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### A New Year Festival to Celebrate Cultural Identity

The Vietnamese Lunar New Year was first introduced by China, Viet Nam's oppressors for almost two thousand years (Le par. 7). The Chinese brought their own policies, culture and traditions to Viet Nam, including the Lunar New Year, which the Vietnamese people now commonly refer to as Tết. Even though Chinese in origin, like other countries in East Asia, Viet Nam has adopted the Lunar New Year festival despite the end of Chinese domination and has made the Lunar New Year's festival *its own*. Even though Tết originated thousands of years ago, many Vietnamese celebrate the festival today in America and over time, the festival's traditions have changed. However, the value of this festival lies neither in its Chinese origin nor in how it was initially celebrated in Viet Nam. Tết's value is a result of how Vietnamese-Americans today are relating to their past and thus, preserving their identity.

Some would argue that Tết no longer has any significance because its celebration has been detached from its original setting. In his essay, "Ways of Seeing," John Berger discusses how reproduction of art obscures the past, which results in a loss of power and disconnection from history (157). This is what Berger calls mystification. Tết is mystified because it is a reproduction of the Chinese New Years. However, by mystifying the Chinese origin and making the Lunar New Year its own, the Vietnamese were able to retain their cultural identity despite Chinese oppression.

The Vietnamese oppression by the Chinese mirrors the example of Spanish colonized Aztecs that Michel de Certeau gives in his book, *The Practice of Everyday Life*:

Submissive, and even consenting to their subjection, the Indians nevertheless often *made of* the rituals...imposed on them something quite different from what their conquerors had in mind...they were other within the very colonization that outwardly assimilated them...The strength of their different lay in procedures of ‘consumption.’ To a lesser degree, a similar ambiguity creeps into our societies through the use made by the ‘common people’ of the culture disseminated and imposed by the ‘elites.’ (xiii)

In the general introduction of de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life*, he dedicates the book to the “ordinary man” and discusses how consumption (ways of using) allows for resistance (xiii). The Vietnamese resisted not by rejecting the ritual imposed on them by their oppressors, but rather by making “transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own interests and their own rules” (xiv). The Vietnamese adopted the Lunar New Years, but left the Chinese myth of the festival’s origin behind (the myth that the New Year’s celebration was a result of the Chinese celebrating the annual defeat of a legendary man-eating beast) (Chinese New Year sec. 1). Instead, the celebration of Tết centers around the springtime idea of rebirth and renewal.

The traditional customs of Tết reflect this very idea of renewal and are based on old cultural beliefs that may seem superstitious, but they involve taking actions that are pure and revitalizing, actions that are all in the spirit of Tết. The Vietnamese believe that the actions they take during the weeks of festivities are omens foretelling the events to come in the New Year, thus their customs are intended to get the new year off to a good start (What is Tết sec. 1). Traditional customs to prepare for and to celebrate the festival include: settling debts and disputes, setting off firecrackers and performing lion dances to ward off evil spirits, spending time with family and wishing them longevity and a prosperous new year and visiting ancestral graves to ask for blessings, etc. (Tết Customs sec. 1-8). These customs may or may not be incorporated into the celebrations of individual families who partake in Tết festivities in America today and this explains why

conservative traditionalists fear the loss of these customs and fear that mainstream American culture will assimilate the Vietnamese people entirely.

By becoming completely assimilated into American culture and becoming remote from our heritage, we are “deprived of the history which belongs to us” (Berger 157). Although the Vietnamese New Year as it is celebrated today is a multicultural celebration, it is far from being characterized solely by American customs. Yes, there are elements of American culture, but the term multicultural entails that the celebration is a fusion of traditional Vietnamese and American culture, and other traditions as well. Vietnamese-Americans are not becoming remote from their heritage. For example, recently in Chicago, the Vietnamese community celebrated Tết with other Southeast Asian communities, including Cambodians and Laotians in a separate event from the Chinese New Year festival organized by the city’s Chinese community (Le par. 11). There is always a risk of being alienated when a people attempt to assert itself as independent from a former oppressor. However, this action is important because there is an empowering result—it allows for a preservation of cultural identities distinct from that of the oppressor.

“The Death of the Author,” an essay by Roland Barthes, describes the importance of deauthorizing a text (disassociating the author from a particular work) in order for the reader to create his or her own meaning from the text. This relationship is comparable to the relationship between Tết and the role of its celebrators. In this essay Roland Barthes writes, “we know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable center of culture” (151). Lunar New Year’s is a text. The way in which it is celebrated in America is a collaboration of the various cultures that take part in it. Although originating from China, there is no single meaning of the festival. So instead of insulating themselves and limiting its celebrations to the traditional customs,

Vietnamese Americans have chosen to reinvigorate their culture and to share it with other ethnic communities, since, after all, there is no single way to celebrate the New Year. Vietnamese communities are developing all over the country, and Tết celebrations are reflecting this evolution by continually incorporating different elements from these new social and cultural environments.

