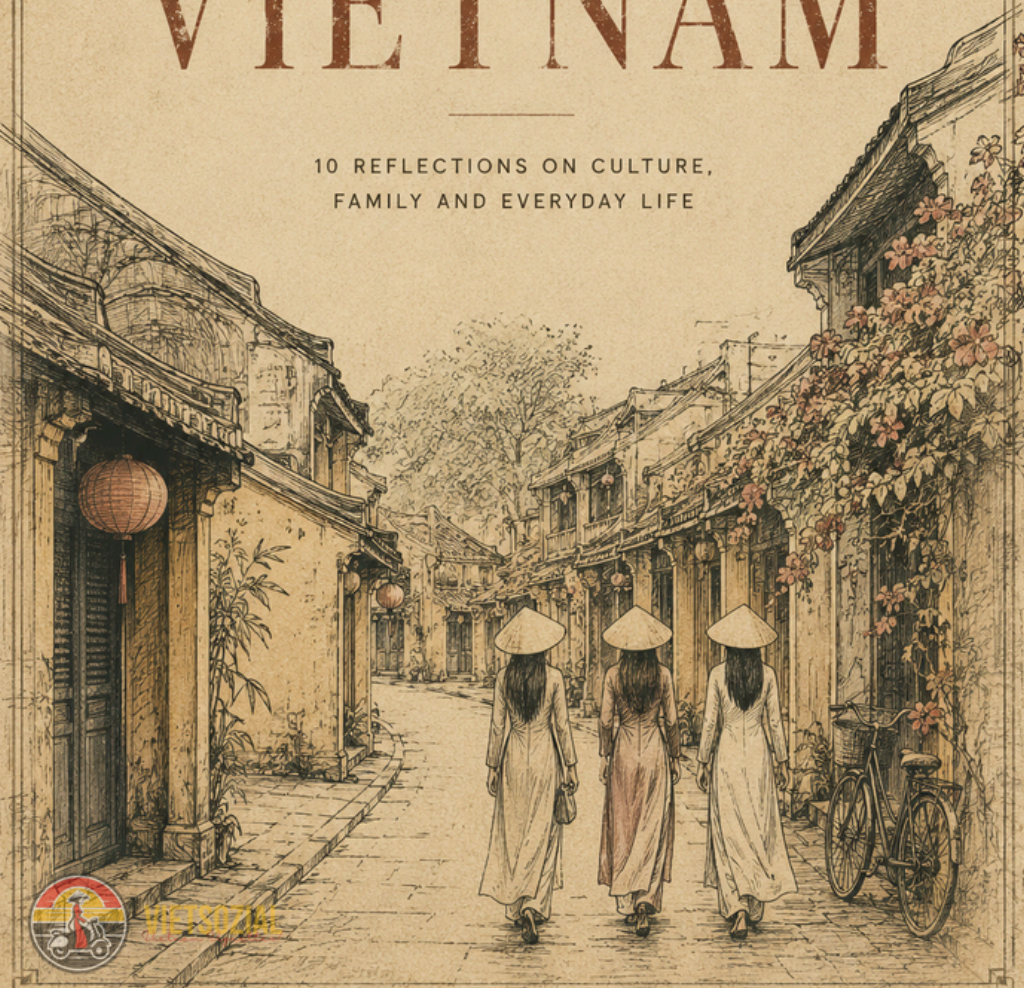


VIETSOZIAL



THINGS
NOBODY TELLS YOU
ABOUT
VIETNAM

10 REFLECTIONS ON CULTURE,
FAMILY AND EVERYDAY LIFE



VIETSOZIAL

*Sometimes it takes an outsider's question to help us
see what has always been there.*



VIETSOZINI
Vietnam's Spirit

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VIETSOZIAL
Vietnam Together!

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WHY I WROTE THIS E-BOOK

I once met an English.

We spent hours talking about life, family, and the places we had been.

During one of our conversations, he began asking me a few simple questions.

“Why do Vietnamese people always ask about age?”

“Why do so many Vietnamese adults still make important decisions with their families in mind?”

“Why do you rarely say ‘no’ directly?”

As he spoke, I realized I had never really thought about these questions before.

Not because they were complicated.

But because they were familiar.

They were woven so deeply into everyday life that I had stopped noticing them.

The more we talked, the more I began to see my own culture through different eyes. Things I had once taken for granted suddenly felt worth examining. Small habits, unspoken rules, family expectations, ways of showing care, ways of avoiding conflict—each carried a story about the people and values behind them.

This book grew from those conversations.

It is not a travel guide, nor is it an attempt to explain Vietnam in its entirety. No single book could ever do that.

Instead, it is a collection of reflections on the things that often go unnoticed by those who grow up with them, yet spark curiosity in those encountering them for the first time.

Sometimes, it takes an outsider’s question to help us see what has always been there.



C1. WHY VIETNAMESE PEOPLE ASK YOUR AGE SO QUICKLY



One of the first questions a Vietnamese person might ask you is surprisingly simple:

“How old are you?”

For many foreigners, this can feel unusual.

In some cultures, asking about someone's age is considered personal or even impolite. It is often avoided, especially when meeting someone for the first time.

Yet in Vietnam, the question is remarkably common.

People may ask your age within minutes of meeting you. Sometimes even before they know much else about you.

The first time my English friend experienced this, he was confused.

“Why does everyone want to know how old I am?” he asked.

