RITES OF PASSAGE

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FOREWORD

Information on rites of passage can be helpful in providing insights into existing cultural patterns and trends in those patterns caused by the impact of external groups and other influences. Because of its usefulness, this should be an interesting topic of study for sociology students and other social scientists. It also can serve as orientation material for newcomers in an alien environment.

In this booklet, the compiler has made extensive use of descriptive data provided in papers written by National Institute of Administration students, especially that data unveiling regional discrepancies. He has provided additional information on relatively old patterns and has added an interpretation of trends in Vietnamese rites of passage.

Despite his diligence in trying to avoid error and omission, these may have occurred in the far from complete descriptions contained in this booklet. Only the compiler is responsible for such deficiencies.

He wishes to express his indebtedness to Dr. John Donoghue for providing him with pertinent documentation and to Myrna Pike for her work on the English manuscript.

Saigon, April 23, 1962

Nguyen van Thuan
I. LUNAR CALENDAR NEW YEAR'S DAY OR TET

Preliminary Consideration. Tet was the most important celebration of the year in old Viet-Nam. Today it is still observed with much solemnity by nearly all social classes in both urban and rural areas. Although many changes have occurred during the last forty years—to an unequal extent in different parts of the country—the general pattern is still adhered to with much affection.

The significance of such a celebration derives from many motivations:

(1) The attachment to the millenary traditions among which ancestor veneration is one of the most important. The Tet period is the best occasion to acquaint children with their ancestors.

(2) The eagerness of family members earning a living far away from home to return to their birth place and live amid the extended family. This, to a great extent, reflects the patriarchal family pattern, so predominant in Asian countries.

(3) The desire for a rest after a long working period as most Vietnamese people do not yet afford themselves summer vacations, week-ends, or regular and irregular recesses of any kind.
(4) A traditional desire to meet relatives and friends and to wish them good luck, prosperity, longevity and a large family.

Tet can also be considered to some extent a season for children and gifts. It is not the point here to evaluate the desirability of the gift giving practice, but it is interesting to note that the practice has created much worry for under privileged subordinates who have to pay for offerings destined for superiors or "benefactors", and a sort of embarrassment to some people of high social status who are expected to distribute gifts.

Preparation for the Tet. In the first decades of this century, preparation for the Tet virtually began in the 10th month of the lunar year with household embellishments, such as white-washing; the making of clothes, and arrangements to clear debts and financial obligations. It has been believed that the physical appearance of people and their homes during the Tet is a factor determining social prestige, and those who are more or less concerned about appearances usually have made efforts to show off their social standing and values. This common habit has often exhausted the resources of people who are economically unprivileged but affected by snobbery.
As early as the 10th month in the lunar calendar, markets and shops are loaded with goods of all kinds--food-stuffs, ready-made clothing for children and grown-ups, kitchen utensils, household equipment, appurtenances for the altar (candlesticks, incense burners, oil lamps, tablets) firecrackers, incense josstick, paper flowers and flower pots. These months see, on the whole, a seasonal boom in the production and distribution of consumer goods.

However, the really bustling time is the final two weeks of the year. The 23rd day of the last lunar month is the Kitchen God's Day on which nearly all householders offer the god a farewell meal, usually announced by the first firecrackers, to solicit his favorable report on their conduct and behavior during the year just ending. It has been believed that the Kitchen God is assigned by Emperor of Heaven to observe and record all right and wrong doings of householders under his protection and supervision and report them to the Emperor at year's end.

As a rule, the offering to the Kitchen God consists of candies, glutinous rice, fruit, boiled chicken, votive papers including money, gold, garments, and many carps. The last are to be used as means of transportation for the God's heavenward journey.
People of the north used to plant a lunar new year pole—cay neu—in the center of the front yard. The pole bore some leaves at its very top and included a set of several small earthenware gongs (Khanh), an amulet made of red paper, a small rice container and a small water container. It was believed the device had a magical property which would chase away evil spirits and prevent them from disturbing the householders. The pole was set up on the 23rd of the old year and brought down on the 7th day of the new.

After the Kitchen God's Day, life gets more and more hectic in every home and shop. Most shops are overloaded with goods of all kinds and many small, seasonal merchants display their products on the sidewalks of blocks surrounding the neighborhood marketplaces. Sometimes improvised "markets" are set up for a few weeks preceding the Tet to cope with the large number of occasional and non-professional vendors who hope to add to the family income. The last goods to appear in the markets before the Tet include all kinds of candies, glutinous rice cakes, fresh flowers, green branches, shrubs and trees, the last being almost indispensable items for household decoration. Also on the sidewalks in populous quarters, old scribes sit writing beautiful Chinese characters expressing greetings and wishes such as
Welcome Spring, Happy New Year, Happiness, Prosperity, Longevity and Peace. By the side of these traditional "learned men" are dealers in folklore sketches and pictures representing the figures of pigs, cocks, well-fed children, handsome old characters out of Chinese literature and envied idols: the God of Longevity, the God of Virtue, the God of Wealth... All these rudimentary symbols are to be stuck or hung on pillars, gates, columns or walls of the house, both as decorations and devices to wish oneself and other people a happier life in the coming year.

