

# An Introduction to Vietnamese Etiquette - the Dos and Don'ts

*Updated December 2013*

## **Welcome to Vietnam!**

By the end of this semester, I guarantee you have had many strange experiences and lessons learned the hard way. When visiting a foreign country, one is bound to make mistakes. There are however a few things one can do in order to avoid making the worst mistakes. This memo will in brief deal with certain aspects of the Vietnamese society that can be unfamiliar and confusing to strangers. The memo must not be seen as a blueprint that should be followed step by step. Rather, the intent is to provide students unfamiliar with the basic pillars of Vietnamese culture, society and etiquette with certain basic concepts. It is by no means a complete list and I am sure each of you will have new points to add towards the end of the semester. Have a wonderful semester in Hoi An!

Remember, if you have any questions regarding Vietnamese etiquette, your Vietnamese co-students or field manger Vinh are excellent sources to ask!

## **Being in a developing country**

Compared to other countries in Southeast Asia, Vietnam is a relatively “easy” country to both travel and live in. It is nonetheless important to keep in mind that Vietnam is still a developing country and one of the poorest countries in the region. It is easy to forget sometimes, so please try and keep this in mind throughout the whole stay. Waiting 15 minutes for the water in the shower to get hot, getting coffee when you ordered a coke, traveling for 2 hours when the ride should take 15 minutes...this is all part of living in a developing country, and equally important lessons than pure academics.

## **Social Etiquette**

The philosophy of Confucianism is deeply embedded in Vietnam. Rather than a religion, Confucianism is a system of social and ethical philosophy - a code for daily conduct. Confucianism place strong emphasis on morality, duty and courtesy and it is based on hierarchy and respect for both elders and knowledge. Self-discipline is especially regarded as a sign of good background and behavior. For this reason you will not see loud quarrels and confrontations out in the open as often as in other countries. Unpleasant subjects are often merely avoided. It can for this reason be difficult for foreigners to know when ones actions are inappropriate as few are willing to tell you, fearing it may upset you.

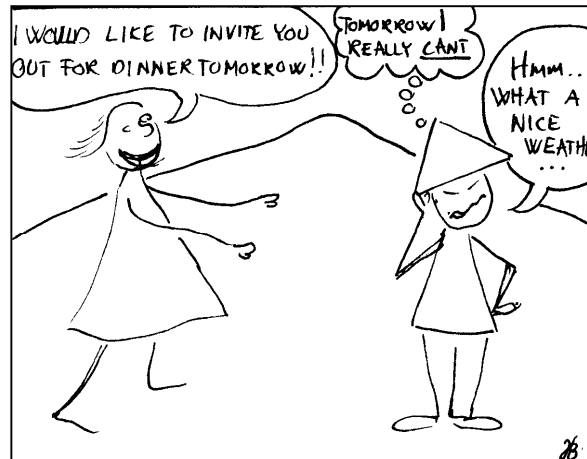
### **Anger management**

In Vietnamese culture, displaying anger, raising ones voice or screaming is considered extremely impolite. You have, in their opinion, displayed a weakness by becoming angry and it is considered very poor manners. Anger directed at someone is taken as a direct criticism and most often cause people to “lose face”. This must be avoided. Suppress your anger, people!

There is no golden formula on how to avoid making people lose their face. The best advice is to be alert during conversations. If you think you can spot uncertainty or hesitation, just leave the subject and turn the conversation over to other topics.

