

Research On Experiences Of Tet Rituals By Vietnamese Students In Korea

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Abstract: *This qualitative case study is about Vietnamese student in Korea and their experiences of Tet rituals (Vietnamese Lunar New Year). As in 2015, the number of Vietnamese student in Korea is in the second place just after Chinese student. However, research on Vietnamese student in Korea is insufficient. This study investigates the socio-cultural features of Vietnamese students through their experience of Tet. This study provides understanding of Vietnamese culture. Through this, the cultural diversity of Vietnamese students in Korea might be received more respect. This study was supported by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and National Research of Korea (NRF-2015S1A2A03048350).*

Key word: *Vietnamese students, traditional culture, cultural change, Tet ceremony, multicultural mentorship*

I. INTRODUCTION

This study aims to explore Vietnamese culture through experiences of Vietnamese students in Korea about Tet (Vietnamese Lunar New Year). Research problem is how Vietnamese culture appeared in the experiences of Tet of Vietnamese students in Korea.

The main research participants in this study is three Vietnamese students who study in Korea. These research participants all have common in abroad experience. Each of them has been living in Korea for more than one year and spent Tet holiday in Korea.

Korea and Vietnam have maintained close relationship after establishing diplomatic relations in 1992. The relationship also endures in education sector. In 2015, number of Vietnamese students is the second highest number among international students enrolling in higher education institutions in Korea (Korea Ministry of Education, 2015).

Several measures have been raised for international students to adapt quickly to Korean academic environment. In particular, systems of mentorship are also emerging as a specific measures for emotional support. Nonetheless, almost researches on international students enrolling university in Korea have only focused on Chinese students. Moreover, these studies mostly concern on economic aspect (Yong Gyun Lee, 2015).

Nieto (2010) emphasized that cultural diversity must be emphasized in multicultural society. Vietnamese students in Korea are also key members of Korean multicultural society. Thus, it is required to support for their successful study abroad. Prior to that, a contextual understanding of their culture and emotion should be preceded, because it is unable to support international students without the understanding of their cultural background. From this point of view,

understanding of Vietnamese students in Korea and their cultural background is not only the responsibility of Korean society, but also considered as condition for assist their successful study abroad.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1. Culture and Cultural variability

Yong Gyun Lee (2015) mentions that most research previously done on international students in Korea have been from the economic aspect and are therefore, limited. Lack of understanding of cultural and emotional characteristics of international students in Korea can lead to their marginalization.

General lifestyle such as ideas, symbols, behavior, values and beliefs shared by a certain groups, is called culture (Banks, 2008:83). However, due to different definitions by anthropologists and sociologists, culture is understood on many levels as a complex concept (Geertz, 1995).

Until the late 1950s, culture meant the style of actions and customs. However, recently, it is placing emphasis on shared knowledge, belief structure, symbols or meanings. Goodenough (1957:167) sees culture as something a person has to study, a result of learned knowledge. Also LeVine (1986) defines culture as “shared group of thoughts”. Triandis (1975) looked at culture as something artificially made, which includes personal and collective outlook on the world.

Through their definitions we can see that it is difficult to explain culture simply as one phenomenon. “Knowing a different culture” means understanding not only the universality but also distinctiveness of culture (Song-Lan, 2010). Culture is delivered through learning, and is shared and accumulated to members of society. Also, culture changes upon meeting an outside culture or value judgment of a member, and is shown variously all over the world.

Although culture has a universality which can be verified in all communities and cultural groups, at the same time reflects distinct characteristics definitive of one particular community. Rituals related to birth or death of human beings can be seen as a case of cultural universality. On the other hand, rituals of Tet or specified dates can be different based on the natural environment, historical background, as well as social conditions.

On the social level, culture can be classified into high-context culture and low-context culture. Though, such classification, as Hall (1976: 341) mentioned, can be applied as a frame of understanding when one gets rid of the stereotypes about. Above all, it is because culture is continuously changing in the interaction of individuals and society. Thus, in order to understand the cultural characteristics of Vietnamese students, there is a need for understanding of not only features of traditional culture but also contextual understanding of Vietnamese traditional culture as experienced by them.