The well-known traditional food for the Tet has been, since time immemorial, the "banh chung" (or banh tet in South Viet-Nam), a kind of cake made of boiled glutinous rice, stuffed with pork and green beans and wrapped in green leaves. In nearly all households there is a fairly large provision of these cakes which can be conserved for a couple of weeks and served at breakfast, as a snack or as an additional dish for old and young people. The origin of this cake is the topic for many versions of a folk story told and retold from one generation to another. Among other commonly prepared foods are onion pickles and hog lard. They stand out, with the traditional glutinous rice cakes and the parallel sentences written on red paper, as most symbolic of
The Tet. They also relieve shortages due to the slack in food production and distribution during the first weeks of the year. In North Viet Nam, lean pork pies, pork jellies, fish bladder, bamboo sprout, pig leg, vermicelli, and chicken are dishes most desired by people of some economic standing. In South Viet Nam especially, pickles of soya bean sprouts and cabbage leaves are widely eaten with stewed meat. Among the various fruits consumed during the holiday, watermelon and grapefruit are the most common.

In every household, furniture, especially in the parlor is cleaned and re-arranged. The altar requisites are polished until they shine with a touch of newness. The walls are whitewashed, the floor carefully washed or swept. In the North an almost leafless peach branch with its lovely pink flowers and buds and a few hollow trays in which narcissus bulbs are planted are most appreciated as decorations for the parlor. In the South where peach trees do not grow, apricot branches with white or yellow flowers, and chrysanthemums of all varieties planted in earthen pots are found in almost every prosperous household. A belief which has been widely held says that it is not desirable to sweep the floor during the three first days of the year. Rice and water containers should be full and the firewood stock large
enough for many days, if not for a whole month. People try to have a profusion of everything as an omen of plenty for the year ahead.

The eve of the New Year is a time when all social and personal business should have been settled, and debts and obligations cleared. People want to avoid, to the greatest extent possible, pending affairs in the belief that it is an ill omen to begin the new year with troubles of debt and contention. Whatever the economic status of the household, all obligations should be fulfilled by the last hour of the old year and both human beings and inanimate objects ready to welcome the new.

In past years, especially those of peace, the deafening sound of firecrackers was heard all around by midnight. The practice of shooting firecrackers has been looked upon as a way to chase away evil spirits and other invisible agents along with the old year and to welcome the coming of a better new life that is so longed for. Shooting off many firecrackers also was a snobbish way of showing off wealth and nobility, especially in periods when the Chinese mode of life was still much admired by the Vietnamese.

However, with the cultural impact of Western living habits on the Vietnamese people and with the restrictions in the production and use of firecrackers for either economic
or security reasons, there has been in about the last two decades a growing tendency to minimize the practice in both rural and urban areas.

When still permitted, firecrackers were shot on the 23rd day of the last month, on the eve of the New Year, during the first three or sometimes seven days of the year and on the 7th and final day. They were set off in series or in isolated claps. Now that firecracker shooting is prohibited, more for security than economic reasons, it is much missed, especially by nostalgic grown-ups and boisterous teenagers.

Another important stage in the celebration of the New Year is sitting up and awaiting its first hour. Except for the small children, most family members generally want to keep themselves awake for this hour, first to present an offering to their ancestors, then to the spirit of the home-site and finally to the Heaven and Earth God. On the altars, oil lamp and candles are lit as are joss sticks and incense, to be burned from the first hour throughout the seventh day of the New Year. At that time the New Year Pole is taken down, signifying the departure of ancestors for the other world. At midnight, every member of the family, beginning with the highest in rank, pays his respects before the altar. Afterwards, at least a few members of the family start a
journey for luck which usually consists of: (a) a visit to a neighbouring pagoda, usually to the one believed to have the most supernatural powers; (b) paying respects to the spirits of the pagoda by kowtowing before their altar, and (c) bringing back a good luck leaf, branch or flower from shrubs or trees on the pagoda grounds. (In Hanoi, the most frequented pagodas were the Ngoc Son and Quan Thanh. In Saigon, it has been the Marshall Le Van Duyet Shrine, commonly known as the Lang Ong or Great Mister Shrine.)

Starting on the journey to the pagoda, a person takes care to step out in a propitious direction as indicated by a horoscope, to avoid meeting a female first, and guard against any unwholesome thinking, heated discussion and vulgar language. It is believed that such "misdoings" would be omens of bad luck in the coming year.

A meal is usually given to the family upon its return from this journey and everyone then goes to bed for a sound sleep.

People get up either early or late the next morning and try to put themselves in a serene state of mind and a pleasant, if not a merry mood. Immediately after washing and dressing up in their best clothes, family members wish one another a happy new year, good luck, good health, longevity
wealth and other good things. Greetings are offered first by the lowest in familial rank to the highest and the latter return the courtesy by distributing luck gifts consisting usually of small amounts of money wrapped in red paper.

The first visitor to the household on New Year's day and the first trip out by each member of the family are matters of concern to everyone.

Most people are extremely anxious to receive, as the first caller of the day, a man of high moral standing (of a generous, dignified, noble character) and hope very much to avoid a person who has a reputation for being avaricious, dishonest, cunning or crafty. It is believed that the first visitor to the house will be followed for all the rest of the year by people of his type—a decisive factor in the success or failure of the family's business and personal affairs.

Whoever the first man may be, he is always warmly received and invited to have one or many cups of tea, a cup of liquor, to taste a large variety of candies and marmalade and finally to have a "lunch" with the head of the family.

It is desirable, though not always expected, that the visitor offer his hosts a luck gift, usually firecrackers to be set off immediately after his arrival or a symbolic gift of money to be distributed to the children.
Although it is hoped that the first visitor is to be a man of great moral dignity, this is not to say that the visitors to follow may behave loosely; everyone who pays calls on relatives and friends should make an effort to appear as easy going, generous, joyful and serene minded as possible, even if they are troubled about something.