At first, I laughed.

To me, it was completely normal.

But when I stopped to think about it, I realized the answer had very little to do with age itself.

In Vietnam, age helps determine how people relate to one another.

Unlike English, where “you” can be used for almost everyone, Vietnamese contains a rich system of pronouns that reflect relationships, respect, and social position.

The way I address a younger sister is different from the way I address an older brother. The way I speak to a teacher is different from the way I speak to a friend. Even two strangers meeting for the first time often need to know who is older before deciding how to address each other.

The question is therefore not always:

“How old are you?”

Sometimes it really means:

“How should I speak to you?”

Or even:

“How should we relate to one another?”

Age in Vietnam is not always measured only in years.

Sometimes, it is measured through the zodiac.

Many Vietnamese people know not only their birth year, but also the animal associated with it. Ask someone when they were born, and there is a good chance they will immediately tell you they are a Dragon, a Cat, a Horse, or a Pig.

People often use these zodiac signs as reference points when talking about age. Someone might say, “We are the same zodiac sign,” or “My father is two zodiac cycles older than me.” A zodiac cycle consists of twelve years, and many Vietnamese people instinctively calculate age differences in this way.

Beyond calculation, the zodiac also serves as a social bridge. Discovering that two people share the same zodiac sign can instantly create a sense of familiarity. It becomes something to laugh about, compare, or bond over. Whether or not people truly believe that zodiac signs shape personality is another question. Many do, many do not. Yet the language of the zodiac remains deeply woven into everyday life.

This small detail reveals an important aspect of Vietnamese culture.

Relationships often come before individuality.

Many Western societies tend to emphasize the individual first. A person is simply a person, regardless of age or position.

Vietnamese culture, on the other hand, often begins by understanding where people stand in relation to one another.

Older and younger.

Teacher and student.

Parent and child.

Senior and junior.

None of these roles is necessarily seen as a restriction. Instead, they help create a framework for interaction.

Of course, modern Vietnam is changing.

Young people today are often more informal than previous generations.

In workplaces, universities, and online communities, communication has become more relaxed.

Yet the instinct remains.

Many Vietnamese people still unconsciously look for clues about age when meeting someone new.

Not because they wish to judge.

But because they wish to find the appropriate way to connect.

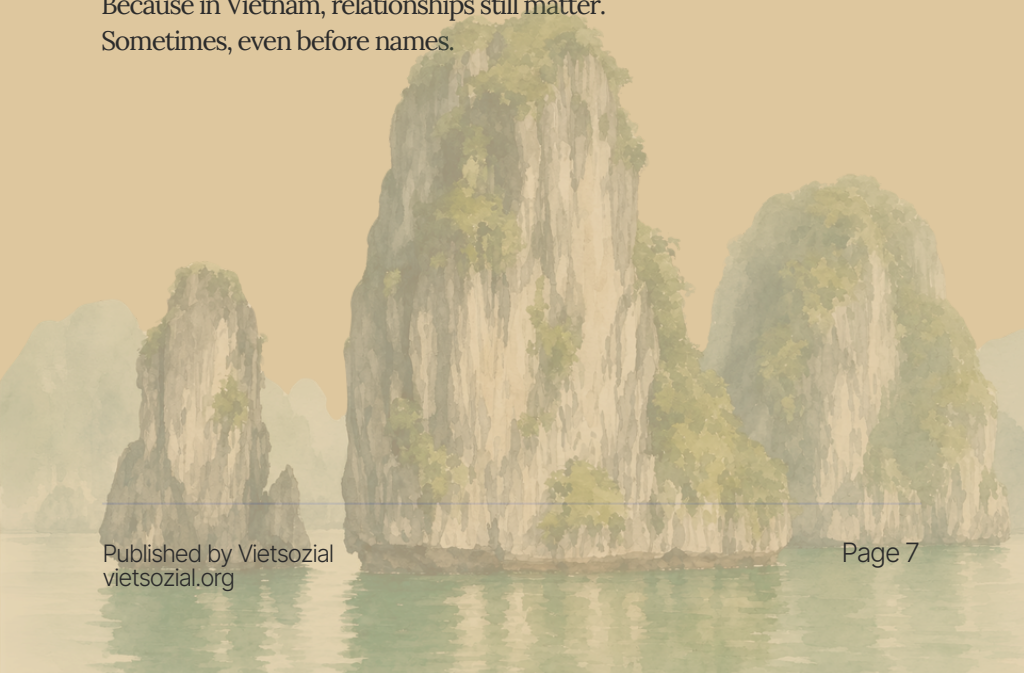
To an outsider, it may seem like a simple question.

To many Vietnamese people, it is the first step toward understanding a relationship.

And perhaps that is why such a small question survives in a rapidly changing world.

Because in Vietnam, relationships still matter.

Sometimes, even before names.



C2. THE INVISIBLE WEIGHT OF FAMILY



One question that often surprises foreigners is why so many Vietnamese adults still consult their families before making important decisions.

“Why do you need to ask your parents?”

“You’re already an adult.”

I have heard variations of these questions many times.

And from a Western perspective, they make perfect sense.

In many countries, adulthood is closely associated with independence. At a certain age, people are expected to make their own decisions, build their own lives, and follow their own paths.

Vietnam is not entirely different.

Young people have dreams, ambitions, and personal goals just like anywhere else.