### When yes means no and no means maybe

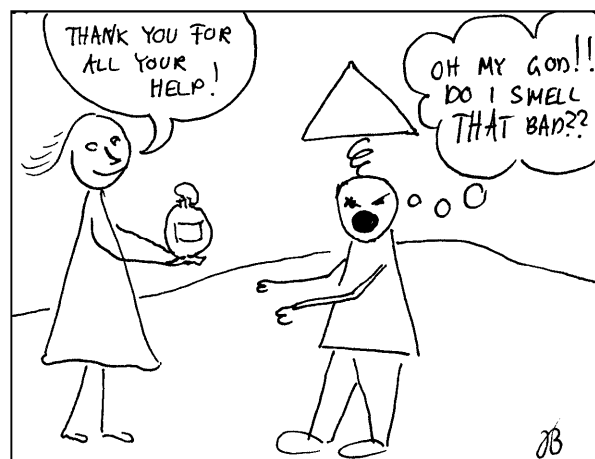
As you will soon find out the Vietnamese are extremely polite and as in many Asian countries, a direct “no” is rarely given. People are more likely to smile, nod and change the subject if the topic is unpleasant. A difficult question to answer may be misunderstood on purpose so that they do not have to give you an answer that will upset you. For example, if one invites a Vietnamese friend for dinner and the person knows she cannot attend, rather than turning down your request, the person may indicate that she will attend though she knows quite well that she will not be able to come. Thus, in answering a question, a “yes” can sometimes mean “maybe” and maybe may mean “no”. Don’t despair, but try to rephrase your questions into open-ended ones instead.



### Gift-giving

The giving of gifts is a common occurrence throughout Vietnam and they are given on numerous occasions. In Norway, we give a gift in order to please the receiver. However, because of the pervasive Buddhist philosophy in Vietnam, there is a sense that the giver receives more benefits than the recipient. Because one’s karma is enhanced by generosity, it is therefore common to bring gifts when you are e.g. invited to someone’s house.

The Vietnamese will often not open your present in front of you but put it aside and open it after you have left. This does not mean they are not curious or grateful.



Common gifts are fruits, flowers (remember: chrysanthemums are associated with funerals and pink roses represents romantic inclinations by the giver), chocolate, fine alcohol, tea and coffee. “Western” products that are hard to buy in Vietnam are always popular! Remember that the different colors in Vietnam inherit strong symbolic value!

“Good colors”: Red is warm and always a good color, purple is feminine and romantic and blue is linked with freshness and love. It is a good idea to ask our field manager Mr Vinh or any of the Vietnamese students for help if in doubt.

It is a good idea to bring small presents from Europe to give to Vietnamese friends you will make through the semester. Little things that tell stories of your own country or family have very special meaning for the locals and you cannot get them once already in the country. Even though you don’t know anyone now, you will be really happy that you brought something once the right moment arrives!

## Language and Communication

As in other non-English speaking countries, you should expect to encounter language problems. Teaching English in schools has only recently been introduced (the emphasis has been on French and Russian). Rather than seeing this as an obstacle, try to see it as a challenge. Try and pick up a few phrases such as hello, thank you, good-bye etc. In this way you can show the locals that you are interested in their language and culture and that you are more than a tourist passing through Hoi An. Also remember that body language and finger signs can communicate a whole lot.

### Ghost = mother = horse?

Spoken Vietnamese is a challenge to learn, as it is a tonal language with a total of six possible tones for some words. One single word may thus have six different meanings based on how it is pronounced. For example, the word ma has the following meanings:

ma- ghost  
 mǎ- horse  
 mạ- rice seedling  
 má- mother  
 mà- that  
 mã- tomb

Learning the Vietnamese language can therefore be a frustrating and time-consuming task. None-native speakers should therefore be careful when pronouncing a Vietnamese word (You definitely don't want to call the well-respected mother in the house a ghost or even worse a horse...). However, do not let these words of caution scare you away from learning a few basic Vietnamese phrases. My experience is that attempted communication in Vietnamese, no matter how many mistakes, easily breaks down barriers between foreigners and locals and the people of Hoi An will most definitely appreciate the fact that you are trying to speak their language.



A situation where you will frequently encounter this problem is when giving directions and street names to cyclo or taxi drivers. Unless you have a very good ear for languages, don't hesitate to write down the street names. It can save you a lot of time!

If you want to learn basic Vietnamese, a good suggestion is to find a Vietnamese who want to learn English. In this way you can be each other's mutual teachers. It is also a great way to get a Vietnamese friend and to learn more about their culture and way of life.