For those who did not make the journey described above in the first hour of the year, the first trip may be on New Year's day, usually at an hour which the horoscopic calendar says is the most propitious or the most "harmless" so as to insure good luck and prosperity all year around. If in a particular year, no harmless hour is found on the first day, many people are careful to defer the journey to the second or third day. The same pattern is followed on these days concerning the propitious direction and hour for setting out.

There has been, especially in the rural areas, a general practice to go to pay respects to the dead on the first day of the Tet in the family communal house--the extended family worship house--and to meet and greet close and distant relatives. At this time, a more or less substantial offering is brought to the common ancestors.

It has also been a custom practice to pay courtesy visits to parents, relatives, benefactors, employers, good
friends and to return courtesies rendered by people of the same or higher social rank. Up until recently, it was expected in Viet Nam that people of lower social or familial rank first visit their superiors; while return visits were usually expected only from equals, all signs of kindness were very much appreciated by inferiors.

On the first day of the New Year, a newly married couple is introduced to its older relatives who did not get the chance to attend the wedding. As a rule the two are warmly greeted and receive such wishes as to have many children, to have the first boy baby in the coming year, to become wealthy and to enjoy happiness, prosperity and longevity in their life together.

On the whole this custom of exchanging visits with the serving of tea, liquor, cigarettes, candies and other foods, sometimes repeated dozens of times during the day, makes everyone very busy and absorbs a good deal of money from family budgets. It often creates a deficit in the finances of people who are not really well off.

The first day is generally the most burdensome as far as courtesy visits are concerned. Many people are so scrupulous as to return the courtesy on the very day they receive it, fearing that a call on the next day would
reflect a slighting attitude towards the initial visitors. This day is extremely busy for people who have many social relations; the following ones usually are filled with less important calls.

Calls are a social duty, especially for family heads and people of some social standing; for young people, the first days of the new year are generally a time for entertainment and enjoyment. Young children often accompany their mothers and sisters to pagodas and on visits to relatives and acquaintances. Teenagers usually saunter about the streets or meet at pagodas, cinemas, theatres, tea shops, restaurants and, more recently, stadiums and playing grounds where they can enjoy refreshments, dramatic performances, music and petty talk. People who are not bound by social calls often indulge in such indoor games as chess, cards and gambling of all kinds. This does not mean that players are not found on the sidewalks of crowded streets, but these improvised gatherings include only people of the lower social strata.

The first days of the year, even the first couple of months, are busy ones for fortune tellers. Their business usually begins with the first hours of New Year's Day, immediately after the early journeys to pagodas and shrines where most people procure "personal" horoscope sheets.
These are prepared and printed in advance and the people pick them at random. The sheet usually bears prophetic statements about the eventual success or failure of the consultant in a fairly large range of affairs from personal problems to business activities. The interpretation of these sheets is not an easy matter for the layman and usually requires the help of skilled persons, conversant with Chinese characters and the figurative language of invisible powers. It has also been a habit, in the early days of the year, to consult a horoscope reader about what will happen to a person during the year so he knows what is to be avoided and what is to be adopted.

In the old days, it was customary for literate or learned people to use their writing brush for the first time in the New Year on the days and hour thought to be most propitious.

These days the Tet celebration ends with the reopening of government offices and those of large private agencies. Many a small shop though, will wait for a propitious hour and day within the first two weeks before resuming business. Travellers too, will wait for a lucky day, as indicated by the traditional Chinese calendar, on which to begin a trip.

The general thinking has been that the first weeks (formerly the first two months) of the year are a time for
enjoyment, for happy living, and not much for toiling and worrying about productive activities. To what extent this indolent attitude affects economic activities and development has been a matter of concern to many economists and sociologists. It is safe to say, however, that in the case of many householders who are economically weak but affected by snobbery, this somewhat foolish attitude toward spending money and refraining from work has caused many family money problems. There are many instances of debts having been contracted to defray the expenditures made by householders who spend beyond their means. This often makes us think about a desirable change in the psychology of the present generation and in its attitude toward the annual Tet celebration.
II. MARRIAGE AND WEDDING

Preliminary. In old Viet Nam, where social life was so strongly based on family units, the heavily patriarchal and paternalistic character of the family had considerable impact on the marriage process and was the reason behind many cultural manifestations. Even in present days and in areas most influenced by western culture, the main traits of a patriarchal system still remain intact, at least in their observable forms: the rituals are kept alive and in essence, hold the same significance as they did decades ago; the authoritarian role of parents and grandparents is, at least outwardly, equal to what it was in the past; the wedding celebration follows roughly the same essential steps which appear to be dictated by the old traditional and cultural motivations. Changes have occurred to unequal degrees in both rural and urban areas, mostly in the matter of clothing, means of transportation, entertainment, and to some extent, in the parlance, behavior, attitude toward family authority, and aspirations. But generally speaking, marriage continues to be viewed with the same importance, despite the fact that recent economic and other conditions have been diverting the way to familial union.
In the following description, the reader should bear in mind the existence of at least two patterns which are not clearly distinct but need to be treated separately: the traditional and the modern sophisticated patterns of behavior. Although it is neither accurate to draw a clear line of demarcation between them, nor feasible to divide them on a geographical basis, e.g., into rural and urban patterns, these words are used here for the sake of convenience and lack of better terms to depict the relatively conservative observance of old customs and rituals, and today's tendency toward change and receptiveness to new ideas.

