

# Marriage Ceremony of Vietnamese People in Udon Thani Province, Thailand

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**Abstract:** Currently, there are about 100,000 people of Vietnamese origin living mainly in the northeastern provinces of Thailand, including Udon Thani province. Although having lived in Thailand for many years, the Vietnamese here still preserve and maintain many traditional cultural traits. This article focuses on clarifying the process of forming the Vietnamese community in Udon Thani province and their marriage rites, customs, and practices. The paper firstly clarifies the cultural characteristics as well as the process of cultural contacts and acculturation reflected in the marriage rites of the Vietnamese people in Udon Thani province. Finally, the article makes assessments and comments, and draws conclusions about the process and preservation, and cultural integration of this group of Vietnamese, thereby proposing solutions to preserve, promote and disseminate Vietnamese culture abroad.

**Keywords:** Vietnamese expat, overseas Vietnamese culture, marriage ceremony, Udon Thani, Thailand.

**Subject classification:** Cultural studies

## 1. Introduction

The Vietnamese community in Udon Thani province has existed and developed for more than a century. It plays an important role in forming and consolidating the Vietnam-Thailand relationship, especially during the two resistance wars in Vietnam against the French and the American. Udon Thani province is one of the locations where the national salvation campaigns of the Vietnamese community in Thailand took place. In addition, President Hồ Chí Minh (also referred to later in this article as Uncle Hồ) used to live and work here during the time he was establishing the patriotic movement against the French colonialists (1928-1929). Currently, the province is one that is home to a large number of overseas Vietnamese; it is also the largest economic centre of the Vietnamese community

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in Thailand. There are approximately 20,000 Thai people of Vietnamese origin who account for about one fifth of the number of overseas Vietnamese in Thailand. Udon Thani is also a province where cultural exchange activities of the Vietnamese community in Thailand are regularly organised. The Vietnamese diaspora here has distinct cultural characteristics compared to Vietnamese communities in other provinces in Thailand, as well as Southeast Asia, because this is one of the exchange areas of Thai, Chinese, and Vietnamese cultures. In spite of these contacts and the cross-cultural exchange built up over a long period living side by side, up to now the Vietnamese people in Udon Thani province maintain many of their traditional cultural traits, including marriage rites.

## **2. Formation of Vietnamese community in Udon Thani province**

### *2.1. Period before 1946*

The Vietnamese community has been present in Udon Thani province since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, after many farmers in northern and central Vietnam migrated to Siam (former name of Thailand) in search of a better life. According to historical documents, during the reign of King Rama IV (1851-1868), there were many waves of Vietnamese migration from Vietnam to Thailand due to religious persecution under the reign of King Minh Mạng (1820-1841), in which some of the Vietnamese people moved to Udon Thani province. In the same period, especially at the beginning of 1881, French missionaries in North Vietnam and Laos expanded their activities to the Northeast of Thailand, so at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Udon Thani province, Noong Bua<sup>1</sup> and Noong On<sup>2</sup> became the two villages where Vietnamese first settled. Revolutionary activist Đặng Thúc Hứa<sup>3</sup> together with Vietnamese residents established these two villages which became bases for revolutionary activities to save their country. From 1927 to 1928, Udon Thani province became the centre of mobilisation for the national salvation of the Vietnamese people in Siam with many organisations such the Vietnamese Revolutionary Youth League, the Friendship Association, the Cooperation Association, and the Women's Organisation, etc. In order to develop the patriotic movement against the French colonialists, in July 1928, President Hồ Chí Minh (also known as Nguyễn Ái Quốc at that time) went to Siam to conduct revolutionary activities under the alias of *Thầu Chín* (Old Man Chín) and he visited many areas in Thailand. He spent a long time in Udon Thani province building a revolutionary

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<sup>1</sup> Noong Bua village is located next to Noong Bua Lake, about 3km from the centre of Udon Thani city.

<sup>2</sup> Noong On village is about 12km from Udon Thani city centre.

<sup>3</sup> Đặng Thúc Hứa was a revolutionary who joined the Duy Tân Association and the Đông Du Movement, and then was sent by Phan Bội Châu to Siam (now Thailand) to carry out a plan to build a revolutionary base to support patriots from Vietnam to Siam then to China to find a way to save the country, as well as to help the revolutionary movement in the country for a long time.

movement. This is considered a premise for the Vietnamese community in Thailand to later establish closer diplomatic relations between Vietnam and Thailand.