Yet family often remains part of the equation.

When deciding what to study, where to work, whether to move to another city, or even whether to move abroad, many Vietnamese people do not simply ask themselves:

“What do I want?”

They also ask:

“What will my family think?”

Or:

“How will this affect the people around me?”

To someone unfamiliar with Vietnamese culture, this may seem unusual. It can even appear as though parents have too much influence over their children's lives.

Sometimes, that is true.

But the story is often more complicated than that.

Family occupies a unique place in Vietnamese society.

For generations, families have served not only as emotional support systems but also as financial, social, and practical safety nets. Long before modern welfare systems existed, people relied on relatives during difficult times. Grandparents helped raise children. Adult children cared for aging parents. Family members shared responsibilities, resources, and sacrifices.

As a result, many Vietnamese people grow up understanding that their lives are closely connected to the lives of others.

Individual choices are rarely seen as entirely individual.

A career decision might affect parents who invested years of effort into a child's education.

A move abroad might mean leaving behind grandparents who hoped to see their family more often.

Even a personal dream may carry consequences for those who care about us.

This does not mean Vietnamese people lack independence.

In fact, many make bold choices that their families initially disagree with.

Some move across the world.

Some choose unconventional careers.

Some build lives very different from what previous generations imagined.

Yet even when they make those choices, family often remains part of the conversation.

The influence of family can be both comforting and challenging.

On one hand, it creates a strong sense of belonging. Many Vietnamese people know that no matter how difficult life becomes, there will usually be someone willing to help.

On the other hand, family expectations can feel heavy.

The desire to make parents proud.

The fear of disappointing them.

The feeling of owing something to those who sacrificed for us.

These emotions are familiar to many Vietnamese people, whether they live in Vietnam or thousands of miles away.

Modern Vietnam is changing rapidly.

Younger generations are becoming more independent, more mobile, and more willing to define success on their own terms.

Yet family remains deeply woven into daily life.

It continues to influence how people think, choose, and imagine their future.

Perhaps that is why many Vietnamese adults still call home before making an important decision.

Not because they cannot decide for themselves.

But because they were taught that decisions rarely belong to one person alone.

In Vietnam, growing up does not always mean growing apart.

Sometimes, it simply means carrying your family with you, wherever you go.



Hoi An Ancient Town, Central Vietnam.

C3. WHY WE RARELY SAY NO



One of the most confusing things for foreigners in Vietnam is that sometimes “yes” does not really mean yes.

And sometimes “maybe” means no.

Imagine asking a Vietnamese friend if they can attend an event.

Instead of a direct answer, they might say:

“I’ll try.”

“Let’s see.”

“Maybe.”

“I’m not sure yet.”

To someone from a culture that values direct communication, these responses can feel frustrating.

Why not simply say no?

The answer often lies in the Vietnamese desire to preserve harmony.

Vietnamese culture places great importance on maintaining good relationships and avoiding unnecessary conflict. As a result, many people grow up learning that words should not only communicate information but also protect feelings.

A direct refusal can sometimes feel harsh.

It can sound like rejection rather than disagreement.

For this reason, many Vietnamese people soften their responses.

Instead of saying:

“No, I don't want to come.”

They might say:

“Maybe next time.”

Instead of saying:

“I disagree.”

They might say:

“That's also one way to look at it.”

The goal is often not to avoid honesty.

It is to avoid causing embarrassment or discomfort.

To understand this better, it helps to look beyond language itself.

In many Western cultures, honesty is often associated with directness.

If you disagree, you say so.

If you cannot attend, you decline.

If you are unhappy, you express it.

A clear answer is often seen as a sign of respect because it allows everyone to know where they stand.

Vietnamese culture approaches communication somewhat differently.

While honesty is valued, maintaining harmony is often valued as well.

People frequently balance two questions at the same time:

“What do I want to say?”

And:

“What effect will my words have on the other person?”

As a result, communication can become more indirect.

The goal is not necessarily to hide the truth.

Rather, it is to deliver the truth in a way that minimizes discomfort.

Many Vietnamese people would rather leave a conversation slightly ambiguous than leave someone feeling embarrassed, rejected, or hurt.

This tendency is especially visible in situations involving older relatives, workplace hierarchies, or people who are not yet close friends.

The relationship itself often becomes part of the message.

What is left unsaid can sometimes be just as important as what is spoken aloud.

The concept of “saving face” also plays an important role.

In many Asian cultures, including Vietnam, people often try to avoid situations that might embarrass themselves or others publicly.

A direct refusal can sometimes create an uncomfortable moment for both sides.

A softer answer allows everyone to leave the conversation with dignity intact.

Of course, this does not mean Vietnamese people are incapable of being direct.

Anyone who has spent enough time in Vietnam knows that people can be remarkably honest when necessary.

Family members, in particular, are often far more direct than foreigners might expect.

Yet in situations involving strangers, colleagues, or new acquaintances, indirect communication remains common.

This is why foreigners sometimes struggle to interpret Vietnamese responses.

A phrase like:

“I’ll think about it.”

May genuinely mean:

“I need more time.”

But it may also mean:

“I don’t want to say no directly.”

Similarly, a response such as:

“We’ll see.”

Can be an invitation to continue discussing something.

Or it can be a polite way of ending the discussion altogether.

Context matters.

Tone matters.

The relationship between two people matters.

A foreigner may hear “I’ll think about it” and assume a decision has not yet been made.