Adolescent Relationships. In the old times there was a strong emphasis on chastity, close supervision of the young was widely practiced, and the society under the Confucian ethic system did not highly regard the physical development of love nor its enjoyment. Falling in love was somewhat discouraged and adolescent courtship prevented.

Youngsters socialized in such a way as to avoid unwatched relationships, uncontrolled contacts, and consequently, falling in love. Both popular and aristocratic literature, however, speaks of spontaneous and/or romantic love, which existed in this country as in any other part of the civilized world even though it suffered from rigid social and cultural sanctions.
Avoidance of adolescent love relationships was accepted as ethically desirable and therefore placed all those who fought against pressure and authority into a category of "outlaws". Their action was formally condemned as shameful not only to the individuals involved, but also to their extended families who were morally responsible for their loose education, to say nothing of the larger community, e.g. the villages or cantons, whose reputation might be affected by the misconduct of their younger inhabitants.

Marriage was almost formally defined as duty and sometimes alliance. Many unions, therefore, were arranged in a relatively arbitrary manner by elders (grandparents and parents or, in the event of their absence, uncles and brothers). Among people of the higher classes there often was a large range of pre-existing specifications regarding an eligible or possible mate. Betrothal with or without immediate marriage was arranged before youngsters had much opportunity to interact with each other as adolescents, often before puberty. Even if physical maturity or puberty was awaited, there still was physical and social separation of potential mates. In spite of all, this sex partition can only be regarded as an ideal rather than a strict observance, especially among the ordinary people.
Choice of Mate. Among the factors determining choice of mate were social standing, economic status, honorableness, and the moral reputations of ascendants parents' and grandparents' pasts were often taken into consideration since heredity was believed to strongly influence moral character.

Much emphasis was placed on other social values, such as the prospective mates', and parents' degree of formal education or literacy, social rank, honorific title, and moral and intellectual department as measured by Confucian cultural and ethical canons and contemporary standards. Certain prejudices limited the choice to classes of eligibles, preventing, for example, theatrical artists and singers from marrying people outside their occupational category and women of bad reputations from making honorable engagements.

The role of parents, as pointed out earlier, was clearly dominant, if not exclusive, in the choice of mate. Although the desirability of yielding to the wishes of the young people was always somewhat recognized, parents seemed to exert strong pressure upon their children, especially their daughters, to accept their decisions. Up to the third or fourth decade of this century, the young people, particularly girls, showed a generally submissive attitude toward their parents' choice and decision.
In more recent times this easily manageable disposition has been found more commonly in the countryside than in urban areas. In both geographical patterns, there has been a growing change in the attitude of children and parents as well toward the matter of choice and enforcement of decision. The tendency has been that young people fight to free themselves from the arbitrary authority of their parents and the parents no longer exert their authority with the same diligence as before. At present, conflicts between children and parents in the choice of a mate seem to be more frequent, or at least more apparent, as a result of less submission to paternalistic authority, stronger desire for individual self determination and a relative deterioration of the old ethical and cultural pattern.

Adolescents and young adults meet one another much more frequently than in the past and opportunity for pre-marital social contacts exists, with or without control, in market and business places, schools and entertainment spots. This has lead to contacts, engagements and unions initiated by the parties concerned. The role of parents has been reduced, in many cases, to one of advice and sponsorship, probably more effective in rural areas than in towns.

Many parents nowadays appear to be more receptive to cultural change and either tolerate this virtual violation of
Marriage Age and Child Marriage. In the old times, the marriageable age was believed to be 13 for girls and 16 for boys. In spite of this, marriage, for various reasons, very frequently occurred at earlier ages. Among farmers, there might have been economic motivations—parents perhaps were short of labor and tried to get daughters-in-law for "free" domestic help. Daughters-in-law sometimes were sent to work on or even supervise the farming operation. A girl's own parents, if financially weak, might have wanted to get rid of mouths to feed. In most cases of child marriage falling into the first category, the girl was older than the boy, sometimes his senior by five, 10 or 12 years. The boy may not even have reached his teens.

Another motivation for child marriage might have been an excessive eagerness to have grandchildren, especially boys. This was particularly true in families which had very few boys, regardless of the number of girls. Here again, the girls were generally older than the boys who often were not yet out of their teens. In many cases, both motivations concurred to build up this practice regarded as harmless by many a naive parent who rarely anticipated any overt or latent discontent.
In former times, the alliance of two families was also a factor which produced child marriages. Engagements in such cases were generally made by parents when their children were very small or even before they were born. Seemingly very few of these couples failed to hear about the absence of happiness in marital life and their problems, mostly hidden, did exist and tortured them all their lives.

However, everything has changed with time. The marriageable age is no longer set so low as before; throughout the country it is now around 16 or 18 for women and 20 or 21 for men. Minimum ages tend to be higher in urban areas, probably a result of the influence of western culture and changed economic conditions. While it is not the point here to determine the actual age at which marriage most often occurs in rural and urban areas, it may be interesting to note that country people marry earlier than city people, that the actual marriage age in rural areas is closer to the modern ideal mentioned above. In towns, the actual marriage age seems to be much higher and bachelors and spinsters are not rare among people who have been affected by the cultural and economic impacts of modern life. Child marriages are also less frequent nowadays, especially in urban areas. In very remote parts of the country, the general tendency has been
to move gradually away from this practice, apparently for the same reasons as in towns.

Wedding Rituals. The rituals observed during the last three decades have roughly the same principal characteristics as those followed in earlier times. They still bear the same appellations and imply therefore the same significance. However, the way of conducting them has changed in many aspects, and to unequal degrees, according to different levels of acceptance of the foreign, or more explicitly, western culture.