## 2.2. *Period after 1946*

The largest migration of Vietnamese people to the Northeast region of Thailand was from 1945 to 1946. The Thai people referred to the migrating Vietnamese during this period as the Vietnamese evacuees, the Vietnamese emigrants (*Khon Yuan Opphayop*), or the new Vietnamese (*Yuan Mai*<sup>4</sup>). After the Second World War, the French colonialists planned to retake Indochina and they attacked the border provinces of Laos at the end of March 1946, when the Vietnamese in Laos together with the Lao people stood up to fight against the French. However, their failure caused part of the Vietnamese community in Laos to migrate to Thailand. Most Vietnamese chose to live in Udon Thani province rather than other Northeast provinces.

When migrating to Thailand, Vietnamese refugees received active support from Prime Minister Pridi Banomyong's<sup>5</sup> government which allowed them to reside, travel freely, and find jobs. With the political upheaval in Thailand once Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram<sup>6</sup> was elected Prime Minister in April 1948, the Vietnamese people in Thailand in general and in Udon Thani province in particular faced many difficulties, especially discrimination. The Thai government at that time considered the Vietnamese who emigrated to Thailand as one of the factors causing disunity, potentially undermining security and social order in the country. Hence, the government issued many strict management policies against the Vietnamese community such as a restriction on living

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<sup>4</sup> Thai people of Vietnamese origin (*Khon Thai Chua Sai Viet Nam*) is the official name in current Thai documents. This noun is widely used and popularised after the Vietnamese people were granted Thai citizenship. In addition, the noun "Vietnamese people (*Khon Vietnam*)" is also commonly used by the Thai people. Other terms such as former Vietnamese people (*Khon Yuan Kau*) are used to denote the Vietnamese people who emigrated to Thailand before 1945, and new Vietnamese people (*Khon Yuan Mai*) or Vietnamese evacuees (*Khon Yuan Oppayop*) to denote the Vietnamese people who emigrated to Thailand after 1945.

<sup>5</sup> Pridi Banomyong was the 7<sup>th</sup> prime minister of Thailand from 24 March 1946 to 23 August 1946. Pridi Banomyong's government was a civilian one. Its foreign policy was to live peacefully with neighbouring countries and support the fight for freedom of those neighbouring countries and countries in Asia that had been invaded by imperialists.

<sup>6</sup> Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram was the 3<sup>rd</sup> prime minister of Thailand, who held this position for the longest time in Thai history from 16 December 1938 to 1 August 1944, and again from 8 April 1948 to 16 September 1957. Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram's government was a military one aimed at nationalism, preserving national security, and it sided with the U.S. in conducting a policy of preventing communist influence in Southeast Asia.

areas, forbidding the Vietnamese from certain occupations, banning all political activities in their community, and arresting those who had connections with the communists. The policies and measures of the Thai government during this period directly affected all aspects of life of the Vietnamese community in Udon Thani province.

In 1988, General Chatichai Choonhavan was elected prime minister, after which many foreign and domestic policies of Thailand underwent fundamental changes, including the policy towards the Vietnamese people based in Thailand. In foreign policy, the government advocated improving relations with neighbouring countries by declaring: “*Turn Indochina battlefields into marketplaces.*” Domestic policy also underwent many changes, in which strict regulations on the management of Vietnamese people in Thailand were improved. Some issues directly relating to people's rights were also resolved, such as allowing second- and third-generation Vietnamese people (descendants) to be naturalised in Thailand, while the first generation (parents' generation) was granted a *Certificate of Alienation*. It can be said that since Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan came to power, the life of the Vietnamese community in Udon Thani province gradually became more stable because they benefitted from the same rights as the local Thais. Whilst experiencing political events, at present the Vietnamese community, which has resided in Udon Thani province for a long time and developed strongly, has become one of the communities to have many economic rights, contributing to the growth of Udon Thani province in particular and Thailand in general. Along with economic development, the Vietnamese community here has been making an important contribution to the region's ethnic cultural diversity and playing a role as a bridge to strengthen friendly relations between Thailand and Vietnam.

### **3. Vietnamese marriage ceremony in Udon Thani province**

#### *3.1. Concept of marriage*

Marriage customs are very diverse and rich embodying many typical cultural values of the ethnic groups living in Udon Thani province, including the Vietnamese residing in Thailand. According to the view of the old Vietnamese people, the institution of marriage forms social bonds between two people, between two different clans, institutionalised through the relationship between husband and wife, and between parents and children (Anthropology Faculty, 2008, p.262). Until now, the Vietnamese people in Thailand still maintain this view and value the marriage between them. This is reflected in the proverbs about marriage that have been absorbed into to the minds of many generations of Vietnamese people living in Thailand: “*Trâu ta ăn cỏ đồng ta*” (‘our buffaloes eat grass in our fields’ which means that one should only marry someone from the same village, and it is forbidden to marry a person from the neighbouring village), “*có con thì gả chồng gần,*