2. Traditional holidays and rituals of Vietnam

Vietnam and Korea received much “Confucian influence” which originated in China based on the agrarian society (Kim et al., 2013:148). This fact explains the many mutually shared features in the life culture of Korea and Vietnam. According to Kim et al (2013:202-203), Vietnamese holidays center on traditional rituals, and it is said that the pay tribute to the benefit of their ancestors. Thus, even today, ideas of Confucianism play an important role in perception as well as attitude of people both in Vietnam and Korea. In other words, the common cultural features of the Vietnam and Korea is a factor which can positively affect the mutual understanding and evaluation of the two countries.

Thus, as Kim (2003) claimed, after the 1990s in the universal level, by fostering “cultural

homogenization”, “globalization” made it difficult for culture to keep its original characteristics. Hong Youl Han, Yeon Gak Kim & Young Woo Kim (1999) claim that after the economic reform policy (doi moi) of 1986 Vietnam has been experiencing drastic inflow of foreign culture. According to the neoliberalistic economic area, it can be said that the towed sociocultural change is an element that increases the cultural similarities of Vietnam and Korea even more.

However, Hyun Jae Kim(2014) & Ho Thi Thu Huong (2015) paid attention to the characteristics of Vietnamese culture and told about the differences between the Korean traditional “rituals”.

Through funeral research Hyun Jae Kim (2014) investigated the indigenous mental world of Vietnam. He argues that Vietnamese funerals, different from those of China, developed differently due to influence of the afterlife view which believes in the indigenous religion and afterlife. Also, Ho Thi Thu Huong (2015) observed the originality in the way of thinking, stereotypes as well as customs of each country are inherent.

Waldenfels (1991:53) stated that understanding the other person is “a process of constant effort”. Also understanding is different depending on the point of view. In this study we aim to examine the experiences of Tet from the point of view of Vietnamese students residing in Korea. With this study as a basis, it is expected to help understand the cultural characteristics of Vietnamese students in Korea and will provide help for them to succeed as a study abroad student.

III. RESEARCH METHOD

1. Research Method

In this study, the qualitative method of case study was used in order to understand the Vietnamese students’ experiences of traditional rituals. Qualitative research has an advantage of finding

out the meaning of the theme from the point of view of research participants, and in the natural context they find themselves in. Case study is about exploring issue based on some cases in the context through field work (Creswell, 2007: 111). In this study we aim to explore the cultural characteristics of Vietnamese students through their experience of Tet.

2. Research Participants

The research participants are three Vietnamese students currently enrolled in a university located in Incheon, Korea. This university is peculiar due to the fact that it is the first university of the country to open a branch school overseas with differentiated cultural diversity and education. The research participants were selected through snowball sampling and are holders of at least level 4 of Test of Proficiency in Korean. Also they have experienced Korean culture for at least 1 year while attending university, and they have Vietnamese culture and experiences still vivid in their memories. Although the research participants shown in Table 1 below, were preparing for final exams and reports at the time of the interviews, they kindly answered our questions.

Table 1. Research Participants

Participant	Sex	Age	Department	Period of stay	Hometown
A	F	23	Korean language	1 year	Southern Vietnam (Ho Chi Minh City)
B	F	27	Korean language	2 years	South Central Vietnam (Da Lat)
C	M	29	Korean language	1 year	Northern Vietnam (Hanoi)

Although the research participants are from different parts of Vietnam, they all decided to further their studies in Korea due to their interest in the Korean language as well as culture. Also, they all have common in their academic background.

3. Data Collection and Analysis

The focal point of the data collection of this study is group interviews about Vietnamese students. From November 12 to 26, 2015 group interviews were conducted in 3 parts considering the reserved characters of Vietnamese students. Then on December 14, an additional interview was conducted. The location of the interview was a classroom in the graduate school, which is a psychologically familiar place for the research participants. The interview was conducted using semi-structured interview questions focusing on the traditional culture of Vietnam. The questions included difficulties in study abroad, Korean culture and holiday experience, and holiday experiences in Vietnam. With the agreement of the research participants the interviews were recorded and notes were taken. After transcribing the recorded data, through open coding and process coding, it was deducted into 187 units of meaning. Then, using line unit coding with each research participant, we ultimately deducted the data into 3 subthemes and 8 meanings of themes. Also, it passed through reviews of 1 PhD student and 1 Master's student and verification of research participants.

