

Exploring the Vietnamese Culture

Background



Vietnam, officially called the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, is a country located on the eastern edge of the mainland of Southeast Asia. Vietnam borders China, Laos, and Cambodia, and its capital is Hanoi. The largest city in Vietnam is Ho Chi Minh City, formerly Saigon. Vietnam is a developing country with a lower to middle-income economy. Vietnam is mostly hilly and densely forested, with mountains accounting for almost half of its land mass. Over half of the country's population lives in low-elevation coastal areas. During the Vietnam War in the 1900's many Vietnamese people were exposed to the chemical herbicide Agent Orange and it continues to cause birth defects and health issues in the Vietnamese population.

Traditions and Customs

The Vietnamese culture is diverse with 54 ethnic groups reflecting customs, rituals, history, and beliefs, passed down through generations. The Vietnamese practice ancestor worship by paying homage to ancestors through rituals, offerings, and visiting graves. They are creative and skillful with a cultural heritage of intricate wood carving and lacquerware to vibrant silk weaving and pottery passed down through generations.



Holidays and Celebrations

Traditional festivals in Vietnam are vibrant and often evolve around historical events, folk beliefs, and spiritual practices. They also display flags reflecting a deep sense of national pride. The Vietnamese celebrate the Lunar New Year known as Tet Nguyen Dan. During Tet, families gather to exchange wishes for a prosperous year, prepare special meals, display colorful decorations, and give one another red envelopes with "lucky" money. The Lim Festival celebrates spring and commemorates the unique culture of the Red River Delta. Quan ho folk songs are performed with people dressed in traditional clothing serenading each other in dragon boats. Independence Day commemorates Vietnam's independence from France in 1945 with patriotic displays, parades, and fireworks at night.

Education and Literacy

The official language of Vietnam is Vietnamese. The national literacy rate is about 90%, with higher education experiencing significant growth.



Health Disparities

Vietnamese Americans experience a higher number of strokes, heart disease, and lung cancer. In addition, the Vietnamese experience high incidence and death rates from liver, lung, and cervical cancer.

Traditional Food Practices

The Vietnamese practice communal dining, which emphasizes the importance of family and community bonds. Meals are often shared, with dishes placed at the center of tables for everyone to enjoy. They believe it fosters a sense of togetherness and hospitality. The Vietnamese cuisine encompasses five fundamental tastes: sweet, salty, bitter, sour and spicy. Traditional Vietnamese cooking uses fresh ingredients and not much dairy or oil. They make use of herbs and vegetables. Their diet is also low in sugar and naturally gluten-free, as many dishes are rice-based. Fish sauce, consisting of fermented and salted anchovies, is commonly used. Feasts are prepared for weddings, funerals, and festivals with up to 12 people per table. There are two courses: the main course and dessert, with large pots of soup in the center of tables and individual bowls of rice. Vietnam also has a huge drinking culture around beer and rice wine, especially during social gatherings and important business transactions. Vietnamese cuisine emphasizes aromatic herbs, fish, rice, and vegetables. Pho, a national dish, is a beef or chicken rice noodle soup sprinkled with fresh herbs, including cilantro, Thai basil, and mint. Chopsticks and spoons are used at meals.



Considerations for WIC Educators and Counselors

- Vietnamese diet is generally healthy with rice, vegetables, and fish, but common condiments such as fish sauce and MSG can be high in sodium.
- Many Vietnamese are lactose intolerant; however, most Vietnamese children growing up in the U.S. drink milk.
- Pregnant Vietnamese typically eat a healthy diet but may not get enough calcium because of a lack of dairy in the diet.
- Vietnamese tend to formula-feed infants and may perceive that formula is more nutritious. Vietnamese families introduce solid foods to infants at about six months, starting with rice gruel.
- Minced meat or vegetables are gradually introduced into the congee or rice gruel when the infant is about nine months old, and more solid foods added after the infant turns one.



References

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