

TẾT—AGGIEⁱ NEW YEAR

Tết is a variant of *tiết* meaning “timeⁱⁱ of the year.” The Vietnamese celebrate many *Tết*'s during a year, but the one called *Tết Nguyên Đán* [tead nư-ian dahn], or *Tết* for short—Lunar New Year Celebration—is the most important one. Reflecting an agricultural culture in the tropical weather, *Tết* is one the first day of the first month of the lunar calendar—called *tháng giêng* [tahj ji-an] ‘the principal month’ (approximately between in late January and early February of the solar year). Although very ceremonious, *Tết* is practically a family holiday full of sentimentality.



Favorite flowers for Tet, South VN
(Source: Internet)

By this time in Vietnam, harvests of or preparation for all crops being over, spring is around the corner. *Tết* is celebrated in the fusion of four official holidays in the US: New Year's, Memorial Day, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and the private one and above all – a birthday for all Vietnamese people.

Tết marks the return of spring and the New Year when people reflect on the past and make resolutions for the New Year. In fact, at the dinner before the New Year Eve, everybody in the family speaks openly about what the resolution(s) might be before others, especially before the grandparents who would act as judges if goals for the resolutions are not met in the months to come.

It is like Memorial Day for it is a time to pay respects to the deceased members in the family. During the last month of the lunar calendar, called *tháng chạp* [tahj chahp] meaning ‘month for the dead's grave renovation,’ the living pay respects to their passed-away relatives according to their religion and belief. In this month all graves enjoy a new look; even the unknown ones. Grave renovators would spare their time to repair them all.

Like on Thanksgiving, members in the family share a special dinner and express their gratitude to the dead and to the heaven for having blessed them with a safe and sound in the year that has just passed. It is also an opportunity for people to show gratitude to their benefactors. During the week before *Tết*, particularly beginning the 23rd of the 12th month, or *tháng chạp*, when all Vietnamese dedicate the departure of the Kitchen God, or *ông Táo* [oŋm tow], to the heaven for his annual report to the Heaven Emperor, presents, gifts—carefully wrapped and decorated—must be ready to be delivered to relatives or friends of the family.

And it is like Christmas when people give and receive gifts. *Tết* is an opportunity to show how important the “give-and-take” policy works. People would feel guilty if they don't think of the benefactors who have helped them during the passing year. Gifts will speak for themselves as the giver wishes to be thankful for all the help he or she has received from the benefactor. In the old days, gifts mainly were *bánh mứt* ‘cakes or sweetened fruits’ or other home-made products.

Tết is a birthday for everyone, no matter when they are born during the year. When wanting to know how old someone is, a Vietnamese would ask “What age are you in?” Age here means ‘under what horoscopic sign one is born.’ From a Vietnamese's perspective, a baby's life is counted from the very moment of fertilization till and after its birth. Therefore, when born, a new born has existed as long as nine months and ten days in the world. And it is

considered “one year of age.” This age is applied for horoscopic reading, marriage or any important event that one plans such as putting a corner stone for construction, moving in a new home, engaging or wedding hour and day, and so on. The twelve Vietnamese horoscopic signs are: the *Mouse*, the *Water Buffalo*, the *Tiger*, the *Cat*, the *Dragon*, the *Snake*, the *Horse*, the *Goat*, the *Monkey*, the *Rooster*, the *Dog*, and the *Pig*. Each represents some characteristics and personalities of an individual.

In the old days, people, especially country folks, celebrate Tết for a week or two and even a month.

Tháng giêng là tháng ăn chơi,
‘The first month is the month for joy and for fun’

Tháng hai cờ bạc, tháng ba rượu chè.
‘The second month is for gambling, the third feasting.’

Presently, Tết celebration lasts three days.

Preparation for Tết may be the most fun thing, and it takes approximately several weeks prior to the celebration. But it traditionally starts with the departure of Ông Táo [ong tow], or Táo Quân ‘the kitchen god’ on the 23rd of the twelfth month of the lunar calendar (seven days before Tết). It is believed by the majority of Vietnamese people that in their kitchens each there is a god who observes the activities in the family, and on this date, he will leave for the Heaven to report everything he has observed and recorded in the family during the past year to the Emperor of the Heaven for judgment.



Tết pole
(Source: Internet)

On this day, *cây nêu* [kay nay-oo] ‘Tết pole’ is planted in front of the home. This is believed to have been the first national flag of the Vietnamese in the prehistoric era. A clay pot hung on the top of a bamboo tree, whose branches are now stripped off from the bottom to the near top. In the pot, there are some lime powder to rid plague, cactus stems and a bow and a couple of arrows to scare off devils.

The pot is hung on five color threads representing five universal elements: *blue* or *black* for *water*, *red* for *fire*, *green* for *plants* and *trees*, *white* for *metal*, , and *yellow* for *earth*.