*Culture Studies will also help facilitate a basic Vietnamese language course in cooperation with English teachers in Hoi An during the beginning of each semester. You have to pay for this yourself, but it is a great way of learning some basic phrases!*

### Greetings

Traditionally, the Vietnamese did not shake hands, but clasped their hands together above the waist level and bowed slightly. But with the increasing number of foreign influence, shaking hands when greeting someone is now the norm.

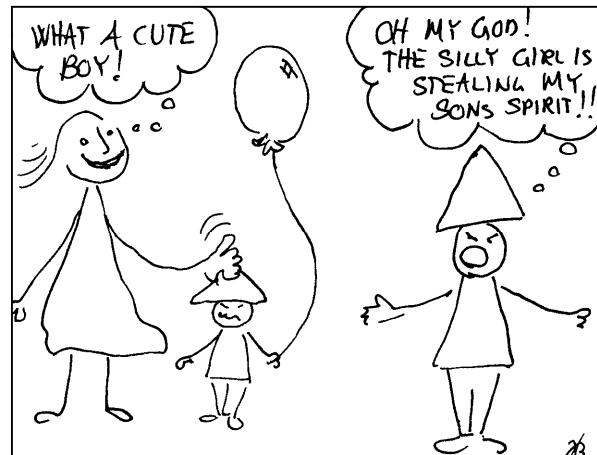
If you know someone very well, it is common to shake hands using both hands. When greeting an older person or someone in authority, it is normal to shake hands with the right hand, then placing your left hand on the inside of your elbow. Due to the Confucian tradition, which put great respect towards the elderly, you should always greet the oldest person in a group first. Also, if you are greeting a group of people, make sure that you greet every person, including young children.

### **Vietnamese names**

As is done in other Southeast Asian countries, given names always come after the family name. For example, in the name Nguyen Co Thieu, Nguyen is the family name and Co Thieu is the person's given names. You will find that certain names are very common. As the Nguyen emperors allowed commoners to take on their family name, almost 50 per cent of Vietnams' population has Nguyen as a family name. Children are often given names with special meanings, as parents believe that the lives of the children may be affected by the chosen name. Hence, a beautiful name may ensure a better life for the child. Examples of common female names are Huong (perfume) and Lien (lotus).

### **Non-verbal Communication**

When you sit down, one important thing must be remembered: Pointing at someone with the sole of your feet when crossing your leg is considered rude. It is actually an indication that you think the other person is below you. So if you do cross your legs, try to point your toes downwards!!



The western gesture of asking someone to come to you by turning the palm of your hand upwards and using the index finger to beckon, is considered impolite. In Vietnam, this sign is only used for animals. Instead, turn your palm downward and wiggle all four fingers in unison.

### **Physical contact**

In general, Vietnamese are more reserved than Westerners. It is less common with physical contact in public, particularly between individuals who are not close friends.

According to many books about etiquette in Vietnam, it is impolite to touch anyone of the opposite sex. Despite Vietnam being a largely conservative society, my experience is that physical contact, at least between members of the same sex, is frequent and looked upon as a sign of friendship. The best advice to give is just to use your common sense. You will probably see two men or two women walking down the street holding hands. This is common between friends. It may feel a little awkward to us, but try and accept it as goodwill and appreciation.

When meeting someone's infant baby, it is regarded as bringing bad luck if you comment on how beautiful the baby looks, how clever it is etc (different well-intended comments we would normally use when meeting a baby). For many Vietnamese, it actually means the opposite. A

good way of avoiding this, is for instance by commenting on how much the baby resembles the mother or the father.

## Housing and homestays

Some of you will get a chance to stay at a house with a Vietnamese family. Though most of the houses are rented out to our students and the family stays somewhere close-by, you should be mindful of the fact that this is more of a home than a hotel. In Vietnam, small neighborhoods tend to be closely-knit and people know each other well. They socialize often and keep watch of the streets and each other's property. This gives additional security but also means that people notice what you do and how you act. Always remember to follow local norms of decency and respect in and around your houses. Making noise late at night and being visibly drunk on your way home are heavily frowned upon and can cause embarrassment to your host family and local Culture Studies staff without you being aware of the fact. It is OK to have fun but please be aware that the social norms in Vietnamese society are different than back home, particularly when it comes to students. When in doubt, you can always consult Culture Studies staff.