A Vietnamese person may already know they are not going.

Neither side is trying to be difficult.

They are simply following different communication rules. As Vietnam becomes more connected to the world, communication styles continue to evolve. Younger generations are often more comfortable expressing disagreement openly than their parents or grandparents. Yet the instinct to soften difficult messages remains surprisingly strong. Not because Vietnamese people dislike honesty. But because many believe that how something is said can be just as important as what is said. For many Vietnamese, communication is not only about exchanging information. It is about managing relationships. In Vietnam, words do more than deliver a message. They also protect a relationship.



Rice terraces in Ha Giang, Northern Vietnam.

C4. WHY VIETNAMESE PARENTS COMPARE THEIR CHILDREN



There is a joke that many Vietnamese people know by heart. No matter what you achieve, there is always another child who has done something better.

A higher score.

A better university.

A more stable career.

A nicer apartment.

Someone's son.

Someone's daughter.

Someone you have never met.

For many Vietnamese people, childhood memories include at least one comparison.

Sometimes it comes from parents.

Sometimes from relatives.

Sometimes from neighbors.

And sometimes from all three at once.

To outsiders, this habit can seem strange.

Why compare children at all?

Why not simply appreciate each person for who they are?

The answer is more complicated than it first appears.

Most Vietnamese parents do not compare their children because they enjoy making them feel inadequate.

In fact, many parents are surprised when their children describe these comparisons as painful.

From their perspective, comparison often comes from concern rather than criticism.

They see another child's success and point to it as an example.

A possibility.

A source of motivation.

A way of saying:

"If someone else can do it, perhaps you can too."

The intention is often encouragement.

The result, however, is not always encouraging.

Many Vietnamese parents grew up with a saying:

"Thương cho roi cho vọt."

There is no perfect English translation, but the phrase reflects a long-held belief that discipline is an expression of care.

For generations, many parents believed that being strict was part of being responsible. Correcting mistakes, setting high expectations, and pushing children to do better were often seen as acts of love rather than harshness.

This mindset could be found in everyday life.

After school, children were often asked questions such as:

"What score did you get?"

"Who got the highest score in your class?"

"How many points did your best friend get?"

These questions were not always intended to create competition.

Often, they reflected genuine concern about a child's progress and future.

Many parents hoped that comparison would inspire growth.

By drawing attention to students who performed better, they believed their children would learn from good examples, work harder, and aim higher.

The message was often not:

"You are not good enough."

But rather:

"Look at what is possible."

In many families, admiration and comparison became closely intertwined. Children were encouraged to observe those who excelled, whether in academics, sports, music, or later in life, careers and financial success. The intention was often positive.

Yet comparison can be a difficult tool.

While it may motivate some children, it can discourage others.

Over time, the line between inspiration and competition can become blurred.

Instead of learning from others, children may begin measuring their worth against them.

Friends become benchmarks.

Classmates become rivals.

Achievement becomes something to chase rather than something to enjoy.

This was rarely what parents intended.

Yet it is one of the unintended consequences that many Vietnamese adults still reflect upon today.

Many Vietnamese children grow up feeling that their achievements are measured against the achievements of others.

A good grade is no longer just a good grade.

It becomes a question of whether someone else scored higher.

A successful career is no longer simply success.

It becomes a comparison against another person's success.

This creates a tension that many Vietnamese adults continue to carry long after childhood.

The desire to make their parents proud.

And the fear of never feeling quite good enough.

To understand why this happens, it helps to consider the generations that came before.

Many Vietnamese parents grew up during periods of economic uncertainty or limited opportunity.

Education was often seen as one of the few reliable paths toward a better life.

A good degree could change a family's future.

A stable profession could provide security not only for one person but for an entire household.

As a result, achievement became deeply connected to love, sacrifice, and responsibility.

Parents worked hard so their children could have opportunities they never had.

And because they cared so deeply, they worried deeply too.

Sometimes that worry appeared in the form of advice.

Sometimes it appeared in the form of comparison.

Of course, modern Vietnam is changing.

Many younger parents are becoming more aware of the emotional impact that constant comparison can have.

Ideas about success are also expanding.

People are choosing different careers, different lifestyles, and different definitions of what it means to live a meaningful life.

Yet the habit has not disappeared entirely.

Even today, many Vietnamese families continue to compare, often without realizing they are doing it.

Not because they love their children less.

But because they hope their children will have the best possible future.

This does not always make the comparisons easier to hear.

But it does help explain where they come from.

Behind many comparisons lies something rarely spoken aloud.

A parent's worry.

A parent's hope.

And a parent's imperfect way of saying:

"I want you to be okay."

C5. FRIENDSHIP IN VIETNAM



One of the first things many foreigners notice about Vietnamese friendships is how quickly they can become deeply personal. People who have known each other for only a few months may refer to one another as brothers and sisters.

Friends are invited to family meals.

Parents know their children's closest friends by name.

And it is not unusual for a friend to become part of a family's daily life.

To someone unfamiliar with Vietnamese culture, this level of closeness can be surprising.

Where does it come from?

Part of the answer lies in how relationships are often viewed in Vietnam.

In many Western cultures, friendship and family are clearly separated categories.

Family is family.

Friends are friends.

Vietnamese culture sometimes treats the boundary differently.

A close friend may gradually be welcomed into family spaces, family conversations, and even family responsibilities.