After the kitchen god’s departure, homes are cleaned thoroughly and painted with new color(s), which is believed to match the newness of nature and the rebirth of the spring with the hope that things would be better in the New Year. The ancestral altar is also cleaned or dusted. Candle stands and incense burners—usually made of brass—will be polished until they become shiny like new. Fruit bowls are ready to be filled with five different kinds: custard apples, coconuts, papayas, mangoes and pineapples representing the wishes for prosperity in the coming year. In the North, a budding branch of blossom cherry sits at the center of the main table of the family room. In the South a branch of yellow ochna blossom (one of the *Ochna integerrima* Lour, *Elaeocarpus integerrima* Lour or *Ochna harmandii* Lec) is in place of the cherry blossom.



Favorite flowers for Tet, North VN
(Source: Internet)

The blooming of these budding branches has its peculiar meaning as

well. Very early on the first day of *Tết*, the head of household would carefully skim over the branch for any omen of luck. Normally, a flower this type has five petals. It is believed that when a flower with six or more petals appeared, it would be a true sign of good luck and prosperity.

During *Tết*, relatives, friends, colleagues are frequent visitors. Food stuffs, therefore, are purchased in a greater amount than usual for big meals in addition to the special cake called *bánh chưng*. Besides, all kinds of other cakes and sweetened fruit, called *mứt* [muhkt], are served.

These special foods are prepared well in advance, particularly meat dishes, because of traditional beliefs. During the three days of *Tết*, there is no killing of any animal, and people avoid using the stove as much as possible. Therefore, food may be heated but not cooked. The kitchen god and other deities in the household need time to enjoy *Tết* as well.

Preparing for *Tết*, parents are to spend extra money on new clothes for the children and for their parents as well. It is believed that wearing old clothes—a symbol of poverty—during *Tết* would mean that one has to wear old clothes all year round. Besides, adults are busy making or buying gifts to give to their relatives and friends. Gifts during this time are called *quà Tết* [kwa tet] ‘*Tết* gifts.’ People send one another New Year wishing cards, or *thiệp chúc Tết* [tip chookp tet] with lively pictures signifying hope, happiness, and prosperity.

With the New Year that comes bringing a new start, people try to pay off all their debts for they believe that if they owe money on New Year, then debts would have a great impact on their credibility and business. Things that have been borrowed are returned to their owners before *Tết*.

All preparation must be completed by late afternoon of the last day of the 12th month, or *tháng chạp* [taang-chaap] ‘month of the dead’s graves being cleaned up or renovated.’ By now, the streets become less and less crowded with pedestrians or travelers as they hurry home for *Tết*. An offering of food is solemnly made to the ancestors inviting them to join the family. This special offering is called *cúng tất niên* [kung tuhkt nian] ‘end-of-the-year offering’ or *rước ông bà* [roowk ongm baah] ‘ancestral greeting offering.’

At the same time a brief ceremony for the kitchen god’s return is simultaneously performed. Children are eager to put their new clothes on, overwhelmed with some red envelopes of early lucky money. When the offering is over, a union dinner is served with the main dishes used for the *tất niên* offering. All members in the family are supposed to be present. Being away from home alone during *Tết* may be a terrible experience one has in her/his life.

After dinner, adults are busy preparing for New Year’s Eve rites while children are overwhelmed with joy running around the neighborhood showing off their new clothes.

Traditionally, *cúng giao thừa* [kung yiao ture] ‘New Year’s Eve offering’ is marked by the display of firecrackers. A table placed in front of the household is under a burden of food, sweetened fruit, and flowers. From the front eaves of the residential structure, a bundle of firecrackers is hung loosely ready to be ignited. This simply demonstrates the longer the bundle of firecrackers, and the louder they crack when they explode the wealthier the owner. This special night is called *đêm trừ tịch* [dame truh tikt] ‘the threshold of new year’. The moments before the Eve, everything becomes entirely silent as if it is eagerly waiting for something extremely

special to happen. Everyone is in silence to wait for the last moments to be gone without anything going wrong.



Five minutes before the Eve, the household patriarch begins with the burning of fragrant incenses to invite the ancestral spirits to share the festivities with the family through his prayers, to express gratitude to the Heaven, and to give thanks for the safe old year. Then he ignites the bundle of firecrackers. The exploding sounds not only symbolize happiness and hope but also chase away evil spirits as well as bad luck of the old year. This opens to a new year full of high expectations.

The solemn moment passing by, the family sits down to a feast and for resolutions with promises to do better in the coming year. Forgiveness plays a crucial role as people try to forget past mistakes and forgive others.

On the first day of *Tết*, the ritual of *xông đất* [songm-duct] ‘blessing the land’ by a relative or a friend as the first visitor to the residence is well observed. As good luck is paramount in the Vietnamese culture, this first visitor who arrives at one’s land (i. e., residence) is believed to be an omen that brings in good luck or bad luck to the family for the whole year. Such a person is usually either a healthy, wealthy, good-natured, or a highly reputable figure. However, accident occasionally happens; an unexpected visitor spoils the family’s expectation. A person in mourning or a pregnant woman to be the first visitor would mean very bad luck.