Table 2. The themes of Tet and their meanings to Vietnamese students in Korea

Common Theme	Subtheme	Meaning of theme
Cultural traits of Vietnamese Tet	Personal rest	Memories of Tet
		Emotional resting time
	Sense of religion	Tet rituals
		Sense of religion expressed differently
		The sense of piety of ancestors worship
	Developing the sense of community	Fellowship as a family community
		Preparation for Tet as a community
		Tet rituals as community activities

As shown in Table 2 above Vietnamese Tet is an important ritual that characterizes the Vietnamese culture. The meaning of Tet and traditional rituals of Tet experienced by Vietnamese students in Korea showed differences according to living spheres and sexes. However, they commonly perceive Tet as the day they have to return to Vietnam.

IV. RESULTS

1. Personal rest

Similar to Korea, Vietnam has Confucian traditions and seasonal customs. Although the official Tet holidays are 4 days, Vietnamese celebrate this holiday during a one-month period. Despite the events provided for international students by their schools in Korea, Vietnamese students think of Tet as the time when it is mandatory that they return to their home country.

1.1 Memories of Tet:

The first mention of Tet by Vietnamese students is not that different from that of Korea. These

similarities can be seen in “things done on Tet” suggested by Participant A. “Things done on Tet” in Vietnam include making Tet food, ancestral rites, greeting their family and relatives.

We perform ancestral rites once the kids are dressed in clean clothes and mothers prepare food. After the meal, we greet our grandparents with New Year blessings and visit our uncle. (A, 2015/11/19)

1.2. Emotional resting time:

The Lunar New Year in Korea lasts 3 days. In Vietnam, officially the Tet holidays are from Lunar December 30th to January 3rd according to the lunar calendar. However, unofficially, the period of Tet in Vietnam is 1 week or 1 month. For Vietnamese students this period is not only for preparing for Tet, but also for sharing their heart, meeting family and friends who are a foundation of emotional support.

When we go to school our friends in the neighborhood also go to there (school in the neighborhood). We were close and spent time together (ellipsis) During those times we would wonder about how and what major we would study (ellipsis) At that time, the daughter of the neighbor was majoring in Korean Language. She told me that the department of Korean Language had recently been established at Da Lat University and recommended it to me. (B, 2015/11/12)

For Vietnamese students a friend is not the general peer, but also includes “neighbors” who share their experiences in a spatially close distance. Also, we can see that to Participant B a friend’s influence is as big as to play a big role in deciding their major in university. In other words, Vietnamese Tet is the time of meeting emotional supporters such as family and neighbors, as well as the time of rest.

2. Sense of religion

Vietnamese students said that during the period of Tet, they mainly practice ancestral rites. During Tet, the ancestral rites are conducted before Tet, the day of Tet, after Tet, and can be classified into something that is done every day and on special days. Traditional rituals of Tet are slightly different depending religious characteristics of each house. However, the rituals of Vietnamese Tet has meaning as acts of finding one’s roots and connecting the past with the future. Through this image were able to identify that Vietnamese students perceive Tet as a period of fulfilling a kind of religion.

2.1. Tet rituals:

Tet rituals in Vietnam start before the day of Tet. Decorating the house or the memorial service for the Kitchen God, ancestral rituals before the day of Tet fall under the rituals before Tet.

I don’t think there is a place where decorating one’s home, pinning flowers or conducting a memorial service to the Kitchen God is done like in Vietnam (ellipsis) I think Vietnamese people do it more prudently. (B, 2015/11/26)

On the last night of the lunar month together with our family we go to the temple, then come home and in the morning we visit our grandparents and other relatives, and then until the fifth day we go to several different temples. (C, 2015/11/26)

It is said that in Vietnam the Kitchen God reports each family’s affairs to the sky on 12/23. Therefore, the service to the Kitchen God can be seen as an act to reflect on the past year and praying for a new future. In the same meaning, cleaning the house and decorating it with flowers and the rituals before Tet are all acts connecting the past to the future.

There are competitions of making Banh chung, a Vietnamese food with other Vietnamese students. On the last day of the month at exactly 12 o’clock

we take out the Banh chung and give a prize to the person who made the best looking Banh chung. After making all the Vietnamese food we sit together, drink beer and play games (A, 2015/11/26)

However, as presented above in the statement of participant A, Tet programs provided by universities in Korea are done with a focus on “competition” and “games”. In other words, Tet provided in Korea for Vietnamese students is merely an event or a competition instead of reflection on one’s own roots and praying about the future.

