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Title

Tét

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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6wd4578z>

ISBN

9781598842401

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Publication Date

2013-11-26

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Tết

The lunar new year is arguably the most important holiday for Vietnamese, whether in the homeland or overseas. Known as Tết Nguyên Đán, or simply Tết for short, the holiday can be divided into three periods: Tết Niên (before New Year's Eve), Giao Thừa (New Year's Eve), and Tân Niên (the New Year). The customs and traditions associated with Tết have changed for Vietnamese Americans, as with other cultural forms that have endured international migration.

Historically, Tết was a tradition passed on from Chinese to Vietnamese during the two thousand years of Chinese colonial rule of Vietnam. Despite the contentious relationship between colonizer and colonized, Tết was a cultural tradition that Vietnamese have adopted and kept relatively intact. This vexed colonial history has resulted in the need among many Vietnamese to emphasize that Tết is not synonymous with

Chinese New Year, as often understood in the mainstream. Some key differences in Vietnamese observance of the lunar new year is the difference in three of the 12 animals chosen to represent the lunar-solar calendar used by Chinese and other Asian countries. The lunar-solar calendar is based on both the moon and the sun's cycles. Chinese use 12 different animals to represent the 12 months that are part of one full year's cycle. Vietnamese lunar calendar replaces the Chinese's sheep, rabbit, and ox with the goat, cat, and buffalo, respectively.

Traditionally, customs in the observance of Tết include cleaning and decorating the house, making special delicacies such as bánh chưng (rice cake wrapped in banana leaves), buying new clothes to be worn for the festivities, visiting family and friends, giving children lucky gifts of money in red envelopes (lì xì) and wishing each other prosperity, good health, and good luck in the new year. Tết also provides the occasion for Vietnamese to settle debts and disputes and clear the way for a brighter new year. Some games often played by children and adults during the new year include lô-tô (bingo), bầu cua (dice toss), and cờ tu'ớng (chess). The most common greetings, often found printed in gold on the lucky red envelopes, are "chúc mừng năm mới" (Happy New Year) and "cung chúc tân xuân" (gracious wishes of the new spring).

According to Vietnamese belief, the first visitor to enter a home on the first day of the New Year is considered to signal the family's fortune for that year. Thus, Vietnamese will invite prestigious, successful, and educated persons to enter their home as the inaugural visitor to usher in all those desired qualities in the new year.

On New Year's Eve, many Vietnamese families will make offerings at the family altar, lighting incense and bidding farewell to the kitchen god, Ông Táo, who must ascend to heaven to report on the family's news to the jade emperor. Besides the domestic rituals and social engagements, Tết also signals a time for remembering and paying respect to one's ancestors. Thus, many families visit the graves of their deceased family members to clean, decorate, and provide offerings during Tết. Family altars are cleaned and decorated with flowers and fruit and offerings are made there as signs of respect to the ancestors.



Vietnamese Americans at a Tết parade in Little Saigon, Westminister, California. (Beth Suda/ZUMA Press/Corbis)

After migration, Vietnamese American communities have continued to observe Tết rituals and have established the annual Tết festival wherever there is a large population of Vietnamese. Even as Vietnamese refugees awaited new lives in transitory refugee camps, they organized Tết celebrations as a way to maintain Vietnamese culture, create a sense of community and belonging, and seek pleasure in the midst of abrupt and difficult change. In different regions of the United States, Vietnamese have celebrated Tết with other Southeast Asian communities, primarily Hmong, Cambodian, and Laotian. The largest Tết festival, by far, is put on annually in Westminister, California by the Union of Vietnamese Student Associations (UVSA). The festival includes a variety of food booths, local business and service vendor booths, games and rides for kids of all ages, and a main stage where live music, dance, and martial arts

performances and fashion shows are presented. The UVSA Tết festival currently attracts over 100,000 visitors over the course of one weekend.

Although Tết connotes a joyous occasion among Vietnamese, the term itself is weighted by the legacy of the Vietnam-American War for many non-Vietnamese. For those unfamiliar with Vietnamese history, culture, and community life, the word Tết itself may denote the Tết Offensive of 1968, a moment considered by historians as a major turning point in the Vietnam-American War. North Vietnamese forces attacked strategic hamlets and villages across South Vietnam during the Tết ceasefire, resulting in devastating losses on both sides of the civil war. Militarily, the Tết offensive was considered a failure for the North, but ideologically the Offensive worked to widen the deep divisions over the war in American society. The loss of American morale has often been cited as

one of the major reasons the war was lost in for South Vietnam and its American ally.