Since *Tết* is a family holiday, people spare the first day of *Tết* to visit their grandparents, then their parents and other relatives in the extended family. The second day is for teachers, friends and colleagues. In some areas, the second day is for the “wife’s side.” This is time for the son-in-law to pay respect to his parents-in-law and his wife’s relatives, making best wishes to all of them. The visit is made in a solemn manner with a thurible in front of the wife’s parents’ altar. The third day is for friends and for fun.

During this time, people are on their best behavior, trying to be polite to the elders and nice to the younger for fear that what happens during *Tết* will be repeated during the coming year. Wherever they come, adults give children or young adults of the visited home a sum of money in small red envelope, called *tiền lì-xì* [tian lee-see] or ‘lucky money.’ Upon receiving this money, children reciprocate by wishing the giver longevity, wealth, happiness and prosperity, called *mừng tuổi* [muwng two-e] ‘wishing one for his or her ripe old age.’

On the third day, people usually go to a temple or a church where they pray for a good year before joining in fun games. All kinds of games could be found during this time. Children usually test their luck in a game called *bầu cua* [baw koor] ‘a type of craps’—a pictorial game with a bottle



Traditional.comamer
(Source: Internet)

gourd, deer, shrimp, fish, crab, and chicken.

Tết is an occasion for the Vietnamese to put on traditional costume. Men are dressed in *áo thun* [awthoongm] ‘long mandarin outfit’ and wear *khăn đống* [kan dawngm] ‘multi-layered turban’. Women also wear *áo dài*, a long-sleeved silk dress with high neck, split up the side and worn with long silk pants, and *hài* [hi] ‘beaded-velvet slippers’ or high heeled shoes.

Meeting relatives or friends in streets, or at their homes, people exchange best wishes with one another. Common wishes made during *Tết* are as follows:

Cung chúc tân xuân ‘Many wishes for the new spring.’ (general use in cards, very formal)

Chúc mừng năm mới ‘Many wishes for the new year.’ (general use in cards, formal)

Kính chúc quý vị một năm mới an khang và thịnh vượng. ‘I (or We) respectfully wish you good health and a prosperous New Year.’ (personal use in cards to elderly people, very formal)

Năm mới kính chúc ông bà vạn sự như ý. ‘I (or We) wish you (Mr&Mrs) that all things would happen as you desire in the New Year.’ (personal use to elderly people, cordial)

Kính chúc ông bà một năm mới hạnh phúc, dồi dào sức khỏe và phát tài. ‘I (or We) respectfully wish you (Mr&Mrs) very good health, happiness, and prosperity.’ (personal use to elderly people, formal)

Thân chúc (các) bạn một năm mới được vạn sự tốt lành. ‘I (or WE) dearly wish you a new year with all best things.’ (personal use to a group of friends, colleagues or co-workers, cordial. If addressing to just one person, remove the term *các* in parentheses.)

Thân chúc anh chị một năm mới hạnh phúc và vạn sự tốt lành. ‘I (or We) dearly wish you a new year full of happiness with all the best things.’ (personal use to a married couple)

Mến chúc (các) em một năm mới đầy sức khỏe, học hành tấn tới (và thành công). ‘I (or We) dearly wish you (younger brothers or sister/boys or girls) good health, good progress in education and good success in the New Year.’ (personal use to a group of younger people, cordial. If addressing to just one person, remove the term *các* and *và thành công* in parentheses.)

Last but not least, besides the good ones people are trying to do during the *Tết*, people are afraid of doing wrong things, which may spoil the celebration. Here are some typical DONT’s everybody should strictly observe:

- Don’t speak foul language to keep oneself as pure as a fresh flower;
- Don’t break anything so as to keep oneself as careful as one could be;
- Don’t talk about unpleasant things, or display grief (crying, sighing...) so that one’s manner is always in good mood;
- Don’t refuse to eat anything when offered to show one’s sympathy and courtesy;
- Don’t be the first visitor unless you are invited. Unless invited, come, at the earliest, in late afternoon or on the second day of *Tết* to avoid becoming an unwanted guest;
- Don’t wear or use things with white or black color or anything that suggests mournful manner;
- Don’t sweep the floor in three days, beginning the New Year’s Eve; it is believed

that during this period, the spirits and the deities in charge of the household and the area are also enjoying the coming of new year. Sweeping the floor would disturb their happy time;

- Don't ask for money or the payment of debts; at least this manner shows respect to the debtor's solemn opportunity of the new year;

In short, *Tết* Lunar Year—though undergoes a complicated process of traditional rites full of “superstitious” activities—reflects love, generosity, family strong bond, thanksgiving and hope. It typifies the sentimentalism within each of the Vietnamese.▣



Trần Ngọc Dung
Year of the *Rooster Domestic Fire*

ⁱ Actually, Lunar Year is a new name for Nông Lịch ‘Agricultural Calendar’, The author wishes to go by the original term

ⁱⁱ When significant changes of the weather occur, the change of wind direction is favorable for farming