*có bát canh cần nó cũng đem cho*” (meaning that one should get married nearby so that one can take better care of one's elderly parents), “*môn đấng hộ đối*” (门当户对 - Mendanghudi - meaning that such marriage is a good match). When they first migrated to Thailand, the first generation Vietnamese (parent's generation) and the second generation (child generation) mainly married within the same ethnic group (i.e. with other Vietnamese people). It was rare for these generations to marry people of a different ethnicity (e.g. Thais, or Thais of Chinese origin). They believed that “marriage between people of the same ethnic group would help them understand each other better and the culture is the same”. In addition, due to discriminatory policies and measures imposed by the Thai government<sup>7</sup> on the Vietnamese community such as restricting where they could live, preventing them from studying, banning them from many occupations, etc., the Vietnamese people often focused on carrying out activities and working together within their community and hence they had few opportunities to interact, communicate, and live with people outside their ethnic group. Another reason for the lack of inter-ethnic marriage is that at first the Vietnamese thought that their stay in Thailand was a temporary one and that they would return to Vietnam<sup>8</sup> after the war. That is why they did not want their children to marry Thais, Chinese, or people of other ethnic groups for fear that it would be difficult for their children to return to Vietnam. Another important reason is that during the 1960s and 1970s overseas Vietnamese were investigated by the Thai government which held negative views towards them, which meant Thai people did not want to marry Vietnamese (Sripana, Thanyathip & Trịnh Diệu Thìn, 2005, p.195).

However, by the third generation (the grandchildren), the political environment and relations between the Vietnamese and the Thais had started to improve and the concept of marriage was more open. In addition, due to the policy of granting nationality and national integration to become a Thai citizen, the Chatichai Choonhavan government created opportunities for Vietnamese, Thais, and Chinese to establish contacts and exchange, thus leading to interracial marriages. More and more third-generation Vietnamese people were born and raised in a Thai socio-cultural environment; they felt they were Thai people of Vietnamese origin rather than Vietnamese people; hence, many third-generation Vietnamese married Thais, Chinese or people of other nationalities.

Currently, the life of Vietnamese people in Udon Thani province has stabilised because the Thai government brought in policies to facilitate former Vietnamese evacuees become Thai citizens; hence, marriage with Thai or Chinese people also became open and equal.

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<sup>7</sup> The early 1950s to 1988 was the period when the Thai government imposed the strictest policies and measures on the Vietnamese people such as restricting their living areas, banning some occupations, banning studying, banning all political activities in the community, arresting people with ties to the Communists. The policies and measures of the Thai government during this period directly affected all aspects of life of the community of Vietnamese people in Udon Thani province.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Mr Trần Mạnh Hồng, 91 years old, former President of the Overseas Vietnamese Association in Udon Thani Province, in Udon Thani province, 24 August 2020.

Despite this, many Vietnamese families still want their children to marry within the same ethnic group because they think that Vietnamese people are more often hard-working and faithful once they get married. In general, when choosing someone to marry the Vietnamese in Udon Thani province previously chose from within their community or through their parents' introductions but nowadays the young generations of Vietnamese people (i.e. Thais of Vietnamese origin) have the right to choose their own partners, and will introduce them to their parents and family members once they get to know each other. This trend is now also popular in Thai society.

### *3.2. About customs, practices, and rituals practiced in marriage*

Currently, the life of Vietnamese people in Udon Thani province, including Vietnamese marriage rituals and customs, has been deeply integrated into Thai culture. In other words, marriage customs of the Vietnamese people have been intertwined, through cross-acculturation, into the local Thai lifestyle creating cultural diversity. However, the Vietnamese people still maintain separate traditional rituals compared to the Thai marriage ceremony. While some traditional marriage customs have been abandoned due to social change, others are still preserved to this day. According to previous traditional customs, the marriage ceremony of the Vietnamese people consisted of six steps: (i) *Lễ Chạm ngõ* (the first official visit - this ceremony is intended to formalise the would-be marriage relationship of the two families), (ii) *Lễ Vấn danh* (the ceremony where the boy's family goes to the girl's house to officially ask for the girl's name and age), (iii) *Lễ Nạp cát* (the ceremony for the boy's family to notify the girl's family that they have consulted a fortune-teller for an auspicious horoscope reading to confirm if the boy and the girl are of compatible age for marriage), (iv) *Lễ Nạp trướng* (the engagement party or pre-wedding ceremony - the boy's family must deliver the required betrothal gifts to the girl's family; if not, there will be no wedding), (v) *Lễ Thành kỳ* (is the ceremony to ask for an auspicious date and time for the wedding ceremony), and (vi) *Lễ Cưới* (the wedding ceremony per se).