Although discrepancies in ritual also exist among regions and smaller divisions of the country, they are not so important as to alter the general pattern significantly. Wherever necessary, qualifications arising from geographic, economic and social differences, as well as evolution, will be indicated.

The Inquiry of the Name. When a boy has reached the marriageable age, his parents set about discreetly choosing a mate for him, either by themselves or with the help of an intermediary. In either case, the formal contacts between two families usually require the intervention of an intermediary, a man, or more often a woman, of middle age, well known in the community, and enjoying a good moral reputation.
Naturally, the intermediary or go-between should be an acquaintance, if not a close friend to both parties. The reward he or she may receive for rendering such services is rarely publicized, but it is understood that a small gift of a traditional robe or something similar was the most frequent item chosen in the recent past by North Viet Nam country people as a token of their gratitude. It also could be food, drink, money or jewels depending on the economic level and the degree of sophistication of those concerned.

During the selection process the boy is usually asked or allowed to express his opinion about his would-be wife. In former times, since most boys did not know much about the girls outside their familial environment, there generally was not much contention about the eligible girl proposed by the parents. Youngsters usually relied on their parents and trusted in the wisdom of their choice. Recently, because of increased social contact between the sexes, more disagreement and conflict has occurred; the boy or girl often has a partner already in mind by the time the parents make their move. In such a case, there is either a compromise between the parents' decision and the child's wishes, or a conflict which often ends with the more or less reluctant submission of the child to his parents' will. It is not difficult to
understand why conflicts caused by boys are treated as less sinful than those caused by girls. Public opinion has dealt much more severely with misbehaving women than with men. In a relatively few instances these conflicts lead to suicide, reflecting much less a protestation against the parents' oppression or rigidity than a recognition of an unavoidable transgression of moral principles by weak human creatures.

The intermediary's task always has been to introduce the families of the betrothed, to provide them with the necessary information concerning each other's moral, social and economic standing and to act sometimes as negotiator advocating the interest of one or the other partner. Whatever may be the opinion of the girl's family, their answer is always a very courteous but indecisive statement leaving freedom for possible favorable or unfavorable attitudes in the future. No girl's parents are so clumsy as to give an immediate affirmative or negative answer. They may slight themselves in the first instance and be accused of haughty or conceited behavior in the second. Sometime later the intermediary calls once or twice again to get the answer which may be favorable or not, but invariably is formulated in very courteous terms. Usage requires that acceptance of a proposal begin with stereotyped decorum and end with
such words as: "We believe that it is within the authority of Mr. and Mrs. X (the boy's parents) to decide on the matter, we have no idea of our own and rely upon them to judge on the desirability of this alliance which would be a moral privilege to us..." Refusal should be formulated in no less tactful and graceful manner so that it cannot hurt the feelings of the boy's family. For this, a whole collection of conventional formulas are available. Their meanings may be as follows: "Our daughter is still too young, too inexperienced in household and other work, her age does not match with that of her proposed mate...," "She has too many young brothers and sisters who need her care, her imminent absence from the household would be detrimental to the economic condition of the family."

A very frequently indicated reason for refusal used to be discord in the couple's horoscopes. Since time immemorial, one of the most important steps in the tentative and final arrangements for marriage has been to consult and interpret the horoscopes of the two parties and sometimes those of their parents as well. This process is called the "comparison of the couple's ages." If the ages are interpreted as being in discord, either one or both of the parties involved is reluctant to offer or accept marriage for fear of eventual
marital problems which might result in separation or even divorce. Cases in which the horoscope data has been deliberately misinterpreted to provide an excuse for a courteous refusal or to withdraw an offer already made have not been exceptional occurrences.

If proposal of the boy's family is accepted, it is expected that the two families will appear to decrease their visits to each other and make them more formal, especially if they previously were close friends. The girl's parents try to avoid visits to the boys family for fear that frequent contact might be interpreted as an over-zealous effort to "sell" the girl. Up until the last couple of decades, the girl and boy also tried to avoid meeting as it was believed that pre-marital social contacts, public or private, reflected bad behavior or violated ethical principles. This explains why an engaged girl even tried to hide her face with her hat when she confronted her future life companion. The boy never found this strange and could, in fact, only be proud of it, being assured that this shyness was proof of her chastity.

More recently, in urban areas especially, this avoidance of one another is no longer observed with the same diligence as before. Future husbands and wives are permitted to meet together fairly frequently as an approach to better understanding. These meetings are generally under the discreet
supervision of parents or the disguised "watch" of brothers and sisters.

The first ritual in the marriage process has always been the "inquiry of the name" or in popular terms, "the crossing the girl's house gate." It consists mainly of bringing the future bride's family gifts which must include a full bunch of areca nuts, a copious provision of betel leaves and possibly tea and other foodstuffs such as cakes or candies. As usual the hour and date for the ceremony should be carefully chosen by the horoscopic calendar. The visitors include the elder members of the boy's family, both men and women, dressed in their best clothes, and led usually by a distinguished looking family patriarch. The gifts are placed on round, red-varnished trays covered with lids and borne on the heads of black-clothed porters wearing red sashes around their waists. The porters march to the girl's house single file. The visitors are always welcomed with great fuss and solemnity. It should be noted that the future bridegroom's participation in the first visit is a necessary condition and that the intermediary also is always present as a member of the boy's party. It is expected that during the reception the girl must appear under the pretense of serving tea to the visitors.
In an ensuing interview between the girl's parents and the intermediary, the nature and importance of the wedding gift is discussed. The results of the discussion are later relayed to the boy's family. After many tactful exchanges of views, the families agree, through the intermediary, on terms concerning the amount of the gift required by the girl's parents and provided by the boy's parents. At these meetings, the date for the formal offer of marriage also is fixed.