Importantly, when you want to have a small party at your house, you should always tell our field manager Mr Vinh because the local police needs to be notified of foreigners staying at someone's home after dark. This rule applies to your homestays as much as it does to local homes.

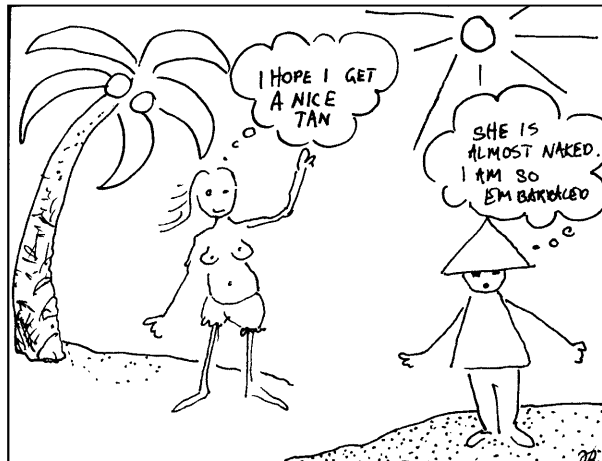
## In the Field

One general rule: Dress appropriately in order to not cause offence to the locals!! Foreigners like us are guests and must behave thereafter. This is a very important point to remember. Hoi An is a relatively small town and we, as a big group, are thus very visible in the city scene. A good way of seeing ourselves is as "ambassadors" for the countries we come from. Remember that many Vietnamese have never talked or interacted with people from Europe- and definitely not Norwegians, ever before. The impression we leave is the impression that stays. We should thus consider ourselves as more than just "average tourists". By dressing appropriately we can send out these signals to the local community as well.

### Dress codes

Vietnamese have conservative dress codes and it is only in larger cities that these codes are relaxed. Due to the heavy flow of tourism in Hoi An, many of the citizens are probably used to see foreigners in revealing western clothes, but we should still show sensitivity. We are not the typical 'three days tourists'!

Importantly, when we have classes at the university, students must not wear too revealing clothes. This includes items such as singlets, short dresses or skirts or tops with low-neck lines and bare shoulders. The rule is to wear shirts covering the shoulder,



and trousers / skirts covering the knees. You will notice that local Vietnamese students (and teachers!) follow a strict dress code and even though we don't have to wear uniforms, we must show respect on the university campus. This is also the dress code at temples and pagodas. There are however no dress codes at the Study Centre!

It is also expected of you that you remove your shoes when entering someone's house at the front door and when entering pagodas and temples. When visiting pagodas and temples it's also good manners to leave a small amount of money on the altar or in the collecting box.

Many Vietnamese girls go swimming with their clothes on. Topless swimming is therefore definitely inappropriate!

### **Doing field work**

There are a number of rules of conduct when doing fieldwork. In Vietnam, research on ethnic minorities is especially sensitive and most often subject to the researchers having proper permissions. Spending the night at a Vietnamese family's house is also subject to special permissions. If you don't have this, the Vietnamese family can get into trouble. How to conduct fieldwork, research ethics and proper conduct will be covered in specific lectures given by the Culture Studies staff. The field manager and seminar leader will be able to both help and advice you on these matters.

### **Bargaining**

Bargaining is a very common way to establish a price in Vietnam, whether it is for a mango or a hair band. The exception is meals as restaurants have set prices. In my experience, the bargaining and first price offered for items are more fair than say in Thailand or Bali where the starting price is often 100-times the actual price. In some tourist places however, the fixed price system is becoming increasingly common.

All tourists are regarded as wealthy - which we are compared to most locals. But that doesn't mean you will always be offered outrageous prices; small shopkeepers and restaurateurs will often charge you the local rate so try not to worry too much about this. Remember, if you are being over-charged it is likely to not be more than a few dollars. This is an important perspective to keep. If you return to the same shop a few times, the owner will know we are staying a long time and will probably offer you very reasonable prices.