However, now the Vietnamese in Udon Thani province only focus on the engagement and the wedding ceremonies. In traditional Vietnamese culture, checking the time, date, and ages of the bride and the groom to determine the auspicious dates for the engagement and the wedding ceremonies is considered important, but nowadays Vietnamese people in Udon Thani province do not pay much attention to this. When they consider the auspicious date (i.e. *giờ lành*) to hold a wedding ceremony they are also influenced by Thai culture, such as avoiding weddings in the rainy season or because it is the harvest season of the local villagers. Instead, it is better to hold a wedding at the end of the year in the winter, or particularly during the even months according to the traditional Thai calendar.

Instead of choosing an auspicious date and time, Vietnamese people often decide to hold a wedding ceremony at the weekend. Currently, over 90% of Vietnamese weddings in Udon Thani province are held on Sundays, which is a holiday, more people can attend.

However, before choosing a wedding date, some Vietnamese families also refer to the date and time according to the Chinese lunar calendar. An important wedding custom which many Vietnamese families still follow is that on the days of the engagement and wedding ceremonies, the family often makes a tray of rice and delicious food to offer the grandparents and the ancestors. On the day of the wedding ceremony, young couples often pray in front of the ancestral altar to ask their ancestors to bless their happiness. For families with many elderly people, this issue is even more important, because this generation is still influenced by Vietnamese culture and their thoughts are still geared towards their homeland. In fact, there are people who were born in Vietnam, Laos, or Thailand but for a long time had to live under restrictions in the community due to the discrimination of the Thai government with little chance of making contact with the local culture; hence, they still practice their traditional rituals and influence the next generation. The current generation of Vietnamese people in Thailand, from the third generation onwards, has been Thai citizens since birth, so they are increasingly integrated into the local culture.

*Lễ Chạm ngõ (Su Kho)* (the first official visit ceremony). This ceremony is intended to formalise the would-be marriage relationship of the two families. As the first step in the wedding customs, the representative of the groom's side known as *Thau Ke*<sup>9</sup> goes to the girl's house to ask the girl on the groom's behalf to marry him and to obtain her family's consent. In this first official visit ceremony, the groom's family brings the standard offerings of two boxes of tea and two bottles of beer for the girl's family. A belief in Thai culture maintains that the number two is an even number and in Thai language it is called *Lech Khu* (i.e. double number); according to Thai belief, double means auspicious for a newlywed couple. During this ceremony, the girl's family can ask for time to consider the proposal or for more time to learn about the boy's family. Afterwards, the girl's family will announce their decision. The boy's family then returns to ask for the girl's hand in marriage. At this time, after the two families agree, they will set a date to prepare for the engagement ceremony and the wedding party.

In modern society, especially over the past decade, young people fall in love and then decide to get married. Very often both the boy's and the girl's families have known each other for a long time so the first official visit is just a conversation and an agreement to prepare for the wedding. Also, following today's social trends, on the first official visit ceremony of the Vietnamese living in Udon Thani province, the two families also discuss the amount of money the boy's family will give the girl's family (*Sin Sot Thong Man*), the date, time, and venue of the wedding ceremony; the number of guests to be invited, the thank you gifts (*Khong Cham Luoi*), betel nut procession for the wedding, and so on. According to the traditional marriage culture of the Thai people, after the two families agree to hold the wedding, the boy's family needs to build a house for the newlyweds

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<sup>9</sup> According to traditional Thai culture, "Thau Ke" is a person of high status, respected by many people and knows the virtues of the boy's family because "Thau Ke" is the one who recognises the boy as the would-be groom.

(*Ruon Ho*) which needs to be completed before the wedding day, and the groom needs to stay at the bride's family house after their wedding for a while. Meanwhile, she is not allowed to stay at her husband's family home.

However, for Vietnamese people, if the groom's family cannot afford to build a house for the newlyweds, they can stay either at the groom's or bride's parents' house. For the Vietnamese in Udon Thani province in the past, during the war and under difficult economic conditions, after the wedding ceremony the bride would go to stay with the groom's family. However, today economic life has improved, and families with enough money tend buy new houses for the newlyweds to live in independently.

A difference in the culture of Vietnamese and Thai people is the amount of money given by the boy's family to the girl's family. According to traditional Thai culture, the money the boy's family gives the girl's family is a very important and indispensable factor in the marriage ceremony. This 'dowry', or so-called 'milk money' (*Kha Nom*), is to honour the way the parents have raised their daughter. Therefore, families who are not well-off face many difficulties. It can lead to situations such as the groom's family having to bargain with the bride's family about the amount of the wedding money payment, and it sometimes leads to discord between the two families. Although the Vietnamese living in Udon Thani province on the whole do not follow this custom, there are some families who are influenced by Thai culture and the groom's family pays a 'dowry' to the bride's family as part of the betrothal gift package. However, usually the girl's family does not receive this amount. On the contrary, sometimes her family gives more money to the newlywed couple, or there are cases where the two families agree to each give an equal amount of money to the newlyweds to help them start a family<sup>10</sup>. For example, the boy's family gives THB 1,000,000 and the girl's family also gives THB 1,000,000. The total amount of money spent on the engagement and the wedding ceremonies will be borne by the boy's family.

