



Diversity of Cultures

Tết in the Diaspora: Migration, Memory, and Traditions

Historical Context

Tết Nguyên Đán, commonly known as Tết, is the Vietnamese Lunar New Year and the most important celebration in Vietnamese culture. Rooted in centuries of agricultural and spiritual traditions, Tết marks the arrival of spring and a chance for renewal, family reunions, and honoring ancestors. In Vietnam, it is a time of deep cultural rituals, such as cleaning homes to sweep away bad luck, cooking special foods like bánh chưng and bánh tét, and lighting firecrackers to ward off evil spirits. Homes are decorated with peach blossoms, families prepare special dishes like bánh chưng (sticky rice cakes), children are given "lì xì" (red envelopes with money) for good luck, and people wear new clothes to symbolize renewal. But Tết is not just celebrated in Vietnam. After the Vietnam War ended in 1975, millions of Vietnamese people left the country, becoming refugees and eventually settling around the world, particularly in the United States, Canada, France, and Australia. In these new homelands, Tết became a way to preserve culture, language, and identity. Chinese influence is evident in several key aspects of Tết celebrations in Vietnam, particularly in the adoption of the lunar calendar and the shared significance of family reunions, ancestor worship, and celebratory customs. However, it's crucial to acknowledge that despite these influences, Tết has also developed unique Vietnamese customs and traditions over time, reflecting Vietnam's own distinct cultural identity and history. Community festivals, parades, and temple visits during Tết help younger generations connect with their roots and keep traditions alive. Tết is a symbol of resilience and continuity for a community of people who have experienced war, displacement, and cultural transformation. Whether celebrated in Hanoi, Houston, or Paris, Tết offers a shared sense of home for the Vietnamese diaspora and an opportunity for all to reflect on the past, hope for the future, and celebrate cultural pride.

[Link to Pronunciations](#)

Connection to Habit

The celebration of Tết Nguyên Đán is an excellent example of the Diversity of Cultures habit of mind. Tết shows us how cultural traditions like honoring ancestors, preparing symbolic foods, or exchanging red envelopes carry deep meaning shaped by historical and spiritual contexts. By studying how Vietnamese communities mark the Lunar New Year, both in Vietnam and across the diaspora, we see how culture is not static but adapts in new settings while maintaining its core values. Tết in Houston or Paris may look different than in Hanoi, but it still offers a shared sense of identity and belonging. Learning about Tết also highlights shared humanity. The desire for renewal, connection with family, and hope for the future are universal. Yet, how these desires are expressed through fireworks, food, or rituals reflects the unique histories and environments of different communities. Appreciating Tết allows us to see both the distinctiveness of Vietnamese culture and the common threads that connect people across time and place. It reminds us that understanding others' cultural traditions deepens our own understanding of history and the human experience.

Discussion Questions

- Why do Vietnamese families honor their ancestors during Tết? How does this reflect cultural views of family and history?
- How did Chinese influence shape the way Tết is celebrated in Vietnam? What are some ways Vietnamese people made the celebration their own?
- How has the celebration of Tết changed for Vietnamese communities living outside of Vietnam? What role does it play in helping preserve culture?
- What does the celebration of Tết teach us about how culture continues to adapt through migration and change?
- How does the celebration of Tết compare or contrast with your own traditions?

Suggested Activity

Materials Needed:

- Digital copies of the examples of Tết altars and cultural items
- Computer
- Notebook paper
- Optional (non-digital alter): Poster/Paper, Scissors, Markers/Colored pencils, Craft materials, etc.

Part 1: Examine Tết Altars and Cultural Items [5 mins]

Examples of altars and cultural items:

- [A red envelope decorations \(lì xì\)](#)
- [Tết Money Tree](#)
- [Tết Altar #1](#)
- [Tết Altar #2](#)

Part 2: Design Your Own Tết Altar [30-45 mins]

Choose one of the following options:

- Option A: Draw your own altar on paper or digitally create using Google Slides, Canva, or similar.
- Option B: Create a 3D model using craft materials, objects from home, or a shoebox.
- Option C: Create a digital collage with labeled images from the internet and write short descriptions of each item's meaning.

Include the cultural items used in traditional Tết altars:

- Incense (for communication with ancestors)
- Candles (symbol of light and protection)
- Flowers (typically peach blossoms or yellow apricot flowers)
- Bánh chưng or bánh tét (sticky rice cakes)
- Fruits (mâm ngũ quả or "five-fruit tray")
- Photos or name plates of ancestors
- Lì xì (red envelopes)
- Water, tea, or wine

Part 3: Write a Reflection (Half Page) [10-15 mins]

Answer the following:

- What items did you include in your altar, and why?
- How do these items reflect Vietnamese cultural values during Tết?
- Why do you think it's important to honor ancestors during holidays?
- How might learning about holidays like Tết help us better understand and appreciate people whose backgrounds are different from our own?

Alter Assessment Criteria

Accurate inclusion of at least 5 cultural elements:

_____ / 50 pts

Creativity and thoughtful design:

_____ / 25 pts

Clear explanation of symbolism in reflection:

_____ / 25 pts

Primary Source 1

Red envelope decoration (lì xì)



Source: [A red envelope decorations \(lì xì\)](#).

Primary Source 2

People celebrating Tết by cutting red envelopes from a lucky money tree.



Source: Trimming the money tree, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Tet-holiday>.

Primary Source 3

Examples of Tet Altars



Source: [Community temples also decorate their altars for Tet, Children's Discovery Museum of San Jose.](#)



Source: [Family altar for Tet, vndpko.gov.vn.](#)