Thus, the connotations and denotations of Tết point to major contradictions in Vietnamese American lives as understood by the larger public. Tết signals the negotiation of Vietnamese Americans with their inextricable ties to the most unpopular war in U.S. history to date. Whenever the term “Vietnam” emerged in conversation, it would inevitably be conjoined with the term “war.” Similarly, whenever the term “Tết” emerged, it would also be conjoined with the term “offensive,” conjuring the tumultuous history of Vietnam, Vietnamese refugees, and a dark period of American history as well. In the 1990s Vietnamese American writers and artists resisted the totalizing narrative of the Vietnam War with the refrain, “Vietnam is not a war.” For Vietnamese Americans, Vietnam signifies homeland, community, and family. Tết, like Vietnam, also signifies homeland, community, and family and so Vietnamese Americans continue to redefine its meaning, moving the public memory of Tết away from the bloodshed of 1968 to imbue Tết with new and dynamic meanings over time.

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See also Chinese-Vietnamese Americans; Vietnamese Americans

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Thai American Organizations

Thai organizations in the United States are diverse, ranging from business and professional associations to university student and alumni societies; from cultural academies and Thai boxing associations to health and religious organizations. Most of them are regional. Some have rudimentary websites in Thai or English; others boast state of the art bilingual websites; still others have no web presence at all. The term “Thai” employed in the title often means the organization emphasizes Thai identity, although “Thai American”

is the designation most often used by the second generation for those born and raised in the United States.

Regardless of their differences, these organizations all share a connection with both the United States and Thailand and a commitment to articulate and practice Thai culture and Thai identity. They organize various events, festivals, and performances to raise the visibility of Thai culture and foster Thai identity in the United States. Moreover, these organizations typically maintain close connections with family, friends, colleagues, and associates in Thailand. Many are also simultaneously involved in projects to improve education, health care, technology, and/or economic development in Thailand and the United States.

A few Thai organizations are national. For example, the Thai USA Association explicitly endeavors to unite Thai migrants in the United States and to support nonprofits in Thailand that work to enhance the lives of the poor as well as promote better education and good health. The Thai Cultural and Fine Arts Institute in Chicago aims at the promotion of Thai culture and fine arts throughout the United States, but it also engages with top performing art schools and artists in Thailand. Similarly, the Thai Cultural Art Association based in Las Vegas aims at promoting classical and folk dance from the four regions of Thailand: the north, northeast, central, and south. In addition, they introduce Thai culture, music, and dance, and conduct workshops, or demonstrations of traditional crafts, food carving, or Thai cuisine, providing Americans with a snapshot of life in Thailand.

Thai business associations tend to meet the more specific needs of a particular constituency. The Thai Commerce Association, established in 2004, supports Thai businesses through the development of Thai Americans within the Thai community and beyond. Its main goal is to help the Thai community overcome barriers, while simultaneously forging networks with larger American society. In contrast, the Thai-American Chamber of Commerce serves as a transnational broker and matchmaker between manufacturers in the United States and in Thailand. It is well connected with the Thai government through the Department of Export Promotion within the Thai Ministry of Commerce.

Thai alumni associations can be divided into three categories. The first type are Thai Student Associations that are generally comprised of graduates, students, staff, and faculty at American universities such as California State University, San Bernardino, Harvard, Brown University, UC Berkeley, Columbia University, the University of Florida, the University of Oklahoma, the University of Maryland, the University of Michigan, and so on. Thai *Smakom* or Thai community, founded in 1980 at UCLA, is a multifaceted association. It provides members with social, cultural, and educational assistance; its mission is to serve as a bridge between the Thai community in Southern California and Thais in Thailand, as well as serving the larger Asian American community. It hopes to create greater awareness of issues Thai Americans face in the United States. The second type of alumni association is comprised of former students, faculty, program participants, grant recipients, and friends who have graduated from or attended American universities but now are living in Thailand. This category includes the Thailand Chapter of the Indiana University Alumni Association (founded in 1948). The Wisconsin Alumni Association Thailand engages in philanthropy in the United States and in Thailand. Alumni organizations tend to maintain a link between the graduates and their respective universities. The third type is comprised of graduates and students from universities in Thailand such as the Chulalongkorn University Alumni Association and the Thammasat University Alumni Association. Graduates of these prestigious schools continue to have relationships with their alma mater. Chulalongkorn University Alumni celebrate their “Chula Spirit.” These alumni provide scholarships and financial assistance to students, and foster a sense of community among alumni of Chulalongkorn University. Thammasat University Alumni Association raised money for reconstruction after the December 26, 2004 tsunami devastated portions of Thailand and for victims of Hurricane Katrina. All these alumni associations collaborate with colleagues in Thailand and support educational activities, especially in science, technology, and education. They also raise funds to provide scholarships and financial assistance for needy students and disabled children.

Many new Thai student organizations have been established over the past 10 years as the number of Thai American college students continues to rise. These student organizations share similar goals: to increase awareness on campus about Thai Americans, Thais, and Thai culture. They raise money through cultural events and food fairs, and sponsor panel discussions, and cultural presentations. At Iowa State University, the Thai student organization assists newly arrived Thais to meet the challenge of living in the United States and provides prearrival assistance, information on housing, visas, work and financial opportunities, as well as advising on personal and cross-cultural matters.