#### *Lễ Ăn hỏi (Pi Thi Man)* - the engagement ceremony

This is the ritual when the groom's family comes to the bride's house for an engagement ceremony. In the past, this took place a few months to a year before the wedding ceremony in order to give the young couple time to get to know each other better. In traditional Thai culture, the engagement ceremony is considered a "deposit" made by the groom's family to the girl's family and when the girl has gone through the betrothal ceremony, it is considered that she has been "booked", so she cannot accept any other offers of marriage. As for the groom's family, if they do not keep to the agreement, such as cancelling the marriage, the girl's family can keep all the betrothal gifts, including the wedding money. However, as for the bride's family, if they cancel the marriage, then they must return the entire betrothal gift package to the groom's family.

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with Mr Trần Minh Chung, 61 years old, Advisor of the Management Board of President Hồ Chí Minh Relic Site in Udon Thani Province, Udon Thani province, 23 August 2020.

When they first emigrated to Thailand, the Vietnamese living in Udon Thani province, usually held the betrothal ceremony before 12h00 at the bride's house. At the appropriate time, the groom's family would bring the betel wedding tray to the bride's house to collect the bride, who was usually already in the room, before moving to the living room for the ceremony. The typical betrothal items were offerings that often came in pairs, including betel leaves, areca nuts, oranges, bottles of wine, tea boxes, cookie boxes, votive money, and so on (depending on the agreement between the two families) contained in a casket and covered with cellophane or red cloth. In terms of format, the betrothal caskets in the Vietnamese betrothal ceremony were of the same type as those of the Thai people. Before the procession where the groom's family accompanies the groom to receive the bride, according to Thai tradition, he must go through the gold and silver doors<sup>11</sup> to receive her. After the groom has brought the bride to his house, the next important ritual, indispensable in Vietnamese tradition, was ancestor worship. On this day, the elderly and those with status, or considered fortunate in life, would lead the bride and groom to burn incense to give thanks in front of the ancestors' altar. The bride and groom would proceed to a predetermined room for the engagement ceremony, where family members from both sides were waiting. The invited guests were usually relatives and close friends of both families and close friends of the bride and groom.

During the engagement ceremony, the representative of the boy's family *Thau Ke* would first talk about the engagement ceremony. After approval from the representative of the girl's family for the girl to prepare for her wedding, the girl's family's representative would open and check the betrothal gift package. After the checking is complete, the representatives of each family would help each other scatter peanuts, sesame seeds, rice, and flowers on the betel-tray. Next, the bride's mother would wrap the betrothal gifts in a piece of cloth and place it on her shoulder to signify that the groom's family has given the bride's family a lot of money, and she would say: "*This bag is so heavy that it will yield a lot of money*" (*Hi ni nak chinh khong mi ngoen ngooc ngam makc mai*) and flaunt the bag of gifts as if it were very heavy. Then the bride and groom would exchange rings, and finally their relatives and friends would take it in turns to present gifts to the young couple. After the engagement ceremony, both families would usually hold an evening party. The bride's relatives would go to the bride's house and the groom's relatives to the groom's house to celebrate the engagement.

According to the tradition of the Vietnamese in Udon Thani province, after the groom receives guests at his house (usually around 20h00), he must go to receive the guests at the bride's house. The format of the evening party also varies from family to family. It is not always the same, and some families can set a date for the wedding party many months after

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<sup>11</sup> The door barrier ceremony is a traditional Thai ceremony held during the engagement ceremony. It is a ritual in which relatives on the bride's side together take the gold and silver chains to block the the groom's betrothal betel-tray to demand gifts or money from the groom. He must negotiate to get through the door and must give gifts or the money envelope to the person blocking the door, so the groom can pass through the door.

the engagement ceremony. If the wedding party is held a long time after the engagement, the evening party will not be held on the date of the engagement, but usually the engagement ceremony and the wedding reception are held close to each other, i.e. the wedding party will be the day after the engagement ceremony. Nowadays the engagement ceremony of the Vietnamese in Udon Thani province has changed with modern trends. Young Vietnamese tend to integrate within Thai culture and society so that the engagement ceremony of the recent generation has gradually been adapted to the traditional style of the Thais. Usually, the engagement ceremony is held in the morning, the bride wears a traditional Thai outfit and waits in a room called the 'Bride's Pick-up Room'.

