

# Social and cultural continuity and change essay



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Vietnam is a country of evolutionary change that has redefined the Vietnamese culture yet it also upholds traditional values and beliefs that have sustained an established way of life.

The family unit is the foundation of Vietnamese society and culture and has been for thousands of years, its prominence in the culture has been preserved under many challenges occurring over many years. Although its status over time has been continuous, the internal and external factors demanding advancement will make change a probability in order for the Vietnamese society to survive. Doi Moi has had a significant impact on the way the family structure has been forced to redevelop. Doi Moi is the name given to a new form of communist government that instituted economic reforms that allowed Vietnam to be captured by foreign investment.

This not only gave Vietnam alliances and diplomatic ties with foreign nations but it made the country increasingly open to westernisation which then led to the evolution of modernisation, globalisation and industrialisation. This not only changed the power and influence overseas nations had on Vietnam's culture but this has serious repercussions on the family unit. Doi Moi reforms have led to increasing migration to urban areas, younger generations have moved out of home to live and work in cities where there is access to higher level education (families may send the children to cities to supplement family income) this has led to the break up of homes. As a result young Vietnamese people from the same region band together in the cities to form surrogate families, who take on the traditional role of the families they have left back in rural areas. It has also affected the type of occupations that the younger generation of Vietnamese are choosing to

pursue. Traditionally the Vietnamese have worked off the land leaning towards agriculture or factory work but now due to the increasing costs of supporting a family and superior levels of education available it creates a need to follow jobs that provide a higher income to provide for extended families back in rural areas.

This is also proven by the increasingly different standard of living between rural and urban areas since the introduction of Doi Moi, which is an implication of the changes in Vietnamese economy. The economy flourished with the decentralization of state economic management, which allowed state industries some local autonomy. This meant that a farmer was able to work for himself and not the state which created an overall better quality of life for the rural population. Even after this fact, younger generations still choose to move to urban areas which instead of generating money they earn less and put more pressure on the system. Conventionally, the Vietnamese take pride in their collectivist way of life.

Living in large compounds with extended family is normalcy. The family unit equally shares any kind of prosperity or financial gain, and they together for the security and welfare of the group. Children are taught not to develop their sense of individualism outside the framework of the immediate and extended family. This is why the effect of westernisation has had such a profound effect of changing the traditional family structure.

In Vietnam the development of western style political 'right wing' views have distorted the collectivist society, as a result extended families and close knit community are starting to dissipate and taking its place are

smaller nuclear families<sup>1</sup> where children are rejecting traditional roles such as caring for the parents and refusing to take on the family line of business, in short the emergence away from filial piety. The implications of this change currently leave the Vietnamese family structure in a state of uncertainty. The shift from an individualistic rather than collectivist society can leave the family unit in a state of disarray. Older generations will find themselves with no self sufficient means to support themselves since it was always expected that the younger generation would care for them, this is going to have profound consequences not only for individual families but for the Vietnamese government as it will need to manage this change effectively and finance the care for the elderly. This urban drift has caused families to send their children out to work in the city due to not being able to rely on the community for support, these children with no prior education or training receive limited employment in Ha Noi and other major cities, this has lead to an increasing in homelessness and street children.

The Vietnamese government will have to focus new policies on being able to combat the financial difficulties placed on most rural families and employment being available in small communities. This will have to be addressed in the foreseeable future as the Vietnamese population continues to spiral outwards (although the government has tried to address this by introducing a two child policy) and the fact that Vietnam just does not have the infrastructure to support such rapid globalisation. The family unit has grown and evolved over many years throughout Vietnamese society however, the fundamental structure of the family has demonstrated continuity especially with the endurance of traditional Vietnamese cultural

practises. The Vietnamese government has had a lot of input trying to sustain traditional family structures, as it see's families as the best way to counteract ' social evils' such as drugs, prostitution, gambling, commercialism, mainly the things that have developed due to the impact of westernisation.

That is why the government gives financial incentives to large families and those who abide by the traditional collective nature of Vietnamese society and filial piety. As there has always been, there is still a large emphasis on the birth order in the family and where this places you on the social hierarchy. Behaviour patterns are directed to family as opposed to individuals. Respect is granted to the head of the family and advice is often sought from older members of the family. The father is seen as the head and as the " pillar" of the family.

Religious or more specifically ' Confucian' beliefs are another reason most Vietnamese tend to uphold time honoured family views. Children are respected by their parents because they believe that they can provide for the parents spirits after they have passed away, they also believe that they way you treat and care for your parents is the way you will be treated. This philosophy tends to rely on the faith that children will uphold and respect the same values the parents upheld, which wasn't a significant problem before the reforms of the Doi Moi. Due to the changing external factors that affect the family unit these traditions will be difficult to maintain. The future for this tradition in based upon the fact that Vietnam remains a collectivist society with low individual needs, which doesn't seem as probable now with a more westernised society.

Family tradition is still an important factor in contemporary Vietnamese society, it is where their culture has evolved from. With tourism an important part of Vietnamese economic sustainability it is imminent that the culture be a prominent part of everyday life in Vietnam in order to ensure tourism profits. The Vietnamese family unit has rapidly changed in some aspects, when in others it has remained continuous in accordance with upholding traditional beliefs and values. It is important to note that whilst many Vietnamese family philosophies have continued unchanged, it is uncertain if it will remain like this indefinitely due to pressure from external sources. This is a disturbing fact considering that the family unit in Vietnam has been the foundation for its unique culture for thousands of years.