Some Thai American college students identify themselves and their organizations as Thai American. These include the Thai-American Association of Illinois, the Princeton Thai-American Student Organization, and the Stanford Thai-American Intercultural Society. At USC, a Thai club for students from Thailand exists side by side with a Thai American Students Association composed of second-generation Thai Americans. On occasion, a non-Thai establishes a Thai American organization. For example, in 1995, an American man married to a Thai woman cofounded the Thai American Association of Milwaukee. This organization provides service not just to Thais and Thai Americans but also to their families.

Thai health-related organizations come in two main forms: nonprofits such as the Thai Health and Information Services (THAIS), and professional associations such as the Thai American Physicians Foundation, Thai Nurses’ Associations, and a Thai Association of Orthodontists. THAIS is a community-based organization incorporated in 1995 that provides service to Thais in Southern California who are low-income and who have been overlooked by other social service providers. In addition, THAIS provides health education, outreach, such as breast cancer screening, job training, as well as assistance for seniors. In contrast, the Thai-American Physicians Foundation, established in 2000, is made up of medical professionals whose goal is to improve medical education, research, and service in Thailand. They hold conferences in Thailand, sponsor Thai medical students to train

in the United States, fund medical research in Thai schools, and provide an exchange program between American doctors and Thai doctors. It is worth pointing out that, in the early 1990s, the Thai Nurses Association was the biggest and most influential Thai organization in Chicago. Another professional medical organization, The Thai Association of Orthodontists, established in 1982, is somewhat smaller. It offers associates continuing education classes, and presents programs that inform the public about the care and prevention of dental abnormalities.

Some Thai professional associations make an effort to help the Thai American community and promote Thai identity. The Thai Association of Conference Interpreters provides expert language professionals (translators and interpreters) in a variety of disciplines including the medical, technical, and legal fields. The Thai American Young Professionals Association in Los Angeles brings Thai immigrants and the second generation together via social activities and claims “No matter how we identify ourselves, we are always Thai first.”

Los Angeles has more Thai organizations than any other city. Among them, the Thai Community Development Center (Thai CDC), founded in East Hollywood in 1994, is one of the most influential. Its mission is to encourage tourism and economic development and provide access to social services to the Southern California Thai community. The Thai CDC played a major role in establishing Thai Town as a cultural destination in Los Angeles. For years, it has collaborated with the city of Los Angeles and private companies, including Singha Beer and Coca Cola, to improve existing facilities in Thai Town and to decorate the surrounding streets in a Thai manner. The Thai CDC pays particular attention to the working class and subjects of human trafficking. It sponsors community development projects including affordable housing and access to health care, as well as promoting small businesses. This organization is also responsible for Thai Cultural Day and the L.A. International Curry Festival.

There are a few Thai sports organizations, mostly tennis, golf, and kickboxing. The Thai Golf Association of Baltimore attempts to help Thais enjoy golf at the lowest cost. At the same time, it strives to build

friendships and field a team to compete in the Thai Interstate Golf Tournament. On the other hand, the Thai Tennis Association of Southern California appears to be more active in the community, and works to help boost tennis participation among Thai children and adults alike. The Thai Boxing Association of the U.S.A., founded in 1968, is the oldest and biggest Muay Thai (kickboxing) organization in the United States. Over the last decade, Western mixed martial arts fighters have been greatly influenced by the fighting style of Muay Thai kickboxers, for example, kicking with the shin instead of the foot. Similarly, many of Thailand’s kickboxing champions have adopted elements of Western-style boxing, which includes throwing hard punches.

The most influential Thai religious organization is the Thai Buddhist temple because Buddhism is Thailand’s official state religion and the vast majority of Thai immigrants self-identify as Buddhist. (See the entry “Thai temples” in this volume.) The Council of Thai Bhikkhus in the United States is an organization for Thai monks who serve at Buddhist temples in the country. The monks get together once a year to exchange ideas and discuss issues that they all confront.

Because Christianity is the unofficial state religion, the number of Thai American Christians, Presbyterians in particular, has rapidly increased. Currently, the Thai Yellow Pages lists 37 Thai Christian churches; they are concentrated in seven states. California has the most churches with 19. The Thai Christian Fellowship Church, established in Los Angeles in 2005, organizes weekly Bible studies, prayer meetings, and youth ministries; it stresses the need for outreach and community development. Other churches, for example, the Barcroft Bible Church Thai and Lao Ministry in Fairfax, Virginia, has members with multicultural backgrounds for it offers the mass in Thai, Lao, English, Spanish, and Korean.

In short, a wide array of national and regional Thai organizations has blossomed like wildflowers following a spring rain. They embody the diversity of Thai Americans. As transnational agents, young and old, professionals and entrepreneurs, monks and kickboxers, they are not only planting roots to improve their circumstances in the United States, but also

giving back what they can to Thailand. Thus, by connecting themselves to the country where they come from and the country where they now dwell, Thai American organizations serve as a bridge between the two.

Jiemin Bao

See also Thai Americans; Thai Temples

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