The language itself reflects this.

Close friends often address each other using family terms such as:

"anh" (older brother),

"chị" (older sister),

or "em" (younger sibling).

These words do more than indicate age.

They create a sense of belonging.

A relationship that might be described as friendship elsewhere can begin to resemble kinship.

Friendship in Vietnam is also often built through shared experiences.

Studying together.

Growing up in the same neighborhood.

Working side by side.

Spending years helping one another through life's challenges.

Trust tends to develop gradually, but once established, it can be remarkably strong.

For many Vietnamese people, friendship is not limited to people of the same age.

When I think about friendship, I often think about my mother, my uncles, and the neighbors who have known one another for decades.

Some of these relationships began long before I was born.

They survived weddings, illnesses, financial hardships, and the countless changes that life brings.

In many Vietnamese communities, especially in previous generations, friendship was closely connected to neighborhood life.

The Vietnamese phrase "tình làng nghĩa xóm" refers to the bonds

between neighbors and the sense of mutual care within a community.

For much of Vietnam's modern history, life was not always easy.

Many families experienced periods of hardship, scarcity, or uncertainty.

People borrowed tools from one another.

Shared meals.

Exchanged clothes.

Watched each other's children.

Helped repair homes.

And offered support without expecting anything in return.

In some neighborhoods, it was perfectly normal to walk into a neighbor's house without a formal invitation.

The boundary between family, friendship, and community was often less defined than it might be in other cultures.

These relationships were built not only through affection but through interdependence.

People relied on one another.

And over time, that reliance became trust.

Even today, many Vietnamese people continue to value this spirit of mutual support.

The forms may have changed, but the underlying idea remains familiar:

Life is easier when people look after one another.

Many Vietnamese people expect friendships to involve more than companionship.

A good friend is someone who shows up.

Someone who helps during difficult times.

Someone who can be relied upon without being asked twice.

This expectation can sometimes feel demanding to people from cultures where personal boundaries are more strongly emphasized.

Yet it also creates a powerful sense of community.

The phrase "tình nghĩa" is difficult to translate directly into English.

It refers to a combination of affection, loyalty, gratitude, and moral responsibility toward another person.

Many Vietnamese friendships are shaped by this idea.

When someone helps you during a difficult period, the relationship often carries that memory for years.

People remember.

Not because they keep score.

But because relationships are seen as something worth honoring.

Of course, friendship in modern Vietnam is changing, just as family life is changing.

Young people move cities.

Study abroad.

Build international careers.

Social media allows friendships to exist across countries and time zones.
Yet many of the underlying values remain.

Loyalty.

Presence.

Reciprocity.

The belief that relationships should be nurtured rather than taken for granted.

Perhaps that is why many Vietnamese people still maintain friendships that began decades earlier.

Not because they speak every day.

But because the connection itself is considered meaningful.

In Vietnam, friendship is often more than a social relationship.

Sometimes, it becomes another form of family.



Vietnamese primary school students

C6. WHY MANY VIETNAMESE SAVE EVERYTHING



If you open a drawer in a Vietnamese home, there is a good chance you will find a collection of plastic bags neatly folded inside.

Not one or two.

Dozens.

Perhaps even hundreds.

Some are saved for carrying groceries.

Some for storing food.

Some for reasons nobody can quite remember.

The same can be said for empty jars, rubber bands, cardboard boxes, gift bags, and containers that originally held something entirely different.

To many foreigners, this habit can seem amusing.

Why keep so many things?

Why not simply throw them away?

The answer goes far beyond plastic bags.

For many Vietnamese people, saving things is not merely a habit.

It is a way of thinking.

A reflection of history, experience, and memory.

Vietnam has changed dramatically over the last few decades.

Modern cities are filled with shopping malls, convenience stores, and online delivery services.

Yet many people still remember a time when resources were limited and

nothing was taken for granted.

For previous generations, waste was a luxury.

Objects were repaired rather than replaced.

Clothes were altered and worn again.

Broken furniture was fixed.

Old notebooks were reused.

Even after periods of hardship had passed, the mindset often remained.

Things still had value.

And value should not be wasted.

This attitude extends far beyond household objects.

It can also be seen in how many Vietnamese people think about money.

Saving is often viewed as a virtue.

Children are taught from a young age not to spend unnecessarily.

Adults are encouraged to prepare for uncertain times.

Many families prioritize financial security over financial risk.

A savings account may provide more peace of mind than an ambitious investment.

Owning a home may feel more important than pursuing a more expensive lifestyle.

To outsiders, this caution can sometimes appear excessive.

But for many Vietnamese families, it comes from experience.

The memory of instability does not disappear overnight.

Even when circumstances improve, people often continue preparing for difficult times.

There is also another reason behind this mindset.

Many Vietnamese people do not save only for themselves.

They save for their parents.

For their children.

For future responsibilities that may not have arrived yet.

Financial decisions are often connected to family obligations and long-term security.

A person may spend very little on themselves while quietly helping relatives, supporting siblings, or preparing for future generations.

In this sense, saving is not always about fear.

Sometimes it is about care.

Of course, younger generations are changing.

Many young Vietnamese are more willing to travel, spend on experiences, and embrace a less cautious approach to money.

Minimalism is becoming more popular.

Consumer habits are changing.

Yet traces of the older mindset remain.

Even among those who laugh about their parents' collection of plastic bags.