One first-generation Vietnamese-American shares her family's first Tết experience in America:

When it [Tết] came around, we told them [sponsors] stories about the festivities that we had back in Viet Nam...Our sponsors were very interested about Tết, it was so foreign to them...[For Tết] we ate an American dinner, we did make the traditional banh chung [known as moon cake in English] for them to try... of course, we didn't see any lion dances or receive li xi [lucky money], but we still felt lucky after having 'ăn Tết' [meaning 'to eat Tết,' an idiom for 'to celebrate.'](Le Interview)

The Vietnamese New Year's is the "multi-dimensional space" in which a variety of cultures come together. This woman and her family found a way to celebrate their traditional New Years in a new and overwhelming social and cultural environment and "without leaving the place where [they had] no choice but to live and which lays down its law for [them], [they established] within it a degree of plurality and creativity" (de Certeau 30). This fusion of American and Vietnamese cultures was important in retaining this family's Vietnamese identity upon their arrival in America, a country that they then considered foreign. It exemplifies how celebrating Tết in America (an example of what de Certeau terms as "consumption") provides a means of resistance, a resistance to an American culture that seeks to assimilate and dominate.

Media and entertainment are often used to influence and profit from the general population economically. The Vietnamese are able to use these to their own ends to benefit and enrich Vietnamese communities culturally. Continuing with the idea of consumption, de Certeau writes,

“the procedures of contemporary consumption appear to constitute a subtle art of ‘renters’ who know how to insinuate their countless differences into the dominant text” (xxii). Just as apartment renters make changes in an apartment to make it “habitable,” the Vietnamese people have created their own space and have found new ways to celebrate Tết while remaining in American culture (xxi). One way this is accomplished is by organizing annual Tết festivals in local communities.

Seattle, Washington, is home to Tết In Seattle (TIS), a known organization that plans annual programs for Tết festivities. The goal of these modern-day festivities is to “unite the Vietnamese community [to celebrate together] and introduce its unique culture to other ethnic communities in the greater Seattle area” (History of Tết In Seattle par. 1). These festivals are promoted in the media to encourage members of the community, including non-Asian Americans, to attend by advertising the crafts and games designed for children, art exhibits, fashion shows, Vietnamese knowledge competitions, and musical entertainment that are in the program (Le par. 12). These activities and events are designed to teach its participants and its audience about the history and culture of Viet Nam. By incorporating these “American” customs of entertainment and using them as means to present its unique culture to the community, the Vietnamese-Americans have in the process, asserted themselves as a culturally distinct group.

However, for those who are concerned for the past, these new “customs,” ways of celebrating Tết, may seem like forms of mystification that have “little to do with the vocabulary used...[but rather with] the process of explaining away what might otherwise be evident” (Berger 161). Conservative traditionalists fear that the grand festivals with the lively entertainment and exhibitions of selective cultural artifacts are colonizing, and thus explaining away, the traditions of Tết that would otherwise be evident if only the traditional customs were practiced. These new customs may seem like they detract from the concepts of Tết, but this is not reason enough to disregard a celebration that has been central to Vietnamese culture for so long. Berger himself, in “Ways of

Seeing,” discusses how many learnt assumptions “no longer accord with the world as it is...out of true with the present, these assumptions obscure the past. They mystify rather than clarify” (157).

The learnt assumption that traditions are better than new customs is out of true with the present. The new ways Vietnamese-Americans are celebrating are not necessarily deviating from the concepts of renewal and nourishment of a spiritual unity with one’s friends and family that are embedded in Tết. Programs such as TIS have been implemented by many Vietnamese communities that include live entertainment, booths and food to attract all members of the community. Yes this is a new way of celebrating the New Year’s that was not seen originally seen in China, or even in Viet Nam until the last decade, but the process itself can be considered in the spirit of Tết, a process of renewal. The intent of these new ways of celebrating is to provide a means to retain a Vietnamese identity.

Instead of focusing on the past customs of Tết, the emphasis needs to be placed on how the present and the past come together and why it is essential that they do. Roland Barthes discusses the effect of “deauthorizing” a text and writes:

there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written here and now...writing can no longer designate an operation of recording, notation, representation, ‘depiction’...rather it designates exactly what linguists...call a performative, a rare verbal form...in which the enunciation has no other content...than the act by which it is uttered.

(151)

The Lunar New Years is a text that is essentially written here and now. Destination has greater importance than origin, which cannot put a constraint on how one chooses to celebrate. Tết has no other meaning than the way it is celebrated in the present because what matters is how families decide to celebrate, to what extent they want to transform the traditional Tết customs in order to make them relevant to their lives, and how they are able to relate to their past. Only by deauthorizing the spirit of Tết by establishing their own traditions can families make a more direct connection to

their past in a more meaningful way in comparison to families that perform rituals just for the sake of following customary traditions for the New Year.

The Vietnamese New Years and its festivities are examples of how a people can preserve and promote its cultural heritage within a multi-cultural world. The Vietnamese culture has survived, not because the culture has isolated itself from the rest of America, but rather it has survived through efforts to celebrate Lunar New Year as an independent people and as part of a larger community. America is infused with so many cultures, therefore it is important to at least have an awareness of one's heritage for "a people or a class which is cut off from its own past is far less free to choose and to act as a people or class than one that has been able to situate itself in history" (Berger 174). There is no future without the past, therefore it is important to bring the past into the context of the present in order to ensure a future where one is free to choose and act as a people. The Vietnamese-American celebration of Tết serves as an example of how one can integrate elements of American culture without being assimilated by it. Without access to one's history, that cultural identity will be lost and one will have no choice but to conform and be one within America's melting pot.

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