At the same time, the groom's family will form a procession called the procession of the betrothal betel-tray for the marriage request (*Kha Buon Khan Mak*) carrying the engagement gift package, along with a young banana tree (symbol of fertility), drum, cymbals, etc. Afterwards, the entire groom's family will proceed to the bride's room, and one member of the group will sing "*Ho-hi-ho-hi-ho-hi-ho-hi-ho*" and everyone in the groom's group will sing back "*Hiu*" (the lyrics and the response are to announce the arrival of the groom's family procession). This will continue until the groom comes to pick up the bride, and this custom is called "*He Khan Mak*" which means the betrothal betel-tray procession to ask for the her hand in marriage. In addition to this custom, some Vietnamese betrothal ceremonies in the province also include splashing water from conch shells (*Phi thi Rot Nam sang*) as per the traditional Thai wedding custom. Here, the elderly on behalf of the relatives of both families, take it in turns to pour water from the conch shells onto the hands of the bride and groom. This ritual is rooted in Indian Buddhist culture that has had a profound influence on Thai culture, and is considered an auspicious action (*Mong khon*). Those who sprinkle water on the hands of the bride and groom do so to wish them happiness and good luck in their future lives.

An indispensable traditional custom in the Thai engagement ceremony is the ceremony of offering rice to the Buddhist monk who presides over the ceremony. The Thais believe that offering rice to the Buddhist monk is a good thing to do, a symbolic form of charity work. Under the influence of Theravada Buddhism for the majority of Thais in Thailand, Buddhist monks have influenced and appeared in many aspects of daily life, including wedding ceremonies. On the engagement day, the Thai people usually invite Buddhist monks (usually nine of them as the number nine in Thai is pronounced Kao which represents development) to perform the ceremony to bring the newlywed couple good luck. The bride and groom respond by offering the monks rice, as well as canned milk, canned fish, and so on. In addition, families also have to give a small amount of money to the monks as a token of gratitude for their prayers of happiness for family members. While there are some Vietnamese families in Udon Thani province who are influenced by and adopt the rice offering custom which they include in the engagement ceremony, others do not because they believe that the monk's symbol is often associated with funeral rites. Although heavily influenced by Thai culture, many customs and practices that have been formed over a long period of time associated with their homeland's wet rice farming

culture are still preserved and practiced by the Vietnamese community in Udon Thani province. For example, they still incorporate betel nuts, areca leaves, fruit, wine, cookies, and so on, in the engagement ceremony. In addition to the traditional betrothal gifts, the custom of ancestor worship is still maintained as part of the wedding ceremony; however, the way of worshipping the ancestors has changed. Some of the specific steps such as considering the date and time, or inviting many people to attend are not followed. Instead, it is a simpler process, taking place over a weekend and just within the family. Before the wedding ceremony, couples often go to the cemetery to burn incense to report back to their ancestors, ask for their permission to start their own family, and pray for many blessings and good things for their married life. In addition, before the engagement and wedding ceremonies, young people also face their family ancestral altar to burn incense and pray for their ancestors to bless their happiness.

#### *The wedding ceremony*

It can be said that the wedding ceremony of the Vietnamese living in Udon Thani province is the most important event for everyone concerned. The two families make a report to the community about the marriage of the young couple, and at the same time it is considered as a way to meet people in the community. In the past, when the Vietnamese here still faced many economic difficulties, their position in society was not established; traditionally, weddings were held at the groom's house. The first step was for the bride and groom to worship the ancestors in front of the ancestors' altar; then both sets of relatives took photos with the couple; the wedding reception followed. Regarding the format of the wedding organisation, when the Vietnamese first migrated to Thailand, their finances were limited; hence, the wedding ceremony was a simple affair within the family surroundings. The Vietnamese people retained their long-standing spirit of mutual affection and love, and this spirit was promoted even further when they came to Thailand. When a family organised a wedding, the whole community would come to help set up the wedding venue, arrange the tables and chairs, prepare the music band, cook the dishes, etc. The food mainly consisted of traditional Vietnamese dishes. In the past, the Vietnamese wedding party usually followed a basic pattern where the guests stood to listen to the song Sansoen Phra Barami in the Thai language<sup>12</sup> (a song that praised the Thai king), followed by popular Vietnamese songs such as *Trông cây lại nhớ đến người* (Looking at trees reminds me of him), etc. Then, representatives of both families spoke and introduced the bride and groom to the wedding guests, followed by music performances with songs in Vietnamese and Thai, to congratulate the newlyweds on their marriage and to wish for happiness, and finally the bride and groom thanked each guest. Before the 1980s, it was common practice for the bride and

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<sup>12</sup> Traditionally for Thai people, the King is a person who is revered by the people as a saint (*Chao du hua*), so in all important events in life, the Thai people often dedicate important statements in commemorating the merits of the king.

groom to take photos with guests in front of the altar of President Hồ Chí Minh<sup>13</sup>, which was one of the most typical features of Vietnamese people in Udon Thani province and Thailand.