Perhaps that is because saving things is rarely just about the things themselves.

A plastic bag may be a plastic bag.

An old container may be an old container.

But behind them lies a memory:

A reminder of times when resources were scarce.

A lesson passed down through generations.

A belief that what you have today should not be taken for granted.

To many Vietnamese people, keeping something for later is not merely practical.

It is a quiet way of preparing for tomorrow.



Boat ride in Trang An, Vietnam

7.A WORD CALLED DUYÊN



Some words are difficult to translate.

Others seem to resist translation altogether.

"Duyên" is one of them.

If you ask a Vietnamese person what the word means, they may pause for a moment before answering.

Not because they do not understand it.

But because it means different things to different people.

Sometimes it refers to fate.

Sometimes coincidence.

Sometimes compatibility.

Sometimes timing.

And sometimes something that exists somewhere between all of these.

For many Vietnamese people, duyên describes the invisible connection that brings people, places, and moments together.

It is often used when something meaningful happens unexpectedly.

Two strangers meet and immediately feel comfortable with one another.

Someone discovers a new city and feels strangely at home.

A friendship begins at exactly the right moment in life.

A job opportunity appears when it is needed most.

People often describe these experiences as duyên.

Not because they can prove it.

But because no other explanation feels quite right.

For many Vietnamese people, *duyên* is not simply about meeting someone.

It is about crossing paths.

Life is filled with countless encounters.

Most people pass by unnoticed.

Yet every now and then, someone enters our story and leaves a mark.

A friend.

A teacher.

A neighbor.

A stranger on a train.

A person we love.

Or someone we lose.

Vietnamese people often describe these encounters through the idea of *duyên*.

Not because they believe every meeting is predetermined.

But because some connections feel too meaningful to be explained by coincidence alone.

When people look back on their lives, they often realize that certain individuals appeared at exactly the right moment.

A teacher who changed the direction of their future.

A friend who stood beside them during a difficult year.

A partner who transformed the way they understood love.

Even relationships that do not last are sometimes remembered through the lens of *duyên*.

Because not every connection is meant to stay forever.

Some people arrive to teach us something.

Some arrive to accompany us through a particular chapter of life.

And some leave after their role in our story is complete.

In this way, *duyên* is not only about beginnings.

It is also about endings.

A relationship can end while the *duyên* remains.

The gratitude remains.

The lesson remains.

The memory remains.

The idea of duyên is also deeply influenced by Buddhist thought, which has shaped Vietnamese culture for centuries.

In Buddhism, people often speak of "nhân duyên" – the causes and conditions that bring things together.

Nothing exists entirely on its own.

Every meeting, every relationship, and every moment arises from countless circumstances that intersect in ways we cannot fully see.

This perspective does not necessarily mean that everything is predetermined.

Rather, it suggests that life is interconnected.

People enter our lives because certain conditions allow them to.

And sometimes, those conditions change.

When they do, people may move apart.

For many Vietnamese people, this understanding brings a certain gentleness to the way they view relationships.

Not everyone who enters our life is meant to stay forever.

Some people walk beside us for a few months.

Others for many years.

Some become family.

Some become friends.

Some become lovers.

And some remain only a brief chapter in our story.

Yet each connection leaves something behind.

A lesson.

A memory.

A different way of seeing the world.

In this sense, duyên is not only about meeting.

It is also about accepting.

Accepting that people arrive.

Accepting that people leave.

Accepting that not every relationship is meant to last forever in order to have meaning.

At the same time, Vietnamese culture does not view duyên as an excuse

to avoid responsibility.

A relationship may begin because of duyên, but it continues through care, effort, and commitment.

Meeting is duyên.

Staying is a choice.

Perhaps this balance is one reason the word remains so meaningful.

It acknowledges uncertainty without surrendering responsibility.

It accepts that some things cannot be planned while still recognizing the importance of personal action.

The word extends beyond romance as well.

People speak about having duyên with a profession.

Duyên with a city.

Duyên with a hobby.

Duyên with a teacher.

Even duyên with a particular stage of life.

In these situations, the word often describes a sense of natural connection.

Something that feels right without needing a logical explanation.

Perhaps that is why the word continues to comfort so many people.

It reminds us that we should cherish the people who are beside us today, while also accepting that some paths eventually diverge.

Not every goodbye is a failure.

Sometimes, it is simply the end of a particular duyên.

Vietnamese culture contains many values that are easy to observe.

Respect for family.

Community.

Hard work.

Responsibility.

Duyên is different.

It cannot be seen.

It cannot be touched.

Yet it continues to shape how many people understand the relationships and experiences that matter most.

Perhaps that is why the word survives.

Not because it provides answers.
But because it gives people a way to talk about the mysteries that remain.
Some become family.
Some become friends.
Some become lovers.
Some remain only memories.
Yet all of them, in one way or another, become part of who we are.
And perhaps that, too, is duyên.



A Vietnamese street fruit vendor

8. LEAVING HOME NEVER MEANS LEAVING HOME



Many Vietnamese people dream of going far away.
To another city.
Another country.
Another continent.
For better opportunities.
For education.
For work.
For adventure.
Or simply to see what else the world has to offer.
And many of them do.
Yet something curious often happens after they leave.
The farther they go, the more they find themselves thinking about home.
Not necessarily every day.
Not always in dramatic ways.
Sometimes it appears unexpectedly.
In the smell of a familiar dish.
A song heard by chance.
A language spoken across a crowded street.
A photograph from years ago.
A video call from family.