2.3. Sense of religion expressed differently:

Vietnamese students explain the characteristic of Tet through the traditional ritual called ancestral rites. The ancestral rites hosted in Vietnam can be classified according to the period and location of the rites. There are rites conducted every day at home during the Tet period, visiting the graves of ancestors and village rites hosted on the last day of Tet. Also, depending on each house, there are rituals of visiting relatives in the evening. Vietnamese ancestral rites are have slight differences depending on the household and the character of the ancestral rites.

As soon as we wake up we eat together, conduct the ancestral rites, go to the temple and conduct the ancestral rites there, then go to the cemetery and conduct the ancestral rites there as well. Once we come back, we have lunch together, in the evening we visit our relatives and wish them a Happy New Year (ellipsis) because our religion is different, there are rules in performing the ancestral rites. The person who supervises the ancestral rites bows and recites the written prayer in the middle. Other people pray individually, instead of out loud (during the recitation of the written prayer), then at the end, if they want to pray additionally, they pray more. (B, 2015/11/26)

In the statement of Participant B we were able to learn that there are changes happening in the forms of ancestral rites according to the religious influence. The household of Participant B are believers of the Cao Dai religion which was discovered during their “grandmother’s time”. According to the doctrine of this religion, in Participant B’s household, although they pray individually, the form of the traditional ancestral rites is “reciting the written prayer” together.

2.4. Ancestor worship as pious ritual:

There are some rituals that are made together in the New Year ritual in Vietnam, such as reading the written prayer, burning incense, burning votive paper, etc. The leading role of the elderly as main priest in the ritual is similar with Korean culture.

We are burning the votive paper. Like a lot. We prepare so every gods can receive the clothes made with votive paper. Not only clothers, we also prepare stuffs such as horses or fishes made with votive paper. Of course, we must prepare money and gold made with votive paper as well. (A, 26. 11. 2015)

The ritual of burning votive paper which is mentioned above by A is a ritual done at home on the last day of Tet. It also can be done at the tomb of ancestors on New Year’s Day. When Korean visits their ancestor’s grave, they bring foods to console the death person’s spirit. On the other hand, Vietnamese prepares votive paper and burn it. The meaning for burning off votive paper at Vietnamese home on the last day of Tet is for driving off bad things in their families. It can also be found in A’s statement that Vietnamese considers and calls their ancestor as god. In other words, through ritual activity called ‘ancestor worship’, Vietnamese identifies their origin of present from the past. It can also be considered as an activity to connect with the faith in the future.

3. Sense of belonging to community

During Tet, Vietnamese students in this study have chance to verify and to build their sense of community as a member of their family and local communities. The ritual Vietnamese students do during Tet is considered to be the activity of exploring their origin. The Tet ritual is also opportunity for Vietnamese students to verify their sense of belonging to their communities in which their families is formed. People in village prepare and take part in the communities' ritual hold on the last day of Tet together. As an activity of the village community, this ritual is to build sense of membership to those who live in village community.

3.1. Sense of belonging to family community:

Tet is not only the biggest ceremony in Vietnam, but also the time for all family members to gather. Although roles of family members are differed by gender and age, they all have common way of expressing love to their family through Tet ritual. This is the similar with Korean Lunar New Year's rituals.

It is responsibility of women to do almost everything in the kitchen. And men is responsible for the performance of ancestral ceremonies. (B, 14.12.2015)

If there is any favorite food that ancestors preferred when they were still alive, we will prepare that kind of food for ritual. (B, 26.11.2015)

My grandparents live separately (with us). They also do ancestral ceremony on Tet. But the leading role belongs to my parent. It is like... My family often plays a prominent part in performing the ritual for my late great grandmother. My cousins perform the ritual also, but they are just do it simply to show their good care. (A, 26.11.2016)

However, as research participant A mentioned above, the ancestral ceremony is done in every

descendants' houses in Vietnam, that is different from Korean culture in which the ritual is only hold in the oldest son's house. In Vietnam, each descendant takes different role in the ritual on Tet. Nevertheless, there is common in the purpose of the ritual that is to express their sincerity to ancestors. In this regard, the ritual of ancestor worship on Tet becomes a chance for Vietnamese people to strengthen their sense of belonging and fellowship as a member of their family and community.