During the American war years, Vietnamese families in Udon Thani province set up altars to worship their homeland and Uncle Hồ. Moreover, as early as 1928, President Hồ Chí Minh had come to carry out revolutionary activities and stirred the patriotic feelings of the Vietnamese people living in this province. Hence, the deep affection held by the overseas Vietnamese community and the local people for Uncle Hồ has always been preserved. In the period before the 1980s, the fact that young couples and their families stood by Uncle Hồ's altar to take photographs was an important ritual. It set a patriotic example to the younger generation of Vietnamese living in Thailand.

By the 1990s, holding a wedding party at a restaurant became a new trend for people in Udon Thani province. The Vietnamese community was no exception and there was a gradual shift towards holding wedding parties in restaurants and hotels. The restaurants catering for weddings in Udon Thani province were mainly Chinese called *A Han Chin* (阿漢欽). Chinese food during this period was popular in the province, as it was considered a luxury banquet in Thai society in general. The trend of organising wedding parties in the style of Chinese banquet tables (*Tô Chin*) was widespread in the province. The Vietnamese also followed this trend for their important parties<sup>14</sup>. The Chinese have migrated to Thailand since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and they have played an important role in the economy, as well as exerting cultural influences, including their cuisine. Udon Thani province is home to many Chinese people and their food culture has influenced the local dining culture in the form of organising Chinese-style parties with wide round tables and high chairs. Meanwhile, native Thai people often sit down to eat at dining tables and low chairs close to the floor. As society developed, the idea of sitting at a round table was considered more luxurious; hence, gradually the Thais and Vietnamese in Udon Thani province gradually chose to follow this dining trend.

Preparation for the wedding party usually starts at 13h00. This mainly involves the relatives and family members preparing to take *Khan Mak* through the gold and silver doors to perform some rituals such as greeting the parents and relatives of both families. Afterwards, both families take photographs together. After a break until about 17h30-18h00 the official ceremony commences. Since the trend of holding a wedding in a restaurant or a hotel, the wedding gifts from invited guests have also changed. Buying wedding gifts in the past has been replaced by gifting cash envelopes for the bride and groom in accordance with modern trends and the convenience of both sides. In addition to

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<sup>13</sup> Interview with Ms Nguyễn Thị Nhung, 79 years old, in Udon Thani province, 29 April 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Ahan is food, Qin is Chinese. Chinese food during this period was very popular in the province. In addition, Chinese food is considered a luxury dish in society, so this trend has directly affected the wedding organisation of Vietnamese people. The trend of holding Chinese table-style wedding parties (*Tô Chin*) is very popular in society, and the Vietnamese people also consider it luxurious.

changing the form of gifts, food at the wedding party has also changed, leaning towards better quality dishes and a more modern palate. Chinese food is mainly selected due to the arrangement of the restaurant while Vietnamese dishes rarely feature on the menu. It is worth noting that currently, in the wedding party of Vietnamese people in the province, some Vietnamese dishes have been added to the wedding menu, along with Chinese dishes, such as banana flower salad, rice cakes, roasted pork, and pickled dishes.

Nowadays, the format of the wedding party of Vietnamese people living in Udon Thani province has changed a lot; it is simpler and more modern. It is usually held at 18h00 on Saturday or Sunday, and the venue is usually a hotel. Before entering the wedding reception, the bride and groom, dressed in the most beautiful wedding outfits, stand in front of the door leading to the wedding room to welcome their guests, with decorative pre-wedding photos on display. Guests often write some congratulatory words in the wedding celebration guest book prepared by the groom's family. The wedding party usually starts with a short film to introduce the love story of the bride and groom. After receiving their guests, the groom leads the bride into the wedding party room to perform the next rituals. The master of ceremonies briefly introduces the couple, and their families, and the representatives of both sides give speeches to thank the guests. Then, the wedding host, who is a person holding a high social status such as the governor, or mayor of the city, or even a minister, goes on stage to congratulate the newlyweds<sup>15</sup>. This is followed by cutting the wedding cake and the wedding flower tossing ceremony.

