

Vietnamese culture: vietnamese lunar new year essay sample

[Countries](#), [Vietnam](#)



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BUSTER**

Culture is the aspect I'm especially interested in. And I find it amazing to read a cultural book in bilingual. It helps me to improve not only my knowledge, but also my new English vocabularies. Recently I have been impressed greatly by " Frequently asked questions about Vietnamese culture: Vietnamese Lunar New Year" – a book written by a cultural scholar Hữu Ngọc and an American writer Lady Borton. This book is from the first series of bilingual handbooks on Vietnamese Culture. These books are really suitable for Vietnamese studying English and for foreigners studying Vietnamese. Because I wish to explore my dear country's culture in the view of another language, I chose this book to read.

Frequently asked questions about Vietnamese culture: Vietnamese Lunar New Year is in form of questions-and-answers, consists of 5 main parts: Background, The Vietnamese Zodiac, Legends, Rituals, Decorations and the glossary is also included at the end of the book. Each part gives us a list of questions related to Vietnamese Lunar New Year. All the answers will be revealed in a clear and understandable way for readers.

Although the Lunar New Year is observed throughout East Asia, each country celebrates Tết in its own way with its own national psyche and cultural conditions. The authors clarify that " Tết" is a word of Chinese origin and a phonetic transcription of " Tiết" – a Sino-Vietnamese term, which means " the beginning of a meteorological period of the year" (15). In the first part, the authors aim at introducing the various definitions of Tết in Việt Nam. " For the Vietnamese people, Tết is like a combination of Christmas, Western New Year's day, Easter, American Thanksgiving, and everyone's birthday. It

is a festival of communion, purity, renewal, and universal peace.”(15). The authors also say that every deed during the three days of Tết should be well-intentioned and finely realised, since “ it symbolises and forecasts actions during the coming twelve months” (19).

Tết is a festival of communion of the living with the dead, too. Relatives and friends pay homage to the spirits of the dead. Vietnamese attend the tombs of their kin carefully before the old year ends: they clear all weeds and replace the plantings on the tomb. An occasion for purification and renewal is another definition of Tết, which is mentioned by authors. I admire those poetic words written by the authors : “ During this period of universal renewal and rejuvenation, Vietnamese feel the spring sap welling up within them; this has an effect similar to the purifying Fountain of Youth. This partaking of cosmic life has given rise to special customs” (20). In brief, Tết brings a message of confidence in humanity; it brings redemption, hope, and optimism.

The second part of this book fulfills readers’ curiosity about Vietnamese Zodiac. The calendar in Việt Nam’s ancient agricultural society was based on the regularly changing circulations of the moon. According to the authors, “ even city dwellers and overseas Vietnamese, have a lunar calendar in their homes to consult for the dates of festivals and auspicious days” (23). The day of the New Year varies from year to year, because it is based on the lunar calendar. The book explain, “ The equinoxes and solstices that mark the beginning of the European seasons are taken as the midpoint by the Asian calendar” (24), so each Vietnamese seasons begins six weeks earlier than its

European counterpart. Each year is “ sponsored” by one of the twelve animals of the Vietnames Zodiac: the Rat, the Ox (or the Buffalo), the Tiger, the Cat, the Dragon, the Snake, the Horse, the Goat (or the Ram), the Monkey, the Cock, the Dog, and last of all, the Pig.

The authors point out that there is one mythical (the Dragon), four (the Rat, the Tiger, the Snake and the Monkey) are wild, shunning contact with human. Seven others are domesticated. And after the circulation of twelve years, the sponsorship reverts to the same animal. For example, the years 1976, 1988, 2000, and 2012 are Dragon Years. “ Each year has import for human who have converging or diverging signs” (25), the authors add list of examples given in order that they occur in the cycle with the question: what is your character if you are a Rat? A Buffalo? A Tiger? or a Pig? This is such an interesting part that I really like because the book explained every details very clearly, and it makes me more exciting to find out who I am.

With 4000 years of history, traditions and customs are not the only things that have been passed down from one generation to another. Like many other countries, Vietnamese has its own legends and myths related to its customs. The third part of this book mainly talks about an interesting topic : Legends. The authors describe a traditional way of telling legend at Tết – “ A traditional custom requires that at the approach of Tết, relatives and friends would gather around the stove where bánh chưng (sticky rice cakes) are cooking and tell one another legends about the Lunar New Year.” (35). There is a popular belief in Việt Nam that Táo Quân, or the Three Kitchen Gods, are present in the kitchen of every home. The authors state about the Three

Kitchen Gods, “ it is in memory of the legend’s three heroes that the name Ông (mister) is given to the two rear stones and that of Bà (madam) to the front stone of the traditional cooking fire”. (36).

