those of the family
- The son is highlighted
- Attention is paid to the cult of ancestors
- Children must work prematurely
- Family must provide education care for sick and old
- Family is often large
- Infant mortality rates are high and life expectancy is low

## **Industrial - post industrial:**

- Development of urbanisation
- Women participate in production
- Marriages increasing result in partners choice
- More attention is paid to the individual's happiness and interests
- Society takes a more active role in family affairs
- Nuclear family becomes more popular
- Divorce increases
- Increase in alternative families and dislocated families
- Development of intellectual labor

Both of these major forms of civilisation exist currently within Vietnam.

Although the country remains largely agricultural (85%) since Doi Moi (economic renovation) industrialisation and urbanisation have accelerated. The country is currently suffering from enormous uncontrolled urban migration, despite government attempts to restrict the flow. The standard of living in the cities and differing cultural influences is leading to an increasingly polarized country between rural and urban areas.

### **The development of the Vietnamese family within an historical context:**

There are five main historical epochs to consider:

- The family pre French aggression
- The family under French rule
- The family during 30 year struggle with for National Liberation
- The family during socialist reform
- The family during Doi Moi

### **National Renovation or Doi Moi**

With the deterioration of the Vietnamese communist economy the Party introduced a series of reforms that have been termed Doi Moi or economic renovation. These reforms have been aimed at introducing market socialism. This term implies the continuation of the Communist Party control of Vietnam and the development of a Western style market economy.

The adoption of Doi Moi has led to Vietnamese society being bombarded with new influences. This includes; industrialisation, westernisation, modernisation, individualism and capitalism. All of these factors have had a profound impact on the nature of the Vietnamese family.

**Marriage:** The changes during this period have led to a number of modifications of the traditional structure and nature of marriage. Marriage is still regarded as an important institution in Vietnamese society, despite the influences of westernisation and western ideas few couples in Vietnam cohabit before marriage. Young people in Vietnam now have the right to decide on their marriage partner but this is seldom followed through without parental consent. This is especially so as the parents bear the burden of the wedding expenses. In many cases the introduction of capitalism has led to a rise in the standard of living and the elaborate nature of Vietnamese wedding ceremonies.

'Young people nowadays are very snooty. They always spend a lot on their weddings' Phaong Ha

"... nowadays people have much more money and they spend more on weddings"  
" Nguyen Trung Kien

Urbanisation has seen a rise in the divorce rate and adultery (?) which often leads to conflicts within the family. To accompany this recent social research has uncovered clear evidence of high rates of domestic violence in Vietnam. This is not a new phenomenon to Vietnamese society nor is it a result of the changing influences in Vietnam. However since Doi Moi there has also been an increasing openness in the investigation and handling of social issues.

The changes in the ideas of marriage have not led to a significant increase in cohabitation, but there has been a considerable rise in the amount of newly wed

couples who chose to live separately from the family. 77.3% of newly weds preferred to live alone while 89.1% of single women would prefer to stay that way rather than live with in-laws.

Capitalism has also changed the perceptions of many young couples. A recent poll reported in the Vietnam Investment Review and conducted by the Thanh Nien newspaper 33.7 per cent of couples polled said that home appliances were the most important factor in family happiness, while sex polled only 27 per cent. In urban areas research has revealed that Vietnamese youth wait longer before getting married and are more likely to have intercourse before marriage. However the patriarchal nature of marriage remains. Despite increasing cases of both partners working men do on average 48 minutes house work per day compared to 3hrs and 9 minutes for women.

### **Structure of the family:**

In recent years Vietnam has suffered from the problems of uncontrolled rural - urban migration. This increasing urbanisation of the country has led to a change in the family structure. The western style nuclear family is becoming more and more common in Vietnam. A survey conducted in Ha Noi in 1995 showed that nuclear families accounted for 66% percent of all family types while the traditional three generation household accounted for 33%.

This urban migration has also led to the break up of families in rural areas as young people leave their parents and grand parents in the village and move to the cities.. The parent - child relationship is also affected. With the move to the city often comes the development of a dual income family. This places new stresses on traditional family roles and values. Urbanisation has also led to less reliance on extended family members and the inability of families to rely on their community for support. The proverb of rich in children, abundant in wealth has come under threat from this rise in urbanisation, but also in the government attempts to control the spiraling population of Vietnam by introducing a two child policy.

Another result of capitalism and rural - urban drift has led to the break up of many rural families as they send their children to the city to find work to supplement the families incomes. This has led to serious problems in large cities with street children and homelessness. However many 'alternative' or surrogate families have developed in the cities. Many young people from the same region band together in the cities to form surrogate families, living together, looking out for each others welfare and generally acting in the traditional role of the families left back in the countryside.

### **Changing gender roles:**

While Doi Moi has opened up opportunities for Vietnamese these have not been shared evenly between the sexes. Vietnam is a country where gender roles are undergoing vast changes. However the new opportunities available to women has led to conflict with traditional role that can often be the cause of great anxiety and stress. Men still hold on to the idea that they are superior to women and that the women's role is to 'serve'.

The traditional role of following the custom of looking after the house is in direct contrast to the fact that a vast majority of women are now in full time positions outside of the family. Women are often doing the same work for the same pay as men and are making many non-family decisions but at home they are expected not to make certain decisions and continue their traditional role.

Women are also become increasingly vocal about their demands to achieve equality. These ideas are being reflected by the increasing participation of women in parliament. By 1997 26.7% of the National Assembly were women.