As always, when bargaining it helps if you know some Vietnamese numbers and have a general idea of the going rate for the item. Otherwise, the trick is to remain friendly and be realistic. If you manage to reduce the price by 40%, you're doing very well. In most cases it'll be more like 10-20%. A common trick is to start moving away if you're on the verge of agreement. But don't bargain just for the sake of it - if your price is agreed, then you are honor bound to purchase. And always keep a sense of perspective: don't waste time and energy haggling over what only amounts to a few cents.

### **Taking pictures and filming**

Always ask permission before taking someone's photograph. If they indicate that they do not want you to, then abide to their wishes. Please do not push the issue or offer money. Also do not photograph military installations or anything else concerning the military. This can be seen as a breach of national security. If you travel to areas with ethnic minorities (especially the Central Highlands or the mountainous areas north of Hanoi, e.g. Sapa) also be sensitive when taking pictures of the people. Many of the ethnic groups believe you take their spirits away when photographing.

### **Partying and going out at night**

Although Hoi An is a safe city compared to Asian standards, you should always make precautions when going out after dark. Girls should never go out alone, and anyone going out should tag up with at least one other student.

You will soon see that very few girls in Vietnam drink alcohol. It is generally considered inappropriate. We should therefore show sensitivity.

### **Drugs**

Culture Studies have a strict none-tolerance for drugs. The punishments for being caught with, or doing, drugs in Vietnam are very harsh, indifferent of the amount and type of drug. There is little the Culture Studies staff or your respective embassies can do if you are caught. Just being in the same room or bar as people doing drugs can be enough for the police to arrest you, so if you observe people doing drugs at a place you're at, we strongly advise you to just leave! There are a number of local bars and night clubs where drugs (and drug raids!) are fairly common. Our staff can advise you which places to avoid and it is really in your own best interest to heed that advice. Don't worry, Hoi An offers many alternatives that are safer and just as fun!

### **Food Situations**

You will quickly realize that the culinary traditions in Vietnam are outstanding. On a general basis, the food is healthy, fresh and not as spicy as in e.g. Thailand. Don't hesitate to try new dishes. You are most likely to be pleasantly surprised!

Make sure you wash your hands well before each meal and that you don't drink tap water. Often a bowl of sliced limes will appear on your table as soon as you have ordered a meal. These are used as a sanitizer for your chopsticks. Rub the lime against your chopsticks before eating and you can be sure the chopsticks will be clean!

My experience is that food poisoning and other illnesses due to poor food hygiene (at least compared to other developing countries) are not very common in Vietnam, but it can of course happen. In my experience, the risk of getting contaminated food decreases when ordering local food from the menu. It is likely to be fresher and better prepared than western food. The only time I have been food poisoned is when I ordered western tomato soup in Sapa! Another reason for ordering local specialties is that it is often cheaper than e.g. hamburgers and omelet.

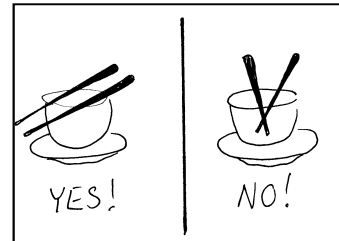
### **Eating out or with a group**

Remember, if you invite someone (Vietnamese that is) out for lunch or dinner, it is common etiquette that you pay for the meal. When eating with a group of people, either at some one's house or at a restaurant, there are a few things you should keep in mind:

- Many small dishes are often eaten at the same time, for instance a light soup with vegetables, a meat or fish dish, vegetables and rice. Unlike customs in e.g. Norway where each person orders one dish and eats it himself, it is usual in Vietnam that all dishes are placed in the middle of the table with people helping themselves to the food. First place rice from the main rice bowl in your own little eating bowl. When taking food from the central food bowl, it should be done with a serving spoon so that you do not dip your own chopsticks into it, thus "contaminating" the food.
- If you are having slight problems eating with chopsticks, it is perfectly okay to pick up your rice bowl and place it closer to your mouth, thus limiting the distance you have to

balance the rice on the chopsticks! It is also generally well accepted to ask for a fork if that is preferred to chopsticks.