Wedding gifts asked by the girl's parents usually are comprised of a certain number of sets of presents to be distributed to the relatives, friends and acquaintances of the girl's family. Each set usually is composed of a couple of more or less substantial packages of tea, candies or glutinous rice cakes, one or many areca nuts and many betel leaves. The number of sets depends on the social relations of the girl's parents. A wide circle of acquaintances would lead them to demand a considerable amount of gifts, while a limited number of relatives and friends would restrict the number of gift sets presented. In addition to these, a fairly complete trousseau; jewels consisting mainly of the engagement ring and/or earrings, necklaces, and bracelets, and a certain amount of money may be included among the items demanded for the bride.
The next step is the delivery of these gifts which also must take place on a propitious day and hour. This ritual is called the formal offer of proposal of marriage. On the appointed day, the boy's parents select a relative or close friend of advanced age to accompany the intermediary and conduct the family "delegation" to the girl's house. This delegation is composed of the future bridegroom and some of his relatives and close friends, followed by gift carriers who may be either relatives or hired persons. In most parts of the country, the boy's father participates in this ceremony but in some regions, people say, he does not.

At the girl's home, the group is solemnly received and invited to sip tea, to smoke pipes or cigarettes, to chew areca nuts and betel leaves and sometimes to have a drink of liquor. Gifts are displayed on the ancestral altar where lights and joss sticks are lit and incense burned. The girl's father bows repeatedly and kneels before the altar to request acquiescence by his ascendants. He is followed in this ritual by the future bride and bridegroom. Afterwards, the girl usually withdraws into a back room, the boy may sometimes act as a member of his future wife's family and entertain the guests.
After a long talk, oftentimes desultory, the head of the girl's family rises to express his thanks to everyone and take down the gifts from the altar. The edible gifts are divided into two unequal parts. The smaller portion is set aside to be returned to the boy's family as an appreciation for its excessive generosity and an indication that the girl's parents are not being so greedy as to accept the whole amount. It is a symbolic gesture signaling good luck in the alliance of the two families.

In some cases, the visitors are invited to stay for a welcome lunch. After they have departed, the sets of edible presents are distributed by the girl's parents to relatives, friends and acquaintances. It is usually the girl's sisters, sisters-in-law or close friends who actually take charge of this operation but they act always on behalf of the parents or grandparents.

After this formal offer or proposal of marriage, the boy is expected to become one of the girl's family and occupy a rank determined by his future wife's position.

In the past, the bridegroom sometimes had to wait as long as two or three years before celebrating the wedding and all during this period his relationship with his future in-laws was supposed to be maintained with generous presents
offered on such occasions as New Year's Day, anniversaries of death of the girl's ancestors and annual celebrations (the 3rd day of the 3rd lunar month, the 5th day of the 5th lunar month, the Mid-Autumn festival and so on). Invitations also were sent to his future in-laws on all anniversaries of the boy's own ancestors. The waiting process was often so demanding that it caused many complaints among the populace. In the last three decades, many changes have occurred in the requirements of the waiting period which has now been reduced to one year or a few months, sometimes a few weeks, and considerably simplified.

The Celebration. As dictated by long tradition, it is necessary to consult the horoscopic calendar and make a comparative study of the couple's own horoscopes to find propitious date and hour for the wedding celebration. It is believed that weddings should not take place during the hot season, supposedly an undesirable time to start a stable union. In both households, preparations are made to celebrate the long awaited event.

In most rural areas, especially in North Viet Nam, communal ties are very strong and require that the boy's family formally notify the community in which it lives usually the village or hamlet, of the forthcoming marital
union. In the North, the notice-giving once consisted of: 1) a more or less substantial present of food and drink offered to a council of a socio-ceremonial character existing in every village, and 2) a payment of money made to the same organization as a contribution to its fund.

This formal but extra-legal acquiescence by the community does not waive the more recently established (some 40 years ago) inscription in the civil status record kept by the village or municipal civil status officer operating in the smallest administrative unit.

Another most important matter in times past was to provide the couple with a nuptial couch. The purchase of it was usually entrusted to a relative who has enjoyed a happy marital life and has many children. He was also requested to lie down on it to impart his good luck to the new couple. Nowadays this practice is no longer heard of, and it should be accurate to consider it a regional custom of the past.

The boy's parents usually invite their relatives, friends and acquaintances to a banquet on the day before the wedding. In the past, this affair was generally arranged at the family's own residence, but now many people turn it over to some decent restaurant which is better equipped to serve large numbers of people. A few weeks before the wedding
day, a wedding announcement card is sent by both families to each of their relatives, friends and acquaintances. To the closest relatives and friends, an invitation to the banquet is attached to the wedding card. Those who accept are expected to send a gift to the new couple which may consist of a sum of money placed in a red envelope or household items. At the beginning of the party, one guest usually acts as spokesman for all the others and expresses congratulations to the couple's parents and wishes happiness and longevity to the bride and groom. The boy's parents then thank the guests for their wishes and gifts and ceremoniously invite them to sit down at the table and begin the party. During hard times and among less wealthy families, this celebration may be simplified; it may consist of a "tea party" at which tea, soft drinks and a variety of cakes and candies are served. In still less privileged families, no entertainment is offered to a large group of people and the sending of wedding cards is the only step taken to notify relatives and friends of the event.