When it comes to music the *Đại giờ lành (Maha Lok)* is played. This piece of music is featured at important Thai ceremonies, and is also popular in Thai wedding parties. Music is usually played after the wedding host blesses the newlyweds. Finally, the host says *Chai* and the guests respond with *Yo* (*Chai Yo* in Thai means cheers). This is repeated three times and then all guests raise a glass of wine to toast the bride and groom and their families. When the wedding party is over, the bride and groom stand to bid farewell and thank their guests.

The format of the Vietnamese marriage ceremony in Udon Thani province has changed a lot compared to the past, and the wedding customs are deeply ingrained in Thai culture. The wedding ceremony of the Vietnamese in particular and the Thais in general is becoming more modern. The Thai and Vietnamese communities of residents in the province holds separate wedding ceremonies in a relatively similar way, only some rituals and betrothal gifts differ.

Nowadays, the Vietnamese wedding ceremony is a shorter event due to more modern and economically developed lifestyles, and because they involve mainly business people, there is a need to save time while creating favourable conditions for the wedding party participants. In general, in terms of time, most Vietnamese engagement and wedding

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<sup>15</sup> Field interview in Udon Thani province conducted by author Pisit Amnuayngerntra (an overseas Vietnamese in Udon Thani province) in 2019.

ceremonies are held according to Thai rituals in line with modern trends and take place on the same day at a hotel. The engagement ceremony is often held in the morning attended by relatives and close friends only, followed by the wedding ceremony in the evening attended by all the guests of the bride and groom.

Since the 2000s, it has been very popular for Vietnamese to hold weddings at hotels in Udon Thani province. For wealthier families, weddings are held at big hotels in the province such as the Centara Hotel & Convention Centre or the Charoen Hotel. However, families with limited finances can organise their weddings at smaller hotels such as Ban Chiang, Napalai, Prajaktra Design, etc. Typically, wedding guests gift the bride and groom envelopes containing money. The amount depends on the relationship of the guest to the couple, and can be around THB 1,000, 1,500, 2,000, and so on.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The Vietnamese community (new Vietnamese) who emigrated to Udon Thani province, has so far experienced nearly eight decades, undergoing a process of reservation (in the first and second generations), and cross-culturation and rapid integration (third generation onwards) into the Thai culture. This is reflected in areas such as language, religion, beliefs, weddings, funerals, cuisine, etc. However, many traditional cultural features of Vietnamese people in the province are still inherited, and preserved through daily activities such as use of the Vietnamese language, ancestor worship, customs and practices of holidays, cuisine, and costumes.

Through research on the marriage ceremony of the Vietnamese people in Udon Thani province, it can be seen that this is one of their important rituals, expressing the distinct cultural diversity of the ethnic group compared with the local culture. For the Vietnamese community here, the marriage ceremony has distinct characteristics compared to that of Vietnamese communities in other areas because Udon Thani province embodies the cross-culturation and mutual influence of the three cultures of Thailand, China, and Vietnam. Due to the peculiarities of history and geography, the Vietnamese marriage ceremony in this province has gone through many changes, cross-culturation, and integration with the local culture. Through evaluation data, from the year 2000 up to now, most of the Vietnamese in Udon Thani province in particular and in Thailand in general have been granted Thai citizenship, so the integration of the Vietnamese into the local Thai culture has taken place more and more rapidly. The third generation of overseas Vietnamese onwards either no longer uses, or speaks very little, Vietnamese compared to the previous generations. On the other hand, in order to become Thai citizens (Thai people of Vietnamese origin), the Vietnamese in Udon Thani province must also contribute to Thailand, their host country. They care little about the local culture in regions from where their grandparents' generation migrated. So now it is difficult to distinguish between marriage ceremonies of the Vietnamese people and their Thai counterparts. This also

means that young Vietnamese in Udon Thani province are free to choose their life partners without barriers of ethnic origin and cultural differences.

Although there have been many changes and integration concerning the marriage ceremony, some traditional cultural features of the Thai people of Vietnamese origin in Udon Thani province are still inherited, maintained, and preserved such as worshipping the ancestors and engagement rituals. According to the pace of social development, maybe in the next 20 years when the first and the second generations of overseas Vietnamese have passed away, the use of Vietnamese in the community will increasingly disappear. Hence, it is very likely that marriage rituals of the Vietnamese people in Udon Thani province will be fully integrated with native Thai marriage rituals. Through research on Vietnamese marriage rituals in this province, in addition to learning about the culture of the Vietnamese community here, the hope is to find solutions that contribute to preserving and promoting Vietnamese cultural values abroad. In order for this to happen, the Vietnamese state needs to find the most appropriate ways to contribute to cultural preservation, and to enhance the role of Vietnamese expatriates in promoting Vietnamese culture to international friends.

**Note:** Translator: Lương Quang Luyện. Language editor: Stella Ciorra.

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