- If you don't like a dish, it is okay to not finish it, but it is polite to take a small bite of it rather than leave it untouched.
- When you pause between eating, or are done, place the chopsticks across your food bowl. Never stick them vertically into the food bowl, as it will look like you are burning incense, a ritual that is deeply associated with funerals and death.
- The Vietnamese are "noisy" when eating, so slurping noises (when e.g. eating noodle soup, pho) is not considered rude or impolite.
- Good etiquette demands that one should not leave any rice in the bowl in the end of a meal. It is sometimes regarded inconsiderate of the effort that has gone into its production and preparation. But then again, if you are full, you are full...



### Tipping

Tipping has not been customary in Vietnam, but as the flow of tourists has increased in recent times, service charges and the expectation of a small tip has become more common in typical tourist places.

In a country where GNI (gross national income) per capita in 2002 was US\$ 430 (less than NOK 3000 a year), a few thousand Dong is enormously appreciated. But there are however times when it can be taken the wrong way. At small hotels, the staff frequently goes out of their way to answer questions, reconfirm plane reservations, look up addresses and so on. This is a great honor and their way of saying they consider you a friend. But remember, friends don't tip friends. A tip, no matter how well intentioned may invariably be taken as an insult.

Your best bet in such situation is to buy small gifts for the staff, such as flowers, pastry, candy- things you would buy for a friend at home (try to avoid buying "typical Vietnamese tourist crafts" such as e.g. lacquer ware and pottery).

### Recommended further readings

**Culture Shock! Vietnam. A guide to customs and etiquette.** Ellis, C. 2004. Times Books International. Singapore

*This book is full of practical information you won't find in other travel books and it will supplement this memo with more interesting and fun details about Vietnamese etiquette. The last chapter also contains an amusing cultural etiquette quiz.*

**Vietnam - Culture Smart!: the essential guide to customs & culture.** Geoffrey Murray. 2006. Kuperard.

*This book covers topics such as land and people, values and attitudes, religion, festivals and ritual, the Vietnamese at home and many other interesting and relevant topics!*

**Vietnam: A traveler's literary companion.** Edited by Qui Doi Nguyen. 1996.

*By reading this book, you learn more about the culture of Vietnam as it has an engaging collection of Vietnamese short stories by various Vietnamese authors.*

**Vietnam: Journey of body, mind and spirit.** Edited by Van Huy Nguyen. 2003.



*This is a beautifully shot photographic journey that travels to the heart of Vietnam, offering a good portrait of the country.*

**Vietnam. A global studies handbook.** Woods, L.S. 2002. ABC-CLIO, Inc. Santa Barbara  
*This is also a good addition to regular travel books. It contains a lengthy introduction to Vietnam's past that serves as a foundation for the present-day society and culture. The book is intended for nonspecialists and gives the reader an introductory understanding of this diverse, richly storied land.*

**The sacred willow: Three generations of a Vietnamese family.** Duong Van Mai Elliott.  
Oxford University Press Inc, USA  
*This is truly a book for recommendation! Writing with insight and compassion, Mai Elliott tells the story of her family over four generations from the 19th century to the present. The book illuminates unfamiliar strands of Vietnamese history and is a great way of learning more about Vietnam's exciting past.*

**Lonely Planet: Vietnam: World Food.** 2000. Richeard Sterling and Tinh-My Hoang.  
*Geography is also cuisine! This book helps you choose where, when, how and what to eat in Vietnam. By exploring maps and recipes, the book navigates Vietnam's regional variations and explains cultural etiquette. The text is rich in culinary legends, myths, riddles and poetry reflecting the Vietnamese passion for food.*

**Lonely Planet: Vietnamese phrasebook** (3rd edition). Xuan Thu Nguyen.  
*If you are planning to pick up a few Vietnamese phrases whilst in Vietnam, this book is a good supplement.*