The propitious day having been chosen, the bridegroom and his family start on a trip to the girl's home, at an hour also determined by horoscopic readings, to conduct her to the groom's house. They walk in a procession which
follows a fairly set pattern, usually led by an elderly man clad in indigo or black robes and carrying an incense burner. Close behind him are other older relatives of the groom and his parents. Next comes the bridegroom himself wearing brand new clothes and escorted by half a dozen attendants. He is followed by his brothers and sisters and closest friends. Some ladies occasionally may be found accompanying the procession, bearing in their arms round boxes containing areca nuts, betel leaves and cigarettes to refresh the marching group.

This march on foot to the bride's home is common in rural and other economically poor localities. Sometimes the trip is shortened by the use of boats or motor buses depending on the distance and the physical condition of the marchers. In urban areas, wealthier people generally use various means of transportation in the procession, from the old fashioned rickshaws and tricycle cabs to hired taxis or cars or cars owned by relatives and friends. The means of transportation, of course, is considered a great reflection of the socio-economic status of the parties concerned and many a prestige-conscious town dweller is willing to spend much money on the ritual of the procession.

Upon arrival at the gate of the girl's house, the pro-
cession announces itself and the marchers are invited in at once by the girl's parents and relatives who do not want to go farther out than the threshold or gate. This is because the latter only accept or wholeheartedly welcome the proposal of marriage and do not initiate the move to offer the hand of their daughter.

After taking seats in the parlor and sipping the customary cup of tea, the head of the boy's family group solemnly formulates the request to "bring away the girl to be a daughter-in-law of our family." The head of the girl's family answers with a courteous and equally-solemn statement of approval.

Next, the bride's father approaches the ancestral altar and bows and kneels in front of it to request supreme acceptance of the marriage by his ascendants. He is followed in this ritual by the bride and bridegroom, the former to take leave of her ancestors and the latter to introduce himself to them and ask their acquiescence to his integration into the family.

At the end of this purely ceremonial activity, a banquet sometimes is offered to the boy's family delegation. They gladly accept but afterwards appear to be very impatient to leave, thus giving the impression that they are anxious to take the girl to their own home.
On the way back, the elder relative again leads the procession, carrying the incense burner. Now the group is joined by many of the bride's attendants, friends and relatives who want to follow her to the house of her husband-to-be.

In rural areas of North Viet Nam, at various spots along the way to the bridegroom's house, children used to hold strings as barriers across the road or path and collect "tolls" which were always gladly paid. This generosity was believed to attract the good luck so strongly desired by every new couple. A reluctance to pay would have been interpreted as an unwillingness to seek a durable union.

At the gate of the groom's house the procession usually is greeted by a thunder of firecrackers. The bride's relatives and friends are invited into the house, asked to take seats and sip tea. Then the ceremony to honor the genie of marriage begins.

The genie of marriage or the Rose Silk Thread God is supposed to promote and be responsible for the marital union. In his honour a special altar is set up lit with bright candles and perfumed with burning incense and josssticks. Here again, an elderly member of the boy's family conducts the ceremony, standing at the point closest to the altar and bowing before it. In the next places, just behind him,
are the bride and bridegroom. After bowing many times, along with the bridal pair, the patriarch holds up a sheet of red paper on which an appeal for protection to the genie of marriage is written in Chinese characters. While the appeal is read aloud, the couple stands still listening attentively to it. When the reading is over, the elder pours alcohol into three cups standing on the altar, bows three times, then gives one cup to the groom who sips from it and hands it to the bride who does the same thing. After this ritual drink, the sheet of red paper is burned and the three bow again before the altar to pay their final respects.

The bride is then taken by her attendants into a room set aside for her at the entrance of which is a table holding food and drink intended for her and her followers. The reason why they are treated in a separate room is that women, and especially newly married girls, are generally very shy in social gatherings.

In the meantime, other members of both families sit down together for a banquet or a tea party. The bride is expected to appear at the end of the celebration to pay her respects and be introduced to the relatives and friends of her husband. In regions where gifts are not sent prior to the wedding day, this is also the time for the guests to
present their gifts to the new couple. Sometimes the bridegroom's parents deliver their gift at this time, formally and publicly and also give guidance and advice to their children as they prepare to start an independent life. After this, members of the bride's family begin to withdraw, their hosts accompanying them to the gate. Only the bride's attendants remain with her in her own room.

In many instances, entertainment offered to the boy's family friends and acquaintances went on for many long hours or even days, keeping the new husband busy as long as it lasted. The bride spends the first night in her room at her husband's house with her attendants, while the bridegroom sleeps in a separate room with his attendants. In former times, professional entertainers were hired to play various kinds of music to divert the guests and hosts.

The second day is set aside especially for treating the bride's and bridegroom's attendants. A lunch is given at the end of which the bridegroom's parents thank his friends for their assistance and courtesy. Generally on this day, but sometimes on the third, the new couple pays a formal visit to the bride's family. The couple may be accompanied by the husband's parents or other relatives. On this occasion, a gift consisting of one or many trays of cooked glutinous
rice, cooked chicken, roasted pork and other delicacies are presented to the bride's parents. The visitors are invited to have tea and stay to a luncheon party; before they leave, they are requested to take back a portion of their present. The parents and relatives usually leave first, leaving the newly married couple to follow sometime later.

Marital Life. From that day, the new couple starts its own life. They may either live independently and earn their own living or live with the husband's parents for a fairly long period of time, under the parents' authority and guidance.