Suddenly, a place that once felt ordinary begins to feel precious.
For many Vietnamese people, home is not simply a location.
It is a network of relationships.
Parents waiting for a phone call.
Grandparents asking when you will visit.
Friends who still remember the person you were before life became complicated.
Neighbors who knew your name when you were a child.
The food.
The sounds.
The habits.
The small details you never thought you would miss.
This difference often becomes most visible after people leave home.
Many Vietnamese people who move abroad continue speaking with their families almost every day.
Sometimes every evening.
Sometimes every other day.
Sometimes through long video calls that seem to discuss everything and nothing at the same time.
To people from more individualistic cultures, this can seem unusual.
"Why do you call your parents so often?"
The answer is often simple:
Because that is how many Vietnamese families have always lived.
Vietnamese people frequently grow up in environments where family members know a great deal about one another's daily lives.
Grandparents, parents, children, aunts, uncles, and cousins may all live close together or remain closely involved in one another's lives.
Meals are shared.
Stories are exchanged.
Problems are discussed.
Advice is given, whether requested or not.
Over time, communication becomes part of daily life rather than a special occasion.
When people move abroad, the habit often remains.

The distance changes.
The conversations do not.
A phone call home is not always about important news.
Sometimes it is simply:
"What did you eat today?"
"How was work?"
"Did you sleep well?"
Small questions.
Ordinary questions.
Yet they carry something larger underneath them:
"I am thinking about you."
For many Vietnamese people, staying connected to family is not an obligation.
It is a continuation of a relationship that has always been present.
The physical distance may grow.
But the emotional distance often does not.
Leaving Vietnam often changes the way people see Vietnam.
Things that once felt annoying become comforting.
Things that seemed unremarkable become unique.
Many people only realize how Vietnamese they are after living somewhere else.
They begin searching for familiar ingredients.
Teaching foreign friends how to pronounce Vietnamese words.
Explaining customs they once took for granted.
Defending parts of their culture they had never previously questioned.
Distance has a strange way of revealing attachment.
At the same time, leaving home can create a quiet tension.
People change.
The places they leave behind change too.
Each visit home feels slightly different from the last.
A favorite shop closes.
A friend moves away.
A younger sibling becomes an adult.
Parents grow older.

The hometown remains familiar, yet never exactly the same.
For many Vietnamese people living abroad, this creates a feeling that is difficult to describe.
Part of their heart belongs to where they came from.
Part belongs to where they are now.
They learn to live between places.
Between languages.
Between versions of themselves.
Yet despite this complexity, many continue carrying home with them.
Not as a physical place.
But as something woven into who they are.
Perhaps that is why so many Vietnamese people continue calling home regularly, even after years abroad.
Why they search for Vietnamese restaurants in unfamiliar cities.
Why they smile when they unexpectedly hear their language in a foreign country.
Why certain songs can still make them emotional decades later.
Home travels farther than geography.
It follows people across oceans.
Across borders.
Across entire lifetimes.
And perhaps that is the lesson many Vietnamese discover after leaving.
You can leave home.
But home rarely leaves you.



Hanoi train street, Vietnam

9. WHY WE WORRY SO MUCH



If you spend enough time around Vietnamese families, you may notice something unusual.

People worry.

A lot.

Parents worry about their children.

Children worry about their parents.

Grandparents worry about everyone.

And sometimes everyone worries at the same time.

To outsiders, this can seem excessive.

Why so many questions?

Why so much concern?

Why does a simple trip across town require multiple reminders?

"Bring an umbrella."

"Don't skip lunch."

"Text me when you arrive."

"Drive carefully."

"Don't stay up too late."

For many Vietnamese people, these phrases are deeply familiar.

They appear so often that they almost fade into the background of daily life.

Yet beneath them lies something important.

In Vietnam, concern is often a language of affection.

People do not always express love directly.

They express it through care.

And care often sounds a lot like worry.

A Vietnamese parent may rarely say:

"I love you."

But they may call three times to make sure you got home safely.

A grandparent may not talk openly about emotions.

But they will ask whether you have eaten.

Twice.

Perhaps three times.

In many Western cultures, love is often communicated through verbal affirmation.

In Vietnam, it is frequently communicated through attention.

People notice.

People remember.

People check.

Not because they want control.

But because caring about someone often means thinking about what could happen to them.

To understand this more deeply, it helps to look at how many Vietnamese people are raised.

From a young age, children often grow up hearing about responsibility.

Responsibility to family.

Responsibility to elders.

Responsibility to younger siblings.

Responsibility to the people who sacrificed for them.

As a result, many Vietnamese people learn to think of their lives not only in terms of personal goals, but also in terms of obligations and relationships.

A decision is rarely seen as affecting just one person.

It affects parents.

Children.

Grandparents.

Sometimes an entire extended family.

This way of thinking creates strong bonds.

But it also creates a tendency to worry.

When people feel responsible for one another, they naturally spend more time thinking about one another.

A mother worries because she sees her child's well-being as part of her own responsibility.

An adult child worries because they feel responsible for aging parents.

Siblings worry about siblings.

Relatives worry about relatives.

The circle of concern can become surprisingly wide.

In many Vietnamese families, caring and worrying are so closely connected that they almost become inseparable.