The origin of bánh chưng and bánh dày cannot be forgotten in this part. It is believed that bánh chưng and bánh dày were invented by the 18th Prince – Lang Liêu. Since then, “ bánh dày is made for festivals or ceremonies, and bánh chưng has been the cake made in the twelfth moon as a token of thankfulness to the good earth, which has fed people throughout the year” (45). Next, the book emphasizes how important the branch of peach blossoms is in the home at Tết. The peach branch is used to ward off evil spirits that prowled by night. “ That is how the use of peach branches spread and reached Việt Nam, where, for centuries, local inhabitants have rejoiced in Tết under the protection of these spring flowers”.(47) The book would have benefited from a greater view of apricot blossom – an irreplaceable one in the Southern part of Việt Nam.

Part 4 and part 5 are the main parts of this book. Part 4 mainly talks about rituals at Tết. The authors note that, “ some of the customs described in this section have lost their original religious meanings but are still followed today out of “ respect for tradition””.(51). The authors explain how the Three Kitchen Gods are seen off to Heaven to report to the Jade Emperor. These Gods observed everything that takes place at every household. At the end of the year, on the twenty-third of the twelfth month, they depart to Heaven to present the Jade Emperor with a detailed report to the behavior of each member of the household. On that day, these Gods are offered the farewell

meal, votive gifts (paper caps, boots and gowns) and a live carp, which the Gods ride to the Heaven. I completely agree with the book, “ This story of annual report as well as attempts to bribe the Gods have inspired an abundance of satirical literature in the form of poems and rhymed prose.

The wicked are thrashed, the vulgar are ridiculed, and emperors and mandarins are attacked in caustic “ report” attributed to the Gods.”(53). Next, with the exciting words, the authors really impress me by portraying the scenes in the first three days of the New Year, people “ dress in their best clothes, calling on with relatives and friends”, “ people exchange cordial wishes: They wish one another good luck, longevity, prosperity, happiness, and, in the case of newlyweds, the birth “ of a son at the beginning of the year and a daughter at the end of the year”(61). One of the authors of this book – American writer Lady Borton also includes her own experience of the 1989 Tết, which makes me move because her detailed story full of wonderful memories from a Tết in the past. At the end of part the authors listed a series of major festivals in northern Việt Nam in January and February as reference.

The last part of this book is about the decoration at Tết . As the authors once mentioned in part 3, peach blossom are crucial at Tết, especially in the Northern part of Việt Nam. When Tết draws near, each family “ makes a point of procuring at least a small branch of peach flowers” (95). Peach blossoms are believed to be a symbol of prosperity and good fortune in the vivid of their colors, the authors add, “ the older generation believes in the power of peach blossoms to repel evil” (96). Besides, the book points out the

important role of parallel sentences in Vietnamese classical literary style. The book gives a clear explanation, “ A pair of parallel sentences comprises two parts, the words of which must stand opposite to one another in the six tones of the Vietnamese language as well as in meaning” (99). On New Year’ Day, people would like to have a pair of parallel sentences composed and written by a scholar on red paper and hung in the place of honour, usually on both sides of the entrance door or of the ancestors’ altar. I personally like this well-known parallel sentences cited in the book:

“ Chiều ba mươi, nợ hỏi tít mù, co cẳng đạp thẳng Bần ra cửa
Sáng mừng một, rượu say túy lúy, giơ tay bồng ông Phú vào nhà.

(On the New Year’s Day, pay debts on all sides; bending your legs, kick out poverty

On New Year’s Day, rice wine makes you drunk; stretching your arms, carry in wealth)

Moreover, the book provides us more facts about the plate of five fruits that is put on the ancestors’ altar in every home during New Year, and how it has been varied nowadays with modern lifestyle, “ Other fruits such as sapodilla, watermelons, coconut, and custard apples may be added to the plate” (103). But the main meaning of it may remain unchange. “ The names of these fruits in Việt Nam echo words signifying prayers for wealth. The plate of fruits gives the family altar a cozy and colorful look. It helps to stress the importance of family traditions and family life.” (104). Some last pages of this book mention the meaning of Dong Ho folk paintings, which is an aesthetic symbol in Vietnam culture. The authors conclude, “ these pictures

strike a fresh note by bringing a good wish, expressing a dream or illustrating a moral concept”(107).

Cultural scholar Huu Ngoc and American writer Lady Borton have brought us a really useful book. The book is full of interesting facts and colorful pictures which are easily attracted me. I believe that choosing this book is my wise choice because of all the great knowledge it brings to me on the aspect of Vietnamese culture, especially about Vietnamese Lunar New Year.