The girl no longer bears her maiden name. If, for example, her husband is called X, she will be called Sister X by her husband's brothers and sisters and also by her husband's parents. His nieces and nephews will call her Aunt X and so on.

When the first child is born, the couple no longer calls its parents "father and mother" but "grandfather and grandmother," on behalf of the child and to teach him to call his grandparents by the proper names. Also after the birth of a child the couple is called, in rural areas, by a variety of curious appellations such as "mother of the boy,"
"father of the boy," or girl as the case may be.

How much the general pattern described above has been affected by change in each region of the country and the smaller geographical divisions, in various socio-economic groups and in various culturally sophisticated classes, can only be guessed and should be the subject of a more elaborate survey than this impressionistic description and analysis.
III. PREGNANCY AND CHILDBIRTH

Preliminary Considerations. Until relatively recent times, to have many children and a large extended family was the dearest desire of almost every Vietnamese married couple. This pronounced love for children, especially for males, derived from the attachment to the patriarchal family pattern and to the Confucian ethical and cultural philosophy which dictates that to procure male descendants is one of the most important duties of every man in the society. In Viet Nam responsibility for the care of aged parents and the veneration of ancestors rests with the sons of the family. This helps explain why childless couples tried all means available to remedy their situation, including frequent visits to pagodas or grottos where spirits, famous for their "effective" powers to endow devotees with child-producing ability, were worshipped.

At the first signs of pregnancy, the mother-to-be must take great care to preserve and promote the physical and mental health of the baby. Years ago, she was usually bound to follow very strict rules concerning her diet and all activities. She was advised to only eat foods known to be nourishing, to behave in an exemplary manner, to avoid
indecent speech and unwholesome thinking, to keep the strictest ethical rules in mind, to always act as though she were in the presence of her baby, talking to him day in and day out, educating and guiding him in his physical, intellectual and moral activities. All these cares came under the term **thai giao**, or "prenatal education", and were given considerable importance in former times, especially in families of some standing.

It is also interesting to note that the expectant mother was encouraged to eat only moderately nourishing food and avoid things considered "too nourishing". People believed that the latter would make the foetus grow too big and the delivery therefore would be difficult and painful. The pregnant woman also was advised to take certain medicine which would keep the baby from growing too big and would make the delivery easier.

Among the undesirable foods are dog, rat and snake, none of which are commonly accepted either by men or non-pregnant women, regardless of socio-economic status. Alcohol drinking and cigarette smoking, considered very bad habits for women, has been strictly condemned in the North and looked upon as loose conduct in the South. Betel leaf and areca nut chewing is tolerated.
Pregnant women are discouraged from undertaking work which requires a great deal of physical effort, and from getting involved in tense situations. It is feared that excessive physical and emotional strain is detrimental to the normal growth of the baby.

In the past sexual intercourse was supposed to be avoided all during the period of pregnancy for fear of miscarriage which was often considered a punishment from God for misdeeds committed by the parents during their earlier life or even in a previous existence.

It was also believed that a pregnant woman should not attend weddings and funerals as her presence could bring bad luck to the individuals and families concerned. An expectant mother was discouraged from meeting people about to set out on business trips for fear that her appearance would be a bad omen for the success of a traveler's commercial or a personal affairs. She was not supposed to step over a hammock (for fear the child would become a lazy boy), walk too much, ride in uncomfortable vehicles, reach for things high up, nor frequent places of worship.

In earlier days, a midwife was sent for when time for the delivery arrived. She helped deliver the child, cut the umbilical cord, and washed and dressed the mother and infant.
The midwife was assisted by one or several female members of the family, usually the mother-in-law or a sister-in-law who was well informed in this sort of thing. A traditional practice, found in all parts of the country, was to cut the umbilical cord with a sharp piece of broken earthenware or a knife made of bamboo, instead of a metallic tool, and to wrap or dress the newborn baby in old clothes discarded by his elder brothers, sisters, cousins or children of neighbors. The father usually was allowed to have a look at his child only after it was washed and dressed.

After giving birth, the mother was often warmed by means of a charcoal stove placed beneath her bed in the belief that she needed to regain the heat lost during the delivery. The ironing of the mother's body by a small hot stove, intended to smooth the wrinkled skin of the abdomen, was practiced in the Khanh Hau area but was not common elsewhere in the country. However, the use of a decoction made of special vegetal ingredients has been observed nearly everywhere.

The newborn child used to sleep beside its mother, but now, in urban areas, there is a growing tendency to provide the infant with a cradle of its own.

Although the common desire is to see the mother relieved
of all physical activity for at least two months, but mothers from low economic levels are often compelled to resume their regular indoor and outdoor work one or two weeks and sometimes a few days after giving birth.

It is considered advisable that a couple abstain from sexual intercourse for at least three months after the birth of a first child. It is difficult to determine the extent to which this recommendation is followed but it is believed that people in rural areas are more willing to observe the restriction.

In the last few decades, most expectant mothers have gone to local maternity clinics where their babies are delivered by western trained midwives and nurses. There appears to have been little or no reluctance—even in remote rural areas—to accept new medical techniques and practice in connection with childbirth. This does not mean that the majority of women, from both rural and urban areas, no longer rely on many traditional practices, such as avoiding certain foods believed harmful to expectant mothers; eating heavily salted stewed lean meat, potages, noodles; avoiding exposure of the body to the sun and wind for many months; avoiding baths for many months. It is not the purpose of this short paper to determine the extent to which traditional practices