To stop worrying would feel, in some way, like stopping caring.

This is why concern often continues long after it seems necessary.

A parent may continue worrying about a child who has lived independently for ten years.

Not because they doubt their child.

But because their sense of responsibility never truly disappears.

Likewise, many Vietnamese adults carry a quiet awareness of their parents' needs, even while building lives of their own.

The relationship changes.

The responsibility remains.

This habit is rooted partly in family culture and partly in history.

For generations, life involved uncertainty.

Economic hardship.

Natural disasters.

Periods of social change.

Many Vietnamese families experienced times when survival depended on preparation, resilience, and mutual support.

When stability cannot always be guaranteed, paying attention becomes a form of protection.

Families learn to look after one another.

To anticipate problems before they arrive.

To prepare for difficulties before they occur.

Over time, these habits become cultural instincts.

Even when circumstances improve.

This way of caring often follows Vietnamese people throughout their lives.

A thirty-year-old living abroad may still receive messages asking whether they are eating properly.

A parent may continue worrying about a child long after that child has become a parent themselves.

The concern rarely disappears.

It simply changes shape.

And interestingly, many Vietnamese people eventually find themselves becoming the very people they once laughed at.

The child who rolled their eyes when their mother asked if they had eaten now sends the same message to a younger sibling.

The student who complained about constant phone calls from home now checks whether their parents arrived safely after a trip.

The roles change.

The habit remains.

Because worry is often passed down not only through words, but through example.

Of course, constant worry can sometimes feel overwhelming.

Many younger Vietnamese people speak openly about the pressure that comes from being cared for so intensely.

The desire for independence can occasionally clash with a family's desire to protect.

Some people long for more space.

More privacy.

More freedom to make mistakes on their own.

Yet even in these moments, both sides are often motivated by the same thing.

Love.

Just expressed differently.

Perhaps that is why conversations in Vietnamese families often begin

with practical questions.

Not:

"How are you feeling emotionally?"

But:

"Have you eaten?"

"Did you sleep well?"

"Are you wearing a jacket?"

The questions may sound ordinary.

But they carry a deeper message.

I care about you.

I am thinking about you.

I want you to be safe.

To many foreigners, Vietnamese people may seem to worry too much.

To many Vietnamese people, worrying is simply another way of loving.

For many Vietnamese people, love is not only something you feel.

It is also something you carry.

And what you carry, you naturally worry about.

And sometimes, the people who worry the most are the people who care the most.



A former Hanoi landmark remembered by many locals.

10. WHAT IT MEANS TO BELONG



When people think about culture, they often think about visible things.

Food.

Language.

Traditional clothing.

National holidays.

Historic landmarks.

These things matter.

They help define a place.

But after writing these pages, I have come to believe that belonging is often found somewhere else.

Not in the things we can easily see.

But in the things we carry.

Throughout this book, we have explored small details of Vietnamese life.

The habit of asking someone's age.

The influence of family.

The difficulty of saying no.

The comparisons that shape childhood.

The friendships that feel like family.

The tendency to save things for the future.

The idea of *duyên*.

The feeling of carrying home wherever we go.

The way concern becomes a language of love.
On their own, these may seem like separate observations.
Yet together, they reveal something deeper.
Again and again, we return to the same idea:
Relationships matter.
They shape how people speak.
How people choose.
How people love.
How people worry.
How people remember.
And perhaps most importantly, how people understand themselves.
In many cultures, identity begins with the individual.
Who am I?
What do I want?
What path will I choose?
In Vietnam, identity is often experienced through connection.
Who raised me?
Who stood beside me?
Who sacrificed for me?
Who do I care for in return?
The self is rarely completely separate from others.
It exists within a web of relationships.
This can be beautiful.
It can also be complicated.
Sometimes these connections provide strength.
Sometimes they create pressure.
Sometimes they do both at the same time.
Yet they remain central to how many Vietnamese people experience life.
Perhaps that is why belonging feels different from simply living in a place.
A person can leave Vietnam and still feel deeply Vietnamese.
A person can spend decades abroad and still carry certain habits, values,
and ways of seeing the world.
The connection survives distance.
Because belonging is not only geographical.

It is emotional.

It is cultural.

It is relational.

It lives in the conversations we have.

The food we crave.

The stories we remember.

The people we continue loving.

For those who are not Vietnamese, I hope this book has offered a small glimpse into the world behind the headlines, the tourist attractions, and the stereotypes.

Vietnam is not only a country.

It is millions of individual stories connected by shared memories, values, and experiences.

And for those who are Vietnamese, perhaps some of these pages have felt familiar.

Perhaps they have reminded you of someone.

A parent.

A grandparent.

A friend.

A teacher.

A neighbor.

Or a version of yourself from long ago.

If so, then perhaps this book has done what I hoped it would do.

Not explain Vietnam completely.

No book could.

But bring us a little closer to understanding it.

And perhaps, a little closer to understanding one another.

Because in the end, belonging is not simply about where we come from.

It is about the people, memories, and connections that continue to travel with us wherever we go.

And maybe that is what Vietnam feels like from the inside.

THANK YOU FOR READING.



*Some people become family.
Some become friends.
Some become lovers.
Some remain only memories.
Yet all of them, in one way or another, become part of
who we are.
And perhaps that, too, is duyên.*

*If this book made Vietnam feel a little closer,
then it has already done more than I hoped.*

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