3.2. Tet preparation as a communal processing:

The village ritual is hold on the last day of Tet and it is discussed by villagers. Through discussion process, Vietnamese solve problems in their community. Through B's statement bellowed, it can be known that the village's ritual is one of problems needed to be solve by villager as they are members of their village's community.

We gather at one place and shared information such as what happened and what we should do in the future. We talk about everything, like remaining problems or new projects. And my village held this event every year. We do it regularly. We join those events. We arrange special place for the ritual. (B, 19.11.2015)

In addition, the village's ritual hold on last day of Tet is an event required to be hold together as a community. At the villagers' meeting, they share information about problems or projects in the village and thus, they try to solve problems in their community. Like this, the village's ritual hold on Tet is considered as part of life that brings joyfulness to members of community. In this context, B's experiences of Korean Lunar New Year are definitely different with his culture.

I spent my Lunar New Year in Korea but it was no fun at all (ellipsis) I couldn't feel it like when in my country. (B, 26.11.2015)

In other words, it can be understood that the lack of communal process in Korean Lunar New Year is one of the main reason for B to describe it “no fun at all”.

3.3. Tet ritual as a communal activity:

As an activity of village community, the village’s ritual hold on Tet’s last day was prepared and participated by villagers. As in the case of Korea, the role of villagers in traditional village priests are divided by the Confucian tradition. Some elders in the village took charge of leading the village’s ritual. There are members taking part in the ritual such as the eldest person reading written prayer, men participating in the ritual, women working in kitchen. As in Vietnamese family, it is responsibility for the eldest person to read written prayer which prays for prosperity of the village community. Therefore, as research participant C mentioned below, family is not only seen as household, but also considered as a village community.

I am going to (spend my Tet holiday) at home (in Vietnam). Because Tet is the time (for family) to gather. Wherever you go, you should come home on Tet. In Vietnam, if a person moves from the North to the South and works there, or vice versa, he or she should come back home on Tet. We Vietnamese has that kind of notion. (C, 26.11.2015)

In this context, Tet is not only a religious implication to explore into one’s origin, but also it is an opportunity for Vietnamese students in Korea to participate so they can build the sense of belonging as a member of their community.

V. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study is to explore the experience of three (03) Vietnamese students in Korea about Tet. This study aims to demonstrate the features of Vietnamese culture. Vietnamese students in Korea, who participate in this study,

consider that they have to come back home on Tet. Their experience of Tet went under a chain of process coding and open coding from which data for this study is derived. Finally, the data is demonstrated into three (03) sub-topics and eight (08) categories of meaning. Through Vietnamese students’ experience of Tet, Vietnamese cultures’ characteristics were indicated as below.

Firstly, Vietnamese students in Korea think about Tet not only as a unique holiday but also as an opportunity for them to relax emotionally through meeting with friend and family.

Secondly, Tet ritual is seen as a symbol of Vietnamese ancestor worship. Various rituals related to ancestor are the expression of their will for bright future by maintaining their own self-esteem.

Thirdly, Tet ritual is a chance for Vietnamese to identify and do their role as member of family community as well as village community.

In this way, Tet can be seen as a symbol of Vietnamese culture. However, as in experiences of research participants A and B, Tet, which is one-time event, is just only an ‘activity of pleasure’. In Korea, we suggest and select the general effective Vietnamese Tet’s culture based on neoliberalism. Yet, Vietnamese students in this study show that they cannot accept the idea of an easy commercialized activity.

Therefore, this study emerges some suggestions in order to help Vietnamese student in Korea to adapt to study abroad. Firstly, the policies for Vietnamese students in Korea must be based on their autonomy and cultural background.

Secondly, both religious value and communal value are needed to be considered when identifying the ritual of Tet. In other words, we should create a culture for Korean academic community in which resolution for Vietnamese students is created.

Thirdly, it is required to support Vietnamese students based on their neighbourliness and their

autonomy. For example, mentorship program in which Vietnamese students act as mentor. This not only reflects their cultural background but also is a remedy to secure their emotional autonomy and to raise their self-